Under such conditions, outright cruelty soon took on the guise of a religious pursuit. When, in the year 1000, St. Romuald, a holy hermit, let it be known that he intended to leave his Umbrian village, the people in his parish made secret plans to take his life so that they would not be deprived of his sanctified remains.

Clearly, the manic demand for holy relics did not find satisfaction entirely in spiritual pursuits. The murder of St. Romuald, and other examples like St. Elisabeth of Thuringia, offer more than a hint of how the contagion had spread. She had lived as a devout, selflessly dedicated woman helping the poor and caring for the sick. Constant exposure to people with contagious diseases eventually led to her untimely death in 1231 at the age of only twenty-three. She died in the city hospital of Marburg. The townspeople did not wait very long to obtain remnants of her blessed remains. They not only cut off her hair and removed her nails in order to obtain some corporal remnants. They also chopped off her fingers, her ears, and her nipples. It did not end here either, since the devout citizens of Marburg in their grief even ran off with pieces of her shroud.

These were more than symbolic acts. They characterize the plasticity of emotions found during this period. Love and affection often merge with passionate violence, and occasionally culminate in outbursts of religious intoxication. Such excesses are an outgrowth of the same anxiety and chronic existential crises we have encountered in the headhunting rites of various primitive tribes, in the child’s dread of being left alone, and in the needfuless of the never completely gratified, always searching collector.
"One Copy of Every Book!"

In the following three chapters I propose to explore the personal circumstances and life-histories of three particular individual collectors. These should illustrate certain empirical aspects, particularly in their early life events, which may help explain certain underlying factors critical for the course of their endeavors as collectors. The advantage of these three profiles is that we do not have to rely on secondary sources. Rather, the collectors themselves have left (or in the case of Mr. G. have given me) autobiographical data that provide an array of illuminating and relevant subjective perspectives about their lives. They help in the effort to understand and illustrate certain aspects in the causal criteria of the origin, course, and, indeed, compensatory significance of their passion.

The examples I have chosen to explore in comprehensive detail—and which highlight the various criteria and aspects that appear to account for the incentive to collect—are the well-known British book and manuscript collector Sir Thomas Phillips, the famous French novelist Honoré de Balzac (an obessional collector of bric-à-brac who in his novel *Cousin Pons* delineated with much empathy and imagination the defensive passions of the dedicated collector), and a Mr. G., whom I knew personally.

At the time of his death in 1872, Sir Thomas left what was probably the largest and most important collection of books and manuscripts ever accumulated by one individual. The collection was so large, and so significant, that to this day, more than a century after his death, the auction house of Sotheby's in London and New York has conducted some sixty sales of "The Celebrated Collection of Sir Thomas Phillips," with a total of millions upon millions of dollars.

It should be noted here that this great collection was not limited to books and manuscripts alone. In fact, Sir Thomas, for more than fifty years, and on the most grandiose scale, acquired virtually every Babylonian cylinder seal, deed, document, codex, genealogical chart, autograph letter, cartulary and map,
besides many master drawings he could lay his hands on, in addition to the tens of thousands of manuscripts and books.

It is perhaps necessary here to stress the intellectual and historical importance of the Bibliotheca Philippiaca, as the owner wished it to be known, because his own inspiration to accumulate it hardly derived from any lofty motives. In fact, as we shall see, at times the accumulative instinct in Sir Thomas seems to have approached, if not even passed, mania, a word which he himself used from time to time in discussing his addiction. For example, “I am going on with the old Mania of Book-buying, but not so much MSS. as Printed books,” he once wrote to a fellow collector, Robert Curzon, one of the few people with whom he remained on consistently good terms for most of his life. A postscript to another letter to Curzon is even more explicit: “I am buying Printed Books because I wish to have ONE COPY OF EVERY BOOK IN THE WORLD!!” he wrote, three years before his death.66

By the time Sir Thomas wrote of his ambition he was already an old man, querulous, opinionated, often mean, a hater of Roman Catholics, and completely self-centered. Only a few years earlier he had moved from the spacious country mansion Middle Hill in Gloucestershire to Thirlestaine House in Cheltenham, the large but inconvenient residence of the late Lord Northwick. The move could not have been easy. If Thirlestaine House was uncomfortable—“booked out of one wing and rattled out of the other;” his ailing wife rightfully complained of her new abode—Middle Hill had by that time become totally uninhabitable. Not that Sir Thomas cared about her feelings or her discomfort. He actually moved not because Thirlestaine House was more agreeable or had more room for his collection, but in a fit of pique.

Middle Hill had been left to Philipps in trust, and on his death would have to go to his eldest child, his daughter Henrietta. Against her father’s wishes, Henrietta had eloped with James Orchard Halliwell, an outstanding Shakespeare scholar. Driven by anger, prejudice, egocentric ambition, and an unwavering hostility toward Halliwell, Philipps was determined to prevent his library and other possessions from falling into the hands of his daughter and her husband. He therefore allowed Middle Hill to deteriorate and become prey to marauders and decay before leaving it to the Halliwell.

Between July 1863 and March 1864, a total of 103 wagon-loads of manuscripts, books, pictures, drawings, and papers of all sorts were transported from Middle Hill to Thirlestaine House by 230 horses accompanied by 160 men.68 Even by today’s standards, the Bibliotheca Philippiaca at that time was enormous and of incalculable value. By 1860 it contained around eleven thousand manuscripts. Sixteen years later the manuscripts alone had increased to about twenty thousand, and there were about thirty thousand printed books.69 An exact count was never made of the collection during Philipps’s lifetime, but at his death he left behind at least sixty thousand manuscripts and around fifty thousand books.

As I have already noted, he was to some degree aware of the extent of his obsession. Sir Frederic Madden, then Keeper of Manuscripts of the British Museum, kept a diary, now also in the Bodleian Library, in which he described a visit to Middle Hill in the summer of 1854:

The house looks more miserable and dilapidated every time I visit it, and there is not a room now that is not crowded with large boxes full of MSS. The state of things is really inconceivable. Lady P. is absent, and were I in her place, I would never return to so wretched an abode… Every room is filled with heaps of papers, MSS, books, charters, packages & other things, lying in heaps under your feet, piled upon tables, beds, chairs, ladders, &c.&c. and in every room, piles of huge boxes, up to the ceiling, containing the more valuable volumes! It is quite sickening!… I asked him why he did not clear away the piles of papers &c. from the floor, so as to allow a path to be kept, but he only laughed and said I was not used to it as he was!… The windows of the house are never opened, and the close confined air & smell of the paper & MSS. is almost unbearable.

This vivid description is more than sufficient to give us an idea as to how Philipps lived and collected. And Madden was not alone in his judgment. Still, one cannot help but admire a library which at that time contained, for example, a fourteenth-century copy on vellum of Valerius Maximus with annotations in Petrarch’s hand (now in the library of Harvard University);
the manuscript catalogue of Horace Walpole's library at Strawberry Hill; and the manuscript of the letters of St. Jerome and St. Augustine in a fifteenth-century binding (now in the Pierpont Morgan Library).

Yet there is a difference between obsession and idealism, and it is largely the absence of the latter that caused Madden to react as he did. There was no sense of aesthetics in the collection, nor is there any indication that Phillips appeared to appreciate the beauty of his many illuminated manuscripts. Some of them were of astounding radiance. Nor did he admire the many outstanding drawings by Michelangelo, Leonardo, and Rubens that he possessed.\(^{35}\)

Only by looking further into Phillips's life-history and development can one see how his interests and ambitions had a certain inner logic and validity, both hidden from Madden, as did his snobbery. Only on one of those rare occasions of self-observation did Phillips become aware of what he himself called his egotism.\(^{35}\) He was a willful, despotic man, plagued by ill-temper, and with an astonishing disregard for other people's needs and emotions. "We all are having serious thoughts that he is going rather cracked," his second daughter, Mary, wrote to Henrietta Halliwell, in the summer of 1843. But at that point their father still had left nearly thirty years of uninterrupted collecting.

At his death, Sir Thomas left behind thousands of scribbles, letters, copies of letters, pamphlets, bills, and random annotations. He seemed unable to consign to the garbage anything with writing on it. Even with all these details we do not know exactly where and under what circumstances young Phillips spent the first four years of his life. Nor do we know who looked after him. He was probably brought up in or around Manchester, where his father had made his fortune. The wealthy Phillips père and son moved to Gloucestershire in 1796. Middle Hill, a large country house with fifty-four windows, according to the tax bill, became the Phillippi's home for the next sixty-eight years.

In spite of his father's wealth and acquired status, Thomas Phillips's childhood was marked by uncertainty. Thomas was born out of wedlock on July 2, 1792. His mother was Hannah Walton, a twenty-one-year-old servant of low origins. His fa-
ened his concern with genealogy and historical documents. His constant sense of uncertainty seems to have started him on his road to histrionic collecting. The question of "Where do I come from?" was thus channeled into a preoccupation with descent and origins, as shown in his initial choice of items to collect: church records, deeds, gravestone inscriptions, manuscripts, and bibliographical information, as well as books. Eventually he had so much source material of this kind that people engaged in genealogical research turned to him for information.

There can be no question as to the basically emotional focus of his collecting: "My dear [cut out]," he wrote shortly after his twenty-sixth birthday, on July 20, 1818,

When I left Town, I went into Wiltshire & staid there three weeks, & from thence went to Cheltenham & staid one week, & when I came home, & found my Father looking very well, but not quite well in reality. . . . I am very angry with you for not sending me the account of your family as far as you know in addition to what you have already given me. What was the name of your Grandmother besides Sarah, and what were the names of your Grandfather’s Father & Mother. What are the names of your Uncles & Aunts, & their Children, and the names of your Brothers & their Wives with their children, & your Sisters Husbands and Children. Write it down in this manner.

My Father’s name was James Walton & he was the son of James Walton & Grandson of what name He had (how many) Brothers & _______ Sisters & (how many) Uncles & Aunts, & then mention how many children they had, born & died & who they married. Or do it in the following manner, ‘My Father had 5 Sons & 5 Daughters 1 Robert, 2 James, 3 Richard, 4 Isaac, 5 John . . .

His instructions continue for another two pages. It is obvious that on the one hand he was trying to cover up his ancestry on his mother’s side, while on the other he was overrating his paternal descent, yet he was still desperate for every detail about his line of ancestry. His obsession with his origins was strong enough to overcome the stigma of illegitimacy. His questionnaire reveals the curiosity that was the foundation of his entire personality. After all, his life work was effectively the outcome of his anxiety about his foggy past. His motherlessness in its practical day-to-day aspects, the complicated relationship that existed between father and son, and the attitude of Phillipps senior toward his mother are all interrelated factors which shrouded the boy’s identity so much that he soon made himself the center of the universe.

Some early letters give us some insight into what was going on. The first reference to an indirect contact between Phillipps senior and Hannah occurs in a letter at the end of November 1800, when Thomas was eight:

Mrs. Graham’s compliments to Mr. Phillips [sic] and begs [indecipherable] the liberty she has taken in writing him her servant Hanah Walton who Mrs. Graham found on her return to town extremely ill. She consulted Sir Walter Farquhar who advised change of air and as travelling is so expensive and the poor young woman has no house to go to she seems anxious for one to solicit you to permit her to visit Middle Hill when she gets better. I shall have no objection to take her back again at present.

On the back of the letter is a draft of Phillipps’s reply, a habit the son frequently followed:

As to the subject you write about I am very sorry to hear your servant Hanah W. is so ill as to be obliged to leave your place where she has been treated with the utmost kindness and affable condescension. . . . But Madam I am so situated amongst my relations & friends that all the female part of them woud immediately say I had shot my doors against them, and however immaculate and pure we might live yet appearances would be so much against me that I shoud assuredly receive the public acuser[s]?, For these reasons which I think you will allow to be substantial I can in no consideration permitt her to come here.

Phillipps’s relations with Hannah had evidently not always been "immaculate and pure," and we do not know why he now used this excuse. Eventually, there was direct contact between Hannah and her son, although it was always guarded and, on his part, rather pedantic. A letter of January 13, 1803, from ten-year-old Thomas to Hannah makes it clear that there had been some meetings between them: “I am very sorry I cannot come to London this Winter. I wish you had a good journey into Scotland & safe back again & I should be very glad if you would write another letter to let me know when you come back again.”
In a letter to his mother later that month, we learn that his father had relented about meeting Hannah. “My Father’s love to you, and begs you will bring a bottle of Soy, when you come down at Easter. I also received the gifts you was so good as to send me, the Prayer Book, Figs, and Oranges. . . Pray, when you come down, do not forget to bring Don Quixote, for my Father wishes me to have it.”

Two years later Thomas thanks his mother “for the intention of sending the books and I beg you will bring them to you when you next come to Middle Hill.” Thus, there was contact between them as far as circumstances permitted. Meanwhile, Thomas had been sent to school at Rugby and was well on his way to becoming an educated, upper-middle-class Englishman. But there was already a core of self-centered stubbornness in Phillipps, which was to become a prime trait of his character. On January 6, 1807, he was looking forward to his mother’s visit at Easter:

“I have not seen you a long while. When you come down, please to bring Don Quixote with you, nicely bound, and good print, that is about as large as I write now. . . You can buy it in London, for all sorts of books can be had there I suppose. There is one of the last books, that you sent me, I do not like, it is about Confirmation; so I shall give it to you again at Easter: all the other books I like pretty well.”

Sir Thomas must have overlooked the end of this letter when he reread it probably half a century later: “I could not write sooner and cannot write farther, for I have nothing else to say; So farewell, Dear Mother till I see you again. I remain Dear [cut out] Your [cut out] — T. Phillipps.”

From the beginning Thomas let little stand in the way of acquiring books, although eventually his father began complaining about the bills. Like so many passionate collectors, Thomas began cataloging early: “I found this Catalogue the other day,” he told Sir Frederic Madden in 1864, “made when I was 16, about the time I was at Rugby School. I fancy there are not many Boys who have had a Library of 110 Vols at the age of 16.” His catalogue of titles fails to reveal any special intellectual acumen. In fact, his comment implies that quantity was already more important to him than content or quality. And it certainly failed to presage one of the most eminent collections of illuminated manuscripts and rare books ever put together. The letters written during his adolescence, before he entered Oxford University, show a warmer relationship with his mother than before, and certainly after, his school years. Apparently, she must have asked him what books he wanted, for he replied: “As I told you before you may get at Middleton’s Cicero in boards, price one Guinea, with a head of Cicero in the beginning, 1st Volume. I should be obliged to you also to get the other two books (Spectator & Pope) bound different from each other. My Father is gone to Evesham so I take the opportunity of writing to you [January 22, 1810].”

There was also some guarded contact between mother and son at this time, which did not meet with the senior Phillipps’s approval:

I assure you I have not neglected you, & I would have written a long while before, but I did not know where you lived, you change about so much, that I wish you could stay in some fixed place, then I could write oftener. I have left Rugby now, & I go to Oxford in October next. My Father says it is not convenient for him that you should come down, & it is of no use trying to prevail upon him, therefore I think it would be better for you to give up all thoughts of coming down here at present, & leave it to Providence to bring about our meeting again. We are both very well. Excuse this short letter as I am going out for dinner. I remain your [cut out].

At this point, the scope of our inquiry must narrow to the relationship between Phillipps’s fundamental character and his compulsive search for historical documentation, manuscripts, and other sources in the name of reclamation and preservation, since he soon became the self-appointed protector and curator of documentary material of all sorts.

Thomas matriculated at University College in Oxford when he was nineteen, rather late by any standard. We do not know what caused the delay. His ambition soon became obvious to his friends, as indicated in a lively correspondence with two fellow students. With Charles Henry Grove he shared an interest in books and a curiosity about seals. In the case of William Riland Bedford, his subsequent lifelong concern with genealogy and
topography surfaced. He was receiving an allowance of 300 pounds a year from his father, but neither economy nor economics was Thomas’s forte, and he soon incurred large debts, despite his father’s continuous admonitions: “Will not your calculations tell you that since you went last time to Oxford you have spent after the rate more than 600L p. ann., and if this 60L you now write for is spent also which I much fear it is, it will make it more than 1200L p.ann. . . . I highly disapprove of your going to an auction when you have no money to pay for what you buy [June 26, 1812].”

Thomas’s elusive descent and rather bizarre upbringing must have been a nagging concern and preoccupation. He felt that he had to conceal from others who his mother was, and he was denied permission for free and open communication with her. This created significant differences between him and other children. There is no record that any woman had been looking after him during his early years. Whatever direction he received came from an intolerant and comparatively old bachelor father whose ideas about paternal guidance were not very clear. Indeed, in some respects, Thomas’s attitude vis-à-vis his own children was, if anything, even more warped and uncomprehending. He grew up to be a stubborn, ill-tempered man whose prejudices and self-centeredness muddied nearly all his relationships. He loathed Roman Catholics and was most of the time completely oblivious to other people’s feelings; with very few exceptions, he was also suspicious of everyone with whom he came in contact.

Phillipps was never a good or even interested student. Eventually, a tutor had to be engaged to help overcome his “slowness of apprehension & mediocrity of talent.” He interrupted his studies in Oxford to search for books, as everything was already subordinated to his passion. In the meantime he kept sending packages of books home to Middle Hill, writing to his father: “Mention every package in the order you have received them describing the appearance of each, not the number of feet, for I did not measure any of them. If you would be kind enough also to spare 10L & enclose it in your letter.”

His college friends were helpful, especially William Bedford, whose father had a lively interest in topography. Bedford took Phillipps home to meet his father, who eventually sponsored him for membership in the Society of Antiquaries, an honor he made ample use of without showing much appreciation or gratitude. His historical and genealogical interests soon eclipsed his academic pursuits, in defiance of his father’s repeated complaints of spending all his time in “Idleness, Dissipation & extravagance [April 17, 1815].”

Thomas insisted on resuscitating the past. He made contact with fellow antiquarians, offered his assistance to them, and prepared his first publication on ancient deeds. Many others followed. Eventually, he became his own printer and publisher under the imprint of Middle Hill Press. While one can argue that a publication such as Parochial Collections for Oxfordshire is hardly a worthwhile enterprise, it is evident that, by now, Phillipps’s interest had been displaced from information about his mother’s various relatives to an investigation of the pedigrees of “the most considerable persons” in the county. The focus and perspective of his pursuits were displaced but were in effect nothing more than another variation of his own existential dilemma. For example, he tried to persuade himself that he was descended from Robert, Duke of Normandy, and Leofwine, Earl of Mercia, twenty-six generations ago, and drew genealogical charts to prove his own family romance and reinforce his patrilineal identity. In the same vein he also traced his ancestry to the Phillippes of Picton Castle in Pembrokehire. Now and then he signed documents Thomas Phillipps, Esq. F.S.A. [Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries]—all a tu quoque argument against his illegitimacy.

His antiquarian interests were temporarily set aside in 1817, when he met Henrietta Molyneux, daughter of Gen. Thomas Molyneux. Henrietta was a young lady whose background offered established family connections, a fact of considerable importance to him. Thomas and Henrietta wanted to marry, but Phillipps senior insisted the marriage would not take place without a dowry of no less than 10,000 pounds. When the general could not meet this demand, Phillipps senior refused to give his consent. Thomas hounded his father with the same doggedness he would later apply to his efforts to obtain the books and manuscripts he wanted.

He tried to persuade the old man by explaining in a letter that marriage would bring to a halt his extravagance:
Since your deafness prevents our carrying on a conversation for any length of time with that calmness with which all conversations should be held. I confess while I live single, & have no body & no thing to be anxious for, I do not live with that prudence and economy which I should, were I in a different situation. In my present state, it is immaterial whether I live or die. But let me change that state with the person of my choice, & the cares & duties which would necessarily & immediately become incumbent upon me to support and discharge, would produce, I assure you, a very great alteration in me. It Must be a person of my own choice, otherwise there will be no affection to detain me at home, & it would be the cause of misery through life. . . . I am perfectly free from the grand causes of a man's ruin. I never gamble, & I dislike cards and betting of all kinds [November 12, 1817].

While this letter shows Thomas in a rather human light, it reveals no evidence of self-knowledge or foresight, since he never did acquire the "prudence and economy" he refers to in his letter, nor would his marriage be an exercise of the cares and duties which he alludes to. In any case, his father was not persuaded. His unbending mind was as refractory as his son's would prove to be a quarter of a century later when his daughter wanted to marry Halliwell. The young Phillips submitted to his father, because the security of his livelihood was at stake, and that he dared not risk. Furthermore, since he was, in effect, motherless, flagrant opposition to the old man would have severed his only family tie, and that he could not do. He accommodated his father.

Nature collaborated with Thomas's hopes, since his father died only a year later. Now there were no barriers to the marriage. The courtship with Henrietta Molyneux was probably the only instance in the collector's long life when feelings of love and desire took precedence over self-absorption and acquisitiveness.

While marrying Henrietta did not bring Thomas the economic advantages his father had demanded, it did gain him the family connections and social identity that to the illegitimate son of a nouveau riche gentleman was more pertinent than additional fortune. His wedding took place about three months after his father's death.
ters to her, and his tone seemed more affectionate, as indicated by the following note:

My dearest friend, I am sorry I cannot send you the spectacles, having previously given them to a friend & relation of mine [probably a reference to his father’s eyeglasses, which she seems to have requested].— My father left you an annuity of 50¢ Per Annum, to be paid half yearly the 1st payment is to be made this month. I expect to be in Town in a month or two & then you shall have it, if you can wait so long.— By return of Post I wish to know your age exactly. It is necessary for me to know it on account of the Legacy Duty.— Believe me with best wishes to Mr. Judd, Yours affectionately,

Thomas Phillipps

This changed tenor, with its rather apologetic “if you can wait so long,” disappeared in later years.

Meanwhile, Thomas’s marriage to a general’s daughter was a means of achieving his rightful status in society, at least the way he saw it. Henrietta represented more a symbol than a woman he loved and desired. Winning her heightened his self-esteem and provided him with a position his father could not give him. Love was never a conscious craving; it was a desire for prestige and recognition that made him court the young society woman, rather than true affection and a wish to get married, for Phillipps was apparently incapable of loving anyone.

In the light of the emotional deprivations during his entire childhood, the chronic demand for new supplies to his collection was a logical reaction of the ever-needy child. Nothing in his early development suggests any kind of attachment to any individual. Having been scarred by motherlessness, and living with a late-middle-aged bachelor father, provided no other solution to Phillipps than finding compensation in almost total self-centeredness and enjoyment in objects rather than people. Self-indulgence soon became his watchword.

Once the authority and control represented by his father was gone, he threw off all restrictions. His desire for new acquisitions knew no bounds. Now he got in touch with fellow collectors, dealers, antiquarians, and topographers, and became a constant customer of auction houses. Later, there were contacts with European and American scholars, which he clearly appre-
If any Duns write to you in future, you must answer that I am gone abroad & you know nothing about the bills, therefore you decline interfering in the business: that I am gone abroad to save money to pay my debts of which the longest standing will be paid first, & they will be paid in their turn. As to the repairs at Farm houses I beg you will not repair even the most damaged until I come home. That is the way in which a good part of my money goes, & I have been repairing & repairing without any end till at last I am resolved to repair no longer, & if the people do not choose in their houses, let them leave them. The butchers must wait another half year for their money [December 8, 1822].

If anything, the letter illustrates the constancy of his character, though hardly a very appealing one. In a sense, he created his persecutors, whom he then tried to destroy. Indeed, several tradesmen were forced to declare bankruptcy due to Phillipps's indifference to their financial needs.

Unnecessary to say, the change of climate had no effect on his obsession and self-centeredness. Throughout Phillipps's correspondence there runs a pattern of financial problems, which expands into a never-ending sequence of acrimonious letters, accusations, litigation, and, on his part, high-handed insolence. Travel was no cure for a man of his emotional condition, and even in Berne, where he and Henrietta settled for part of 1822 and 1823, he was sued by several of his creditors, including his wine merchant.76

Moreover, his stay on the Continent merely exacerbated matters, since he was soon making new contacts and thereby broadening the base of his purchases, all of which brought more complicated and complicating commitments. Several editions of his Catalogus Librorum Manuscriptorum, edited by himself and printed at his Middle Hill Press, record his acquisitions at this time, along with their provenance, giving us some information as to his suppliers during his stay on the Continent. He remained in Switzerland for some time because he had to evade his creditors back home and reduce his commitments to suppliers in Britain. However, while he and Henrietta were living in Berne, he added sixty books from a Swiss Jesuit college to his collection, and more than one hundred manuscripts. He also initiated contacts with dealers in France, Holland, Belgium, and Germany, which he pursued after his return to Middle Hill, in the autumn of 1823.

At about this time he received a catalogue from a German theologian named Leander van Ess which listed a number of very important manuscripts, among them an eleventh-century work by SS. Jerome and Isidore of Seville from the Abbey of St. Matthias in Trier. All in all, the collection included 367 Western and seven Oriental manuscripts, 56 miniatures and illuminations, and 173 woodcuts. In addition, there was a collection of books with about 900 incunabula.

To no one's surprise, Sir Thomas could not resist buying the entire collection for the sum of 870 pounds. A lengthy letter from Doctor van Ess affirms Phillipps's unreliability to the fullest degree. While Phillipps had agreed to settle the account within a few months, van Ess clearly did not know with whom he was dealing, and it was five years before Phillipps finally paid. A letter from van Ess demonstrates the dimensions of Phillipps's aggressive self-serving manipulation:

You bought from me my collection of manuscripts according to agreement for £320. [Later on he mentions an additional 350 pounds for incunabula and old documents.] You wrote to me 28th Jan. 1824. 'Would it be equally convenient to you to accept a Draft payable in 3 or 4 months wch. might serve all the purposes of each to you, and would not distress me to send it to you.'... But you did not honour your words: for the Bill came back with protest... I was obliged to pay for charges and Damages on this Bill 34 florins... It is quite beneath me, to lose further a word about this.

Letters of this tenor—and this one is hardly unique—provide us with a thorough profile of how Phillipps dealt with his creditors. Unquestionably, he was already a past master at the game of avoiding or at least postponing payment. Even while van Ess was waiting to be paid, Phillipps made other significant purchases in the Low Countries: 165 medieval manuscripts from two Benedictine abbeys, 64 additional manuscripts from three Cistercian abbeys in Belgium, and at least two collections in Holland.

His fame, or rather that of his collection, was gradually spreading, and by the late 1820s internationally known scholars
began to write to him and visit Middle Hill. As for dealers, they
could not disregard his custom, despite his growing reputation
as a very slow and often recalcitrant payer who only grudgingly
parted with his money.

By now he had exhausted his funds to the degree that he
could not even pay his own mother the current installment of
her annuity. His reply to her request sounded cavalier. To him,
she had become just one more creditor, although we must bear
in mind the possibility that his attitude toward her may reflect
the basic reaction itself: having been a motherless and unloved
child, this could easily have been the ultimate source for his self-
ish and unempathetic conduct. And even though he was fully
aware of the circumstances of his illegitimate birth, and his
mother’s absence, it had little influence on his conscious atti-
tude: “I have just received your letter I am very sorry to say that
I cannot pay you at present nor shall I know when until the 4th
July. . . . I shall be able to give you a draft at 4 months I believe
on the 4th July, but I am so pinched for want of money that I do
not know what to do [June 22, 1827].”

Meanwhile, he made several journeys to the Continent
searching for manuscripts and other early publications in mon-
asteries, city archives, record offices, and salesrooms. His travel
plans were just as unpredictable as his financial practices. When
he departed on his travels, he still owed his mother her half-year
payment of twenty-five pounds, and he had not yet paid his
servants.

He visited Arras, Lille, St. Omer, and Rouen in France to do
research in the town libraries, made some discoveries about
manuscripts that had been stolen by a former librarian, and
delivered a lecture to the Royal Society of Literature on “Obser-
vations on Some Monastic Libraries and archives in French
Flanders” (November 17, 1830). No doubt, he wanted to be rec-
ognized as a man of scholarly pursuits, and in that way justify
his monomaniacal temperament.

He now began to spend more and more of his time traveling.
While he traveled, he left his wife and children home in Middle
Hill, short of money and pursued by creditors seeking payment
of unsettled accounts, including items sent to him on approval,
which he returned months and occasionally even years later
after acrimonious exchanges of letters. Phillipps had learned in

his childhood to renounce all expectations of love and closeness,
and he was now paying the world back for this, as his entire
behavior makes evident. By this time, his never-ending search
for manuscripts, documents, and old books—all representing
vouchers of the past—was far more important than any other
emotional needs.

There was not much kindliness left in his attitude toward his
wife. His letters to her from London, where he now spent a
good deal of his time, reflect a tone gracelessly devoid of con-
cern and consideration: “I cannot write to you more often than
I do for I have nothing to say more than that I wander every day
from one Record Office to another until my business is finished,
which you know is not at all interesting to you [October 22,
1831].”

A month later his caretaker, Michael Russell, tried to tell him
with more tact than Phillipps could appreciate: “I think Lady
Phillipps is very much chang’d lately, seems much out of spirits
and appears very uncomfortable indeed . . . she has so many
people troubling her with one thing or other that worries her
almost to death [November 22, 1831].” Twelve weeks later Lady
Phillipps died at the age of thirty-seven.

Little in Phillipps’s correspondence or notes reveals anything
about his reaction to the loss of his wife and the mother of his
daughters, if indeed he even felt any such loss. He soon re-
turned to London, leaving his children, aged thirteen, eleven,
and nine in the care of a governess. Completely frustrated by
the baronet, the governess was tempted to quit on several occa-
sions, but her affection for the motherless children must have
changed her mind. She wisely kept them copying “Rolls for
Papa,” transcribing deeds and tracing pedigrees in the hope that
their father might take some interest in them.

Not unexpectedly, Phillipps’s collecting as well as his indebt-
edness increased after Henrietta’s death. There is an endless
stream of letters from booksellers and art dealers. Soon enough
he is in search of another spouse. But by now his customary over-
shadows his tact and good taste. “Do you know of any Lady
with 50,000£ who wants a husband. I am for sale for that price,”
he tells an acquaintance on April 16, 1833. He is in correspon-
dence with a Perthshire collector, W. M. Clarke. On the back of
a letter from Clarke is a copy of his reply: “I am become now a
fortune hunter do you know any wealthy body who wants a husband." Clarke answered a few months later: "How goes on your matrimonial spec? I know of no person of the kind here, excepting the Dowager Duchess of Atholl who has a tremendous jointure. If you could get an introduction there, & be successful you might give me capital shooting. I should think she was m' above sixty!"

Phillipps persevered. To some, he must have appeared ludicrous. One of his lawyer’s sons offered him a wife with a fortune of 100,000 pounds—against a finder’s fee. Munby counted “no less than seventeen abortive negotiations with the parents of heiresses.” Phillipps’s efforts to find a wealthy wife had nothing to do with love or attraction. Everything was governed by his all-consuming passion for adding more and more acquisitions to his already considerable collection. To him, no woman held the spell of a rare manuscript or could measure up to an old map or a fine book. A woman was desirable to him only to the extent that her material position would enable him to add to his holdings.

In the course of his constant search for origins and pedigree, he had met the wealthy family of Francis Warneford. Before he had even received a reply from Clarke, he enquired about the availability of Warneford’s two daughters. But Warneford well understood Phillipps’s aims and insensitivity. He answered, “I only hope [my daughters] will choose a Gentleman and one that is likely to make her happy.” Unruffled by the man’s appropriate reply, Phillipps continued his pursuit of the Warneford daughters and considered it necessary to explain to their father as follows:

Dear Sir:

It is an idle waste of time for 2 persons to begin making love while any obstacle remains to prevent their union. I do not choose to marry a woman without some fortune, & that is the first point I will know before I make any love at all. I have already known of the misery of engaging one’s heart, while a stumbling block remains in the way.

While the last sentence is an obvious reference to his youthful infatuation with Henrietta Molyneux, it is at the same time an unconscious reproach to the mother who disappointed him, regardless of the actual circumstances that caused the disappointment.

We can understand, although hardly be sympathetic to, the reason why Phillipps had obliterated anything resembling human affection and sensitivity from his life. His was a not unexpected reaction, undoubtedly fostered by a lack of maternal care and the domineering stance of his bachelor father. To him, it was far safer to put all his concerns and emotions into a different sort of relationship with the past. The documents, manuscripts, and topographical and genealogical source material he collected readily substituted for human relationships, while distorting and coloring his entire sense of values and his obligations to anyone, including his own children. Nor was there any sense of guilt about the way he felt or, rather, that he had any feelings at all about the matter, character traits we tend to associate with psychopathy. Right, he was convinced, was invariably on his side, a belief that may have been bolstered by the fact that, in the child’s mind, his father had preferred him to his mother.

Observing Thomas Phillipps in all his mean-spirited relationships, we are hard put to maintain an objective point of view. We must keep in mind that all his attitudes and concerns are in logical accord with his character. Arrogance and obduracy mask doubt and suspicion. There is no place for empathy or consideration of others. His letters speak for themselves. They establish a clear coherence in all his actions and affairs.

In the autumn of 1833 Phillipps’s fellow collector, Richard Heber, died, leaving behind 200,000 books and 1,717 manuscripts. Obviously, Phillipps could not possibly forgo such a rich prize. Long, entangled negotiations followed the announcement that the Heber collection would be sold at auction. Now the barrister began to maneuver by seeking to delay the dates of the sales. Then he asked the auctioneers and booksellers for years of credit, and finally, after much haggling, he arrived at an agreement as to commission and dates of payment.

At the sale he acquired 428 manuscripts, among them the most important ones in Heber’s collection, “merely to gratify a selfish and silly feeling, which manifests itself in carrying home
cartloads of MSS... and he is daily becoming a dog in the manager,” as Sir Frederic Madden wrote in his diary. However, it should be added that Madden was not completely objective in making this comment, since Phillips was a competitor of the British Museum, which Madden represented as the Keeper of Manuscripts at the sale.

There is no question that Phillips, regardless of his limited knowledge and sophistication, had acquired a certain reputation and stature in the book world, and notwithstanding his unfailling bargaining and slow payment, dealers as well as scholars sought his patronage. Dealers continued to offer him material because his income was assured, and he eventually paid his bills or most of them, even if under protest.

After buying the Heber manuscripts he was approached by the London bookdealer Thomas Thorpe, who offered him “upwards of fourteen hundred Manuscripts.” Thorpe provided a detailed listing of the manuscripts and arrived at a price of 11,928 pounds, 10 shillings, and 10 pence for the entire lot. Knowing his customer, he had probably incautiouslyPhillips’s counteroffer: “You know that I have brought myself to present poverty through my too great zeal in the acquisition of MSS.” Phillips proposed “5000£ without interest, or 4000£ with interest.” While the transaction was finally concluded at 6,000 pounds, Phillips was as defiant as ever about paying off the debt, and, true to his character, took eight years to live up to his commitment, contributing substantially to Thorpe’s bankruptcy.

It is not easy to picture domestic life at Middle Hill at this time. We do not know what relationships, if any, he had with his three daughters during these years. Riding and shooting provided him with some modicum of relaxation. Still, the overshadowing presence of his ravenous acquisitions was visible throughout the mansion. “Books fill not only the rooms, but also the staircases and passages,” reported a French visitor, Jean-Louis-Alphonse Huillard-Breholles. Personal comfort, leisure time, and economic ease were constantly sacrificed to the reward of expanding the collection.

Always on the lookout for new discoveries, Phillips began to buy up the stocks of wastepaper merchants. Let one example of what he found stand among many. In the tons of valueless ma-

terial he bought in this manner, he unearthed the main part of the early English printer William Caxton’s Ovid. It was a remarkable find, as Sotheby’s catalogue commented when the volume came up for sale in 1966, with the pages discovered, “hopelessly out of order, loose in the fragments of the binding, the remainder in loose sheets. It is a piece of almost unparalleled good luck that the work should have emerged from this lamentable condition in fine state and entirely complete.”

As the Bibliotheca Phillippica grew, so did its owner’s miseries. He even reduced his aging mother’s small annuity by twenty pounds a year. It is difficult to reconstruct the relationship between mother and son in later years. There exist several receipts for the payments, and a few letters. In a letter of January 30, 1850, she addresses Thomas as “My Dearest Friend” as usual, and informs him that

I am a little Better to Day. But at times I am very Bad as my head and Eyes are one Day Better & an other worse. But I thank the Lord that I can see at all at my age as I shall Be 80 years the next Birth Day. I thank the almighty Lord that he has spared me so long. I sincerly hope I shall live to see you once more if it is his Blessed Will. Write all this with out Glasses.... Write again soon & think of me.

Yours very sincerely H. J.

Her last letter to him, dated October 29, 1850, reads “I receiv’d your kind Letter & the inclosed quite safe and am very obliged to you for the same for it was a very great help... give my love to all.” One wonders whether she ever met her granddaughters.

Phillips was now fifty-eight. Even at this age his attitude of alienation and his egocentricity remained unchecked. A few years earlier, in 1843, his daughter Mary had written to her sister, “He is going rather cracked. He is scareely ever in good humour now.” He was angry with everyone and everything—the Pope and Catholicism in general, certain government institutions, book dealers, and various tenants of his farm. Whatever did not suit his plans and purpose was unacceptable to him. His blasphemous diatribes against the Holy Father and everything Catholic took on ludicrous dimensions. He had a leaflet printed and circulated among the “Inhabitants of Broadway” stating
that "The Roman Catholics say in the Sacrament of our Lord’s Supper they actually EAT the REAL BODY, and BLOOD of CHRIST. If so, are they not CANNIBALS?"

All of this is in keeping with his unceasing quarrels with authority. This can only be understood in the larger context of his animosity toward his father, but he could never allow himself the full expression of his resentment. After his father’s death he had to find new targets to aim at, among them the authorities and in particular the Holy Father. There are innumerable additional examples. For instance, a few months before Mary described him as "rather cracked," the local tax collector called at Middle Hill. His affidavit describes the scene: "Sir Thomas then came up with a paddle in his hand and said to me what do you want. I replied Her Majesty’s taxes—he then struck me with a paddle across my body and held the paddle up a second time and I caught it to save a second blow."

This incident bespeaks the man’s irritability and narrow-minded behavior. It occurred about ten months after Phillipps finally remarried. An ordinary man would have been comforted and calmed by a new young wife, but the baronet was no ordinary man. He had been a widower for ten years when he found Elizabeth Manzel, who at twenty-seven was only four years older than his daughter Henrietta. Financially, the marriage did not deliver what he had hoped for a decade earlier. There were long drawn-out negotiations with Eliza’s widowed mother and other relatives before the wedding took place. He finally accepted a dowry of only 3,000 pounds, plus an annual dress allowance of fifty pounds.

In the beginning, there seems to have been a measure of warmth between him and the new Lady Phillipps. He called her Vifty or Wyfy, and she used to address him as Tippie, a pet name evidently derived from his initials T.P. Visitors described her gracefulness and tact. But then the space for entertaining diminished in proportion to the rapidly increasing accession of new acquisitions for the collection.

On September 8, 1857, Phillipps invited Jared Sparks, then president of Harvard University, for a second visit to Middle Hill. He warned Sparks in advance that "the Drawing Room is the only Room we live in & 3 Bed Rooms for ourselves and friends." Three years later he told his old friend Robert Curzon: "Our Drawing Room & Sitting Room is Lady Phillipps’ Bou-

doirls! [December 11, 1860]." In the same letter he comments that there is "no room to dine in except in the Housekeeper’s Room!" There is no question that he was well aware of the increase in his unremitting acquisitiveness.

For the first two decades of his second marriage, there was a more agreeable tenor to his relationship with his wife. There even seemed to be a measure of playfulness between them, rather surprising in a man of Phillipps’s temperament and inner makeup. Thus, in a letter written from London on August 16, 1859, after the auction sale of the collection of Lord Northwick, the same man from whom he later acquired Thistleshaine House, he wrote, "My dear Wyfy, Poor Tippy ruined at the Northwick Sale!!! What a pity his careful prudent Wyfy was not with him. Could not help it! Such beautiful Picts! But where to put them? Aye, there’s the rub!"

One can read between the lines here and note a certain measure of apprehensiveness. Without doubt, in the early years of their marriage, Eliza must have been a sobering influence on his otherwise indefensible acquisitiveness. However, the tone of this note is rare indeed. It has an almost childish, apologetic ring to it and seems to reflect one of those rare flashes of insight from which he returns time and again to that ravenous craving for more and more new material.

This is demonstrated by his involvement with an adventurous forger, a Greek named Constantine Simonides. Simonides had approached the British Museum and the Bodleian Library at Oxford and offered them a number of scrolls and a variety of ancient Greek manuscripts. On close inspection, they were recognized to be ingenious fakes. When Phillipps heard about him, he extended an invitation to Simonides to visit Middle Hill. The Greek was an expert character reader, and, like many dealers, knew how to whet a client’s appetite. He told Phillipps stories about his treasure trove, and how he had obtained the manuscripts in the Middle East and on Mount Athos. He soon provided the collector with a detailed description of a previously unknown manuscript by Thucydidæs.

Phillipps was mesmerized by the man’s stories, as devoted collectors are apt to be. He immediately decided to purchase some of the manuscripts, and jotted down: "I am to have his Pythagoras, his Phocyilides & 3 Diatagnosta Autokrator for a certain sum [December 1853]." While several experts had warned
him about Simonides, he preferred to risk buying forgeries than
to let such “jewels” get into someone else’s hands.

Dr. Johann Georg Kohl, a German scholar, was visiting Mid-
dle Hill at this time. Kohl tells us that Phillipps happened to
have a German newspaper clipping on Simonides, and asked
him to translate the article. Even though it described the Greek
as an expert forger, nothing could prevent Sir Thomas from
buying twenty-two manuscripts of very questionable authentic-
ity. This outright refusal to accept anyone else’s opinion or ex-
pertise is closely related to the attitude of certain types of obser-
vational collectors. It is the opposite of those people who dare not
make any acquisition without the approval and in essence the
sanction of an established authority.

Phillipps, of course, was anything but a conventional man. He
could never resist from increasing his holdings. Eventually he
had about sixty thousand manuscripts, in addition to his books
and other documentary material. He was always accessible
to scholars and fellow collectors, and his readiness to put his
knowledge and experience at their disposal may have been
unconsciously motivated by a desire for reconciliation with
symbolic father figures. During the 1840s and 1850s, he was in
Correspondence with at least sixty researchers and specialists in
Europe and the United States. His hospitality could be disar-
ming, and in conspicuous contrast to the cold fury with which he
sometimes tended to treat members of his family, book dealers,
or his tenant farmers or anyone dependent on him.

Jared Sparks of Harvard, who visited Middle Hill in 1840,
noted in his diary: “I have rarely passed so agreeable or so prof-
itable a week. Sir Thomas Phillipps is renowned for his hospital-
ity ... He devoted nearly the whole time to me, assisting me in
finding manuscripts, and himself searching for such as would
be to my purpose.”

Another visitor, the French Abbott Jean-Baptiste Pitra, a histo-
rian of great repute who was researching the Christianization of
France, reminisced: “At the end of the day, when we felt that we
should have been making our apologies, we were invited by the
baronet to an entertainment which he described as ‘a dessert of
manuscripts.’ At the hour when an English table is spread with
wine, fruit and rare dishes, we found displayed before our eyes
a choice treat of manuscripts of Middlehill.”

Phillipps seems to have treated visiting scholars with a kind
of filial respect, as if he were looking for praise and approval,
perhaps like an obstreperous son hoping for a final acceptance
and ultimate endorsement of his wayward behavior. He must
have imagined himself as a generous provider of rare treats as
he went about selecting “delicacies” for his honored guests, thus
making a virtue out of his ineradicable greed.

In his later years, he confessed that his manuscripts were “a
never failing solace in every trouble.” Like his first wife, the sec-
ond Lady Phillipps could not long endure his selfishness and
intolerance. Not unexpectedly, his marriage suffered. At one
point, her health failed, and doctors prescribed the old remedy,
a trip abroad. The estimate for spending a winter on the Conti-
nent was some 250 pounds, far too large a sum for Sir Thomas
to part with easily. However, as far as I can make out from his
records, in that same year he spent at least 1,384 pounds 13 shil-
lings and 6 pence on his collection, not counting bills from print-
ers and bookbinders.

Lady Phillipps settled for a journey to the sea resort of
Torquay, where she took a room in a boarding house. She wrote
to complain that she did not even have enough money for gro-
cerries and dental bills. “Oh, if you would not set your heart so
much on your books, making them an Idol, how thankful I
should be!” she implored him (November 24, 1868). This was
just one day after he had written to tell his old friend Robert
Curzon that “I am going on with the old Mania of Book-
buying.”

Meanwhile his response to his wife once more reveals his un-
bending self-centeredness:

Dear E.

I must desire you not to send me any more of your sermons.
You are evidently fallen into bad company in Torquay for you
were never so absurd before. ... Never interfere with the happy-
ness of other people. I make no Idol of my Books more than you
of your Hymn Books. Therefore write no more to me in such a
strain, if you wish to retain my good Will, & then I shall continue
your

affectionate
T. Phillipps
Not quite four years later Sir Thomas Phillipps died leaving the most extensive and significant library of manuscripts ever. Middle Hill went to the Halliwell's, in totally uninhabitable condition. To his wife of thirty years he left 100 pounds "as a mark of my affection." The collection was given to the care of his daughter Kate and her husband, without sufficient funds to keep it properly intact. Neither the Halliwell's nor any Roman Catholic were to be admitted to inspect the library.

On February 27, 1848, Honoré de Balzac invited the young author Jules Fleury-Husson, who wrote under the pen name of Champfleury, to visit him at his new dreamhouse on the Rue Fortunée in Paris. Champfleury had long been an admirer of the famous author and had in fact even dedicated his Feu Miette, Fantaisie d'Eté to Balzac. It was a historic moment, for it was the day after the proclamation of the Republic.

Only twelve days earlier, Balzac had returned from one of his frequent visits to Russia, where he had stayed at the home of the recently widowed Countess Eveline de Hanska, whom he had assiduously courted for the last sixteen years. Life on her estate was luxurious, far beyond his own more or less petit bourgeois background or, for that matter, even that of his many aristocratic French friends.

His fantasy was to offer the woman he hoped to make his wife a hôtel particulier in Paris that would equal her beautiful manor house in Wierczowina, in the Ukraine. A year or so earlier, on September 28, 1846, he had bought the house on the Rue Fortunée that he wanted to give to his beloved "Louloup," the pet name he used for Eve de Hanska in the thousands of love letters he wrote over nearly two decades. Since then, he had been filling the house with rare furniture, rich carpets, chinaware, paintings, silver, and innumerable pieces of bric-à-brac.

Balzac's lavish spending and fondness for luxury was longstanding, going back to the beginning of his adult life. By this time, his passion for all sorts of decorative objects knew no bounds, and he was spending like a wild man. No author of his time depending solely on the earnings from his writings, no matter how successful, could have shouldered the cost of his collection and his extravagant lifestyle. Nonetheless, he could not resist spending still another 400,000 francs, far more than he could afford, on his dreamhouse, as he called it. He justified this
TWO COLLECTORS

expenditure by telling himself that a grandniece of a former
queen of France needed a proper home.

"I hope to become rich by the stroke of novels," he had told
his sister in a letter written some twenty-five years earlier. This
was a lifelong expectation, but was bound to remain unfulfilled,
and, after buying and furnishing his new house, he was, as
usual, very heavily in debt.

It is easy to imagine how impressed Champfleury must have
been by his idol's lavishly decorated new home. Balzac spent
several hours with the young author discussing the ins and outs
of their profession, with particular attention to the drawback of
being a novelist, rather than a dramatist. By this time Balzac was
convinced that he would make his fortune in the theater, rather
than through novels.

Drama and the theater were much on Balzac's mind, since
three months later a new play of his, La Mairie (The Step-
mother), was to open at the Théâtre Historique in Paris. As
usual, he was convinced that the play would be a huge success
and bring in the much-needed money, which he could use to
pay his always pressing debts. Also as usual, the thought the
play might not be well accepted never entered his mind, since
the idea of failure was something he simply could not believe.

Yes, he told Champfleury, the theater brings instant remunera-
tion, but novels and stories do not. In the course of talking
about his new home, he explained that, in his opinion, an artist
should live in comfort, and even in style. To underline this pro-
ouncement, he then proceeded to take the young writer on a
tour of the home that now housed his impressive (at first glance)
collection. As Champfleury was led from one lavishly furnished
room to the next, he thought to himself: "This is the gallery of
Cousin Pons, these are the paintings of Cousin Pons, the curios of
Cousin Pons..."86

Champfleury's observation was by no means a leap of his
imagination, since Balzac's house in the Rue Fortunée was in-
deed close to that of Cousin Pons, the central character of his re-
cently published novel of that name. Le Cousin Pons, one of
Balzac's last books, appearing in 1847, is the story of a failure in
life of a man who is a passionately dedicated collector. While the
inspiration for Pons antedates the acquisition of the house, the
attitudes and activities of the man show striking similarities

with Balzac's fantasies, though not his habits. Moreover, the
dreamhouses of Pons and his author are almost one and the
same.

It is noteworthy to remember that Balzac worked on the novel
and his new house at one and the same time. His story describes
the passion and anguish of the inveterate collector, and the tor-
ment and courses of experience during his childhood and
youth, including the coldness that denied him a mother's love.
Perhaps most relevant, Pons's attitude toward the objects in his
collection echoes that of Balzac himself. The author at one point
in the novel describes Pons as a man "who found in those [ob-
jects] ever-renewed compensation for his failure, that, if he had
been made to choose between his curiosities and the fame of
Rossini—will it be believed?—Pons would have pronounced for
his beloved collection."87

In the novel, Sylvain Pons is an aging bachelor who in his
youth had been a promising violinist, even winning the Prix de
Rome. However, life has not been kind to him. His only relatives
look down on this unattractive and unprepossessing man, and
express their contempt by haughtily distancing themselves from
him. Pons is a subtenant in a house in the Marais (the same sec-
tion of bourgeois Paris to which the Balzac family had moved
after leaving their home in Tours, Honoré's birthplace). Here,
Pons becomes friendly with another bachelor-tenant, a one-time
orchestra conductor named Schmucke.

The theme of the poor relation, and of impoverished and mis-
understood people, often appears in Balzac's writings. An
awareness of social distinctions shines through most of his nov-
els, while the constant references to name, fortune, and social
position echo essential elements of the author's aspirations.

Cousin Pons is the unwanted and scorned relative of the cold-
hearted, nouveaux riches and uninformed Camusots de Mer-
ville, members of the new, post-Napoleonic, Paris society, who
have tried to minimize all contact with their homely and undis-
tinguished cousin. The Camusots had become rich through
France's financial and political machinations, and the rapid ad-

dvance of industrialization, in the Napoleonic era. Their ostenta-
tious parade in front of Pons during one of his infrequent visits
to them, and his discomfort, clearly reflect Balzac's feelings of
depression and neglect during his childhood and adolescence.
This mingling of graphic descriptions of the correlation between the social climate and historical events of the early nineteenth-century and his own personal history and self-image is most characteristic for Balzac’s work.

Now and then the Camusots invite Pons to dine with them, a highlight in his otherwise uneventful and solitary existence. He describes these dinners with great relish to his friend Schmucke. On one of these occasions, Pons brings his cousin, Madame la Présidente Camusot, a beautiful painted fan. She makes the obligatory, albeit perfunctory, gesture of appreciation, briefly shows it to her snobbish daughter, and then takes little notice of the gift. At this point, Pons, a bit put out, feels compelled to explain that the fan was painted by Watteau and once belonged to Mme. de Pompadour. Mme. Camusot, however, is not impressed, because she has never heard of Jean-Antoine Watteau.

As is frequently the case in Balzac’s writings, his hero’s universe is made up of thinly disguised autobiographical details. The scenery, the background, the characters, and the entire ambience inevitably connect with his own past, and with the contradictory character traits that marked his own personality. These all become part of a contemporary social drama, played out against the background of the post-Napoleonic era in France.

By the time Cousin Pons was published, Balzac was a famous and distinguished author, with all the doors of Paris society open to him. Had he not been constantly seeking new acquisitions to add to his collection, thereby running up enormous debts, he might very well have died a contented man who had achieved the kind of success he had only fantasized about in his childhood and adolescence. If we are to understand what was involved in the development of his highly complex character, we must delve into the disturbing emotional life that marked his formative years, since the daydreams, intricate schemes, and wild flights of imagination, which always dominated his private world, originated during that time.

Honoré de Balzac was born during Napoleon’s Consulship, on May 20, 1799, in Tours, in central France. His father, Bernard-François—a self-made man, energetic, ambitious, and not without certain flexibility as to the tide of the times—was the oldest son of a farmer, Bernard Balssa, a name he later changed to Balzac.

The aspiring Bernard-François first became a clerk in an attorney’s office, and then, “while still very young, he ‘went up’ to Paris, owning nothing but his hobnailed shoes, a peasant jacket, a flowered waistcoat, and three shirts of coarse material.” This is recalled in the author’s description of one of his heroes, César Brotteau, who, as an adolescent, leaves Tours for Paris with only his “hobnailed shoes, a pair of breeches, blue stockings, a sprigged waistcoat . . . three ample shirts of good linen, and a stout walking stick.”

Honoré described his father as an eccentric man, talkative, boisterous, and full of illogical theories and conceptions, although more human and certainly kinder than his cold, narcissistic mother who seemed quite indifferent to her children, perhaps with the exception of the youngest one, Henri. The father was already of grandfather age when Honoré and his two sisters, Laure and Louise, were born. Henri was his mother’s favorite, possibly because he had not been fathered by Bernard-François.

In later life, Balzac clearly took on certain character traits of his father. However, while there were quite pronounced elements of identification, especially his reiterated conviction that he was an exceptional person, it appears that here at least the son had more reason to make such a claim than the father. In addition, Bernard-François probably did not have the engaging, almost seductive nature of his son. A man with a roving eye, the father was infatuated by young ladies and much concerned with finding the key to longevity and, implicitly, potency. This soon led him to Chinese literature, since he was apparently convinced that Chinese thought and writings held the answer to everything. In his spare time, he wrote little tracts on all sorts of subjects—politics, trade, social issues—and he was incessantly trying to improve his own predicament and that of his family.

It was quite in keeping with this aim that he should have a grandiose fantasy—that his branch of the family had sprung from an easy and noble stock of Gallic origins. Remember this was a family romance that Bernard-François shared with Sir Thomas Phillipps, and it was a notion that also appealed to Honoré. In this regard, it should be noted that, just as his father
attempted to trace his ancestry to the noble family of the Balzac d’Entraigues, Honoré also used the pseudonym of the Marquis d’Entraigues at the occasion of his first secret rendezvous with the Countess de Hanska in the town of Neuchâtel, in Switzerland.30

There is a principal fact we must bear in mind. Balzac’s early years consisted of a series of rejections, disappointments, and loneliness. Throughout his life he kept saying, “I never had a mother.” It left a lasting mark on his personality. It helps explain his many attempts and strategies aimed at providing himself with a true sense of security as opposed to his early feelings of deprivation and abandonment, which led to an almost random system of phobic defenses, especially by becoming a man of the world, a pseudo-womanizer, a carpetbagger, an obsessive collector, all in order to dilute the inner threats posed by childhood anxieties.

He was born simply Honoré Balzac.31 His father, plain Citizen Balzac, without the “de” particle he eventually added to the name, often, and apparently jokingly, referred to the family’s aristocratic antecedents. And indeed, his dogged struggle for acceptance in Tours society was crowned with a certain measure of success. Shortly before Honoré’s birth, he had become a supplier to the French army, always a lucrative enterprise. Thus elevated to a solid economic status, and with it a more prominent social position in this small-town, provincial world, Bernard-François at the age of fifty-one married Laure Salambier, a nineteen-year-old Parisian girl. Marrying a girl thirty-two years his junior reflected his need to prove himself, his denial of aging, his longing for recognition, and his continual self-idealization. This last characteristic was echoed in his son’s eccentricities, especially in the way Honoré went about his collecting, often intertwined with his delusional beliefs of having made extraordinary discoveries.

The considerable age difference between his parents, his mother’s self-absorption and the concomitant insensitivity for other people’s needs and feelings, and his father’s perpetual boastfulness and grandiosity left their mark on the boy’s struggle for love and attention. Vainglory was a significant element in the model the father had set for his son. And so, at the age of twenty-six, Honoré Balzac, plain Citizen Balzac, becomes

Honoré de Balzac in a letter to the Duchess Laure d’Abrantès.32 In the next few years the article begins to appear with increasing frequency in his name, more or less in keeping with his rapid rise in Paris society.

Even though the title was a fictitious one, it was not entirely Honoré’s creation because his father too had imagined himself to be a descendent of an old aristocratic family. Self-idealization was more delusional for the father than for Honoré, who, after all, had grown up with Bernard-François’s preoccupation with his fictitious ancestry. Tellingly enough, while still in his twenties, Honoré wrote a few trashy stories and novels under such curious pen names as “Lord R’Hoone” or “Horace de Saint-Aubin,” which seem to echo his father’s fantasies. Balzac’s longing to be part of a higher social stratum derived from both the emotional deprivations throughout his childhood and the father’s exhibitionistic personality. What Honoré was really hoping for was better, more caring mothering from someone who could then be elevated into an aristocratic lady. It is a theme he kept acting out in his numerous relationships with titled mistresses and describes time and again in his novels. Maternal neglect remained a festering wound with him throughout his entire life.

In Balzac’s autobiographical novel The Lily of the Valley, the hero finds himself wishing to be the Duc d’Angoulême, for whom a party is being given. Later on in the novel, the hero refers to “the antiquity of my name, the most precious hallmark a man could possess.”33 Balzac’s obsessive preoccupation with names, with social position, and with financial matters are an unmistakable natural adjunct to his propensity for dramatic exaggeration of his sense of values and priorities. He tended to elevate everything about him, people as well as goods and objects (and particularly the largely mediocre objects in his possession). This worked both ways: the objects were ennobled because he owned them, and his self-esteem, always uncertain, was enhanced because he imagined to own objects of great significance or rarity.

Honoré shares this tendency with many collectors, who also have the need to convince themselves that what they own is special, if not “the best,” or “the ultimate.” It is, to be sure, a form of projection that relates to their self-image. In Balzac’s case it is
easy to trace the roots of this particular need. Emotionally deprived, and plagued by childhood agonies, Honoré had to learn to cope with the ignominy of hunger, illness, parental neglect, and finally devastating loneliness. Under these circumstances, he had to fortify himself with lively fantasies, idealizing himself as a person of exceptional qualities and foresight. But he also had a “Cinderella complex,” in that he was convinced that one day a beautiful princess would come to his rescue.

Before we further explore the collector Balzac’s personality, we must first understand more of the non-dialogue between him and his parents. We only have an incomplete picture of Laure Salambier. Her family came from the same arrondissement in Paris to which the Balzacs moved twenty years later, and where Pons and his friend Schmucke led their insular existence. The Salambiers were respected merchants, and of a higher social station than the originally penniless Bernard-François. Laure’s parents seem to have been more warmhearted and kinder than their daughter, according to the impressions of Honoré’s sister. The maternal grandmother, Sophie Salambier, was not an easy-going woman. Although she showed some affection for her oldest grandchild, she appears to have been strict and demanding with her daughter. A “Daily Time-Table for my Daughter Laure” reflects something of the severity of Honoré’s mother’s childhood environment: Rise at 7, clean teeth, wash hands and face, tidy bedroom between 7 and 8, breakfast and recreation between 8 and 9, writing between 9 and 10, and “useful work” between 10 and noon,” which referred to dressmaking, knitting, hemming, and embroidery. The force and rigor of this conditioning doubtless had its affect on Laure’s personality.

There is no indication that, in all of Balzac’s fifty-one years, there had ever been a single moment of true closeness and affection between him and the vain, distant, and narcissistic woman who was his mother. The extensive family correspondence, which still exists, confirms this, since it consists largely of letters from Honoré to his mother describing in the main the business of dealing with publishers, printers, and creditors, and the details of his often confusing economic affairs in general. A typical letter begins: “Dear mother, The day before yesterday I received your letter enclosing the account since May 10 according to

which you still have 614 frs. and 54 centimes, and I am answering first in regard to business [October 22, 1849].” He goes on for pages discussing nothing but financial matters, and these are mostly trivialities. He had spent several months at the Ukrainian estate of Countess Hanska, from where the letter was written. Meanwhile, he had left his financial affairs in the not-so-competent hands of his mother, who was over seventy and not very well to do. In the same letter, only five short sentences refer to her personally: “Take good care of yourself; don’t spare anything. (Ah! I hope you had the heating pipes cleaned before using them for the winter for they must be cleaned every year.)” At best, these letters to his mother show no more than a sense of filial obligation and certainly no love. When he died less than a year later, his will directed Eve de Hanska to pay Mme. de Balzac a stipend for her subsistence.

Until Honoré was fifteen, the family lived in Tours, the provincial capital the man never completely abandoned. Tours was a regular setting for many of his stories and novels, which reflect an outspoken fondness for the Loire Valley and the local landscape to which he returns time and again. Despite this, it was not his parents’ house in Tours that was the focus of his impressions during his earliest years.

Immediately after his birth, he was put in the care of a hired nurse in Saint Cyr-sur-Loire. His mother’s explanation of this was that a brother, born exactly a year earlier, had been nursed by her and had died when he was only twenty-three days old. We do not know the cause of the baby’s death, or Laure’s maternal response to it. However, there is little question that being deprived from the outset of maternal love and devotion and being separated from his mother and his parents’ home for the first four years of his life, constituted the basis of the predominantly obsessive defenses that persisted throughout Honoré’s life.

Very little is known about the vicissitudes while he was in the care of the nurse. Sixteen months later he was joined there by his sister Laure, who was also given into the nurse’s charge. There are many indications that much of Honoré’s attachment to the first woman who had taken care of him was soon displaced to his sister. Her presence undoubtedly relieved some of his sad-
ness and despair, and the bond with her remained certainly the most constant, and quite possibly the least ambivalent, of any he ever had. Laure’s presence guaranteed some kind of emotional continuity and belonging to him, and his lasting affection for his sister indicates a recognition of this fact. Indeed, many of his letters to her later in life read more like love letters than correspondence between siblings. Nonetheless, this closeness did not eliminate a basic sense of solitude that remained with him throughout his life, and supplied him with his creative fantasies and astonishingly rich and detailed imaginary excursions into the world of other people. In addition, it gave him license for both his asocial way of life and his restitutive and reparative obsessions.

It should be mentioned here that it was not uncommon in French society of the Napoleonic era to give young children into the care of a nurse outside the parental home. In view of their mother’s emotional detachment, the Balzac children were probably better off in the hands of a simple country woman. Nor can we discount the advantages of the brother and sister being brought up together, for they were always able to rely on each other. Spending the first years of one’s life away from one’s parents, and going without the emotional security provided by good-enough mothering—always a fortification against the vicissitudes of life—are more than sufficient grounds for an escape into imagination and fantasy, as well as for hopelessness and obsessionial maneuvers needed to ward off frustration and mental distress.

A childhood scene recalled by Laure throws some light on young Honoré’s already florid fantasy life: “For hours on end he would scratch away at a little red violin, and in his rapturous expression showed that he believed he was hearing tunes. He was astonished when I begged him to stop. ‘Can’t you hear how pretty it is?’ he would say.”

Years later, after Balzac had achieved fame and success, he wrote about Pons and Schmucke, two former musicians, lonely, friendless, and prey to emotional impotence. Pons, the unsuccessful violinst turned collector extraordinaire, found solace and companionship in the objects he had collected with utmost care and discernment. Like Pons, Honoré’s flights into fantasy often carried him beyond self-doubt and the disappointments and suffering of his boyhood. When he was young, others had complained about the croaking of frogs, which to him sounded beautiful; later in life, he found mediocre works of art that he was convinced were outstanding examples by some of his favorite artists. Clearly, the ground for this bizarre self-deception had thus been prepared during his childhood when he simply had to take such flights of imagination.

If the initial circumstances of the two children were confusing, their traumatic and unhappy homecoming about three years later was in many ways even more so. Their mother was anything but empathetic or understanding, and used to reprimand them for any misdeeds. They saw little enough of her as it was, but then there arrived a new governess, which made matters even worse, since she was just as cold and as strict with them as their mother.

A few people brought some relief. Their maternal grandparents provided a bit of warmth and understanding, and then, later on, there came a friend of the family, the “petit père Dabin,” a well-meaning, considerate, and wealthy bachelor and family friend and an ever-available father figure who often came to Honoré’s financial rescue.

We know what kind of healthy and healing comfort comes from a sense of being wanted and cared for. Thus, even a short visit to his grandparents’ home in Paris gave young Honoré a deeply needed sense of family attachment and belonging. According to Laure, the boy cried when their grandfather died—the only tears his sister ever remembered him shedding.

In his search for a place in the world, as well as for security and inspiration, Honoré soon turned to books. He quickly became an indefatigable reader. The fantasy life as an outcome of his reading became a secret escape from, and a magical weapon against, an ever-present sense of anguish and desperation. In due time, Honoré found other escape routes. In identification with his father, he became vainglorious and exhibitionistic, at times even cynical and patronizing, and he tried to elevate himself to the aristocratic social position his father had only fantasized about.

But during those early childhood years, when true care and caring and the experience of being loved and lovable give a certain inner stability and self-regard, Honoré had almost no per-
sonal attachments and was very forlorn. An article entitled “Des Artistes,” published in La Silhouette (1830), expresses some of his introspective understanding of this: “A man who is used to make his soul a mirror in which the entire universe is reflected lacks necessarily that kind of logic, that brand of obstinacy that we label ‘character.’ He is a bit of a harlot. He longs like a child for everything that strikes his fancy.” A statement such as this leads Maurois to the conclusion that Balzac here is asserting his prerogative to inconstancy, and I agree.99

Balzac’s writings are studded with references to the impressions and experiences of his childhood and early adolescence; to peoples’ egotism, suffering, and unstable and unreliable associations. Many of his themes reflect a childhood full of threats, ambivalent relationships, and disappointments. There seems to linger a compulsive need to return to his early circumstances, sometimes modified, at other times barely disguised at all.

His young mother was attractive, socially ambitious, and probably more than a little bored with a much older husband preoccupied with his position, and with awkward ideas about politics, religion, longevity, and his life expectations about which he concocted and published those innocuous pamphlets.

As the son later put it, he thought of his health, and what he defined as “the perfect life,” as having taken refuge “in a provincial life and quiet home.”99 It is easy to visualize this narrow-minded, obsessional man with a borrowed sense of importance, married to a narcissistic woman more than a generation younger than himself who came from a Parisian middle-class family and must have seen in Bernard-François a rigid and basically insecure provincial. She sought escape from these bourgeois confines in pseudo-philosophical speculations—later expounded upon by Balzac in his novels Louis Lambert and Seraphita.

As was to be expected, the young girl from Paris turned into a disappointed housewife in Tours. Later, she had a relationship with a slightly younger local aristocrat, Jean de Margonne, by whom she had her fourth and youngest child, Henri. She was by all accounts a shallow and extravagant woman who was parsi monious and severe with her children, with the possible exception of Henri.100 At one point, Honoré, fully aware of his mother’s character, wrote to his sister, “Mme. Balzac has one foot in Paris and the other in the country, she is tired from run

ning after wealth... Papa says that our good mama is a wicked woman [January 1822].”

Little is reported by brother and sister after their return “home” from Saint Cyr-sur-Loire. Their unsympathetic governess always stood between the children and their mother, although in fact it made very little difference since she was uncaring and hardly maternal anyway. Soon thereafter the two girls were sent off to a private school. The disruption of the long-established bond between Honoré and Laure must have added to the boy’s sense of loneliness. Shortly before the birth of Henri, Honoré, aged eight, was sent away again, this time to the Oratorian college in Vendôme, where he remained from 1807 to 1813. He would see his mother only twice in those six years.

This boarding school was known for being very strict. The food was sparse and the heating minimal. Occasional outings were likely to resemble military forced marches, a typical example being a ten-mile walk to a local foundry or observatory starting at 4:00 in the morning. To us, such training seems much more typical of a prison than an educational institution. It is certainly not what we would consider suitable for a reflective lad more in need of care and maternal warmth than harsh discipline.

In his autobiographical novel Louis Lambert, Balzac describes the severity of the regimen at the school, the physical neglect, and even the sores and chilblains that developed during the cold winters. The boy felt more unloved and abandoned at the school than at Saint Cyr-sur-Loire because there was no caring sister nor a supervisory nurse. The students were not even permitted to leave school for a visit home.

Thus, Honoré’s childhood had accustomed him for loneliness and neglect. As he wrote in Louis Lambert: “Instead of enjoying, as most schoolboys do, the sweets of farniente, so enticing at any age, he carried his books into the woods where he could read and meditate free from the remonstrances of his mother... From this time reading became a species of hunger in Louis’ soul which nothing appeased; he devoured books of all sorts—feeding indiscriminately on history, philosophy, physics, and religious works.”

Meditation, hunger, feeding are recurrent themes in Balzac’s writings. He was never able to come to grips with his early privations and unhappiness. Incessant reading and the accumula-
tion of all kinds of knowledge gave him the vast amounts of information used so frequently and so effectively in his novels. His awareness of his isolation; his need for some tie with the outside world; his constant search for material security; his craving for objects, possessions, and people; and his enormous and constant indebtedness are in essence closely connected psychological reactions. He not only sought to acquire objects of all sorts but also collected people. In addition, there was within him a hunger for affection and for being wanted as a defense against an ever-present fear of desertion.

All of this was clearly and demonstrably rooted in those early years of uncertainty, and in the comparative vagueness of identificatory models, the unreliability of a capricious and insensitive mother, and a father whose concerns were of a higher order than coping with his children’s needs. All of this considerably affected the development of Balzac’s very complex character.

Balzac wrote Louis Lambert at the age of thirty-three while staying at Sache, the country estate of his mother’s lover, Jean de Margonne. He considered this novel his most personal and possibly his best piece of writing. To today’s reader it is a work of a still young and potentially promising although inexperienced writer lacking the ease and penetrating conceptualization so apparent in his later works, and especially in the Comédie Humaine. In a way, Louis Lambert belongs to those autobiographical and self-revelatory works that often serve as catalysts to young authors by opening the way for the release of more remote, often unconscious but in any case inaccessible creative powers.

The true achievement of this first novel lies in its documentation of the author’s early years, since it not only makes for better acquaintance with the history of Balzac as a collector but also reveals a tortured adolescent’s sense of resignation and self-absorption, together with his emerging defenses later to be expressed in arrogance and exhibitionistic displays.

The Lily of the Valley and Louis Lambert have always been considered the most confessional, and hence the most informative of Balzac’s novels. Other works, such as The Wild Ass’s Skin, Père Goriot, Cousine Bette, and Facino Cane are also personal and revealing, but they are less illuminating for the clinician than those books that offer an intriguing glimpse of his early years, of his adolescence and his pecadillos as a young adult.

Louis Lambert and Felix de Vandenesse, the young hero of The Lily of the Valley, both provide the key to an understanding of Sylvain Pons or, more to the point, of Honoré de Balzac. Pons lived in poverty and Balzac in constant debt; the passions of both border on mania, and their appetites feed on a fanatic need for replenishment. Both are, or can be, voracious eaters.

Louis, described as the precocious son of poor country folk, has been sent, in preparation for the priesthood, to his uncle, a curate in the Loire Valley. An intelligent lad of irresistible charm, Louis receives further education at the well-known Oratorian college at Vendôme at the expense and under the protection of the highly celebrated Madame de Stael. Out walking one day, she had “discovered” Louis, “almost in rags, and absorbed in reading.” The boy is thus rescued by a “lady of quality” (a theme repeated later in the book when his bride, the Jewish heiress Pauline de Villenoix, shows her selfless devotion to him when he suffers a catatonic breakdown).

On their first encounter, Louis and Mme. de Stael engage in a brief conversation about God and mysticism. Toward the end of their exchange she declares, “He is a real seer.” Indeed, his thinking is very different from that of the other pupils. However, his schoolmates consider him quite ordinary, and not at all the usual boy Mme. de Stael thinks him to be. Only Balzac, in his role as the storyteller, knows the truth. He tells his readers: “I alone was allowed really to know [Louis’s] sublime . . . divine soul.” He continues: “Our intimacy was so brotherly that our school-fellows joined our two names; one never was spoken without the other.”

Fictitious friendships are not uncommon in Balzac’s novels. Pons and Schmucke represent a similar pair. Relationships such as these are built on a strong homoerotic-identificatory bond intrinsic to the kind of defensive personality traits that commonly develop in response to early emotional deprivation. One wonders whether Balzac had any awareness of the frequency with which he refers to trust and intimacy between two men.

The emotional traumatata Honoré experienced at the hands of his parents and governness as well as some of his teachers were compounded by his physical suffering at the boarding school. There he was frequently banished to the “alcove.” These were confinement quarters. It was a form of isolation from the other
children and considered severe punishment indeed. But it gave him ample opportunity to continue unobserved his insatiable reading, at that time his only means of escape from the outside world, and the first tentative manifestation of his collecting drive. At the same time, he made his first serious attempt at writing, an essay entitled “Traité de la Volonté,” which was discovered by one of the schoolmasters and subsequently destroyed. However, the same concepts were later expounded on in his novel Seraphita with a highly revealing example of a hallucinatory experience of male-female identity confusion and the androgynous element of human nature.

The final part of Louis Lambert is in keeping with Balzac’s melodramatic style, especially in his early works. After Louis’s sudden departure from the school, he and the narrator lose contact. Years later, in 1823, the storyteller unexpectedly meets his old friend’s uncle in a coach (chance meetings are a favorite device in Balzac) and learns of Louis’s unhappy fate: “My poor nephew was to be married to the richest heiress in Blois, but the day before his wedding he went mad. . . . Louis had some well-marked attacks of catalepsy. . . . He thought himself unfit for marriage.” His bride, Pauline de Vilenoix, insists on devoting herself to his recovery. The marriage— “a happiness we alone can comprehend,” says Louis to Pauline—is never consummated.

The portraits he paints of Cousin Pons, of Raphael de Valentin, Lucien de Rubempré, Vautrin and Rastignac, and primarily of Louis Lambert, all show numerous traces of the author’s personality. These characters help in our understanding of an exceptional man who found in his search for objects an avenue of self-therapy, despite his inability to adjust to the demands of his environment and to accept the terms of the world into which he was born.

Balzac had an intuitive grasp of human passion, of carnal appetites, of affects and aspirations. He knew them all. When, for example, Felix de Vandenesse reveals to the Countess Natalie de Manerville that “I have, buried within my soul, astounding memories, like those marine growths which may be seen in calm waters, and which the surges of the storm fling in fragments on the shore,”105 This is not a mere figure of speech. He is quite aware that his emotions, although seemingly in control, are barely repressed. We see the versatile writer dealing with anal imagery, and with an inner rage in which broken objects are flung at the outside world. He wants to undo profound anxiety by attacking, and to express his anger at the long years of hurt, of suffering and the repression of deep emotional pain.

“What poet,” he writes, “will tell of the sorrows of the child whose lips suck the milk of bitterness, whose smiles are checked by the scorching fire of a stern eye? . . . What moral or physical deformity earned me my mother’s coldness? Was I the offspring of duty?” He laments further: “Cut off already from all affection, I could love nothing, and Nature had made me loving! Is there an angel who collects the sighs of such ever-present feelings?”

Here is the probing spirit that leads to a preoccupation with objects meant to counterbalance the trauma of a loveless, disorienting childhood. And Felix de Vandenesse’s childhood could well have been a chapter in a textbook on child psychiatry. In it, we are getting a description of Honoré’s own emotional conflicts and agony.

This man’s younger and delicate wife becomes the storyteller’s mistress. Or take A Start in Life. Here the Comte de Seses, a peer of France, falls in love with a younger woman whom he subsequently marries. He is emotionally dependent on her even though she refuses intimacy. The count suffers from a skin ailment, which his wife uses as her reason for rejecting him, and, while they make a pretense of having marital relations, the countess leads an independent life of glamour and luxury, not unlike that of Honoré’s mother.

Again, in Droll Stories, Balzac describes Bertha the Penitent who marries the much older Sire Imbert de Bastarnay, one of the most landed lords in the Touraine. The old man has encountered the innocent and attractive maiden Bertha de Rohan, and was “seized with so great a desire to possess her that he determined to make her his wife. . . . So immediately the night arrived when it should be lawful for him to embrace her, he got her with child so roughly that he had proof of the result two months after the marriage.” Bertha lets the insensitive man enter into “the sweet garden of Venus as he would into a place taken by assault, without giving any heed to the cries of the poor inhabitants in tears, and placed a child as he would an arrow in
the dark.” Bertha was only fifteen years old, and even though “she had had the profit of being a mother, the pleasures of love had been denied to her.”

For Balzac, Bertha is a “mirror of virtue,” and this “considerably aided the little boy, who during six years occupied day and night the attention of his pretty mother, who first nourished him with her milk, and made him a lover’s lieutenant, yielding to him her sweet breasts, which gnawed at, hungry, as often as he would, and was, like a lover, always there. This good mother knew no other pleasures than those of his rosy lips . . . and listened to no other music than his cries, which sounded in her ears like angels’ whispers.” These cries that turn into heavenly whispers are remarkably like little Honoré’s scratches on his violin, which sounded to him like pretty melodies. To us, the story is dated, leaden, and ponderous, but we are not concerned here with its literary merits. The tale contrasts Bertha’s devotion with his mother’s frigidity; even more important, it gives us insight into his not-so-subtle incestuous fantasies of being “like a lover” to his ideal of a mother.

From this point of view, it is hardly a coincidence that as a young adult Balzac’s love relationships were clear attempts to compensate for his early deprivation by acting out such instinctual gratification. He was not quite twenty-three when he started his first love affair, with the Countess Laure de Berny who was then about forty-five.

An essay by Freud deals with the phenomenon of those who see themselves as exceptional or chosen people. They feel privileged or different and insist that nonconformity is their due and birthright. The ontogenetic origins of this specific self-image are that they had unusual childhoods, and that certain early experiences or conditions affected their development, the way they see themselves, their mode of behavior, and their lifestyle. Their early lives constitute a repository of emotional disturbances and experiential or physiological conditions. These are people who tend throughout their later lives to make claims for compensation, or “an accident pension,” as Freud once put it. Potentially, the need to be exceptional can carry with it an insistence on a kind of eccentricity that manifests itself in more or less conspicuous and often compulsive ambition.

Honorable consistently presented himself as special and expected others to recognize his singularity. Moreover, he had a plethora of schemes, plans, and pipe dreams to further his goals in order to counteract his damaged self-esteem. It is reasonable to assume that he was testing his own potential as well as his environment. He was in a bind since his early childhood experiences had left their mark on him, so he was prepared for disillusionment and rejection. However, he also had a memory of his avenue of escape—his fantasies of grandiosity and his ostentatious behavior. His appetites and illusions were fixated at a stage when he felt unloved and even unwanted. His erratic style, his obsessive propensities—either totally immersed in his work, or squandering time and money; living on next to nothing but cup after cup of black coffee, or being a gourmandizer of enormous proportions—vividly demonstrate his underlying character structure as the affective responses to his early unfulfilled needs and his constant search for relief through a desperate, frequently delusional play for recognition and applause. His often grotesque and self-congratulatory braggadocio is conspicuously like an infant’s vacillation between rage and laughter. Impulse-ridden in his decisions, starry-eyed and sentimental in his infatuation with the Countess de Hanska, sometimes vain and irritatingly pretentious, Balzac felt that his exceptionality entitled him to the temperamental outbursts and moodswings as a manifestation of his early perception of lack of love and inadequate care.

His childhood was a chronicle of disappointments and rejections, which explains much of his behavior in his adult life. He became a “workaholic,” spending as much as eighteen hours at a stretch at his desk. Then there were his outrageous debts, largely due to his ostentation and incessant acquisition of objects for his house. Quite understandably, he was predisposed to idolize older women from social strata far above his own. However, never having experienced good-enough mothering and care, all he could do was dream of love while he was incapable of ever truly loving anyone with genuinely devoted dedication, free from self-centered, narcissistic illusions.

Like his parents, he was always trying to enhance his social position. His efforts were reasonably successful, particularly as
his literary talents began to bring him more and more prestige. The acclaim of his books soon opened the doors to many of the most fashionable Paris salons in the 1820s and 1830s. Ambitious and resourceful, Honoré was determined to take from other women the attention denied him by his mother throughout his childhood.

His alert mind and quick wit soon captivated the Duchesse de Rauzen, the Marquise de la Bourdonnaye, and Madame Sophie Gay, and he was just thirty when he began being invited to the salon of Madame Récamier, perhaps the summit of Parisian café society at the time. The social success he was enjoying in the salons helped exaggerate his self-assertive tendencies, his dandyism, his extravagance, and, particularly, his often frenzied acquisition of more and more objects for his ever-growing collection. He now became accustomed to spending money more and more recklessly as he fell more and more in love not with his real self, but with his fantasy image, an ideal of himself.

He was already living in a very comfortable apartment at 1 Rue Cassini in Paris, which, in addition to being beautifully furnished and decorated, boasted a bathroom, a considerable luxury for a young bachelor at the time. However, his grandiosity soon threatened to engulf him as his standards went far beyond his means and, before long, his capricious self-indulgence seemed to overwhelm any sense of responsibility. In a short time he rented another room in the same house and went about furnishing it lavishly, with particular attention to carpets that André Mauvois succinctly described as “thick and soft and ruinous.”

By this time the ambitious and talented young man from the provinces was firmly established in all quarters of Parisian society. Everybody knew about him. He was now also at home in the world of the arts, having become friendly with Delacroix, Gavarni, Dumas “père,” Rossini, Merimée, Victor Hugo, and many other well-known artists and writers.

His brilliance as a conversationalist and his boundless energy must have been more than enough to offset his unsightly appearance. He has been described as being heavy-set, short, and unattractive with a gap-toothed smile—a far cry from the impressive figure known to us from Rodin’s famous larger-than-life figure of him. That sculpture itself is indicative of the mental image he left behind. People seemed to forget his appearance once he began to tell a story or describe one or the other event. For many years, long before he had any indication of marrying the Countess de Hanska, he had been collecting decorative objects and bric-à-brac. His lifelong and perhaps only constant friend, Zulma Carraud, soon saw what was lacking: “I understand your eagerness to complete your little paradise; after the chinaware and the silver it needs a female soul, for nothing else is missing [September 10, 1832].” Even at this stage, Balzac had his Tilbury (a fashionable carriage), two horses, and, of course, his debts. His fateful acquaintance with Eveline de Hanska shortly thereafter became a welcome excuse for continuing his obsessive and uncontrolled hoarding.

It should be mentioned here that all of his impulsive acquisitions would have been well within the reach of a prosperous merchant of the day, or a successful entrepreneur, or perhaps even an author of Balzac’s fame and stature. The problem was that his unrestrained acquisitiveness was rooted in his identity confusion. He was unable to distinguish between the limits of what his financial condition would allow and his rich imagination, or, more to the point, the magical thinking of the lonely and deprived little boy he had been.

At this time, Balzac would, more or less periodically, indulge himself in lavish entertainment and luxuries, as if acting out the daydreams of his boyhood years of loneliness and emotional starvation. First, he would drive himself to write for fifteen to eighteen hours a day, living only on his black coffee and clad in a monkish robe. Then he would reward himself with an epicurean meal like those indulged in by the fictional Sylvain Pons. On one such occasion, he gave a dinner for the celebrated composer Gioacchino Rossini and his girlfriend, Olympe Pelissier, together with some other members of the Paris beau monde. In a letter to Eve he tells her that he had had “the choicest wines of Europe, the rarest flowers, the most wonderful food.” He then adds that “the goldsmith Lecointe supplied five silver platters, three dozen forks, a fish-slice with a silver handle, and all this, having made its effect, would go straight to Mont-de-Piété [the pawnbroker].”

Three months earlier the same jeweler had made Balzac a cane with a knob of gold decorated with turquoise, at a price of
700 francs. "As to my joys, they are innocent," he wrote, with conspicuously little introspection, to the countess.  

Balzac never understood the pathological side of these joys. In addition to his sumptuous and costly dinner parties, he comments that his "innocent" pleasures consist in new furniture for my room, a cane which makes all Paris gossip, a divine opera-glass which my workers have had made by the optician at the Observatory; also the gold buttons on my new coat, buttons chiselled by the hand of a fairy, for the man who carries a cane worthy of Louis XIV in the 19th Century cannot wear ignoble pinchback buttons. These are little innocent toys which make me considered a millionaire. I have created the sect of 'Camophiles' in the world of fashion, and everyone thinks me utterly frivolous. This amuses me!  

What really amuses him is that he is now finally in the limelight. His self-doubt, and possibly even his unconscious feminine-receptive desires, seem to be further repressed by the reassurance he gains from his admirers, in particular those older and usually titled women to whom he felt attracted. However, he seems somehow aware of his effeminate stance. In a letter to Eve written some months earlier, he states: "The love of a poet is a bit crazy. ... They themselves are a bit of a woman." And then, in March 1835, quite proud of the popularity his flamboyant cane has gained, he tells Eve again: "You cannot imagine the popularity of this gimpckack stick of mine, which bids fair to become European." His painter-friend Auguste Borget, who had just returned from a visit to Italy, had heard people in Naples and Rome talking about the cane: "All the dandies of Paris are jealous of it. ... It appears to me that it will furnish materials for a biography; and if you were told on your travels that I have a fairy walking stick, which shelters, builds palaces, and spits forth diamonds, don't be astonished, and laugh with me."  

It seems evident that the model for Balzac's manners and aspirations came from Tours, and from both his parents, although elaborated and inflated almost beyond recognition. And yet one is left with the inescapable impression of the provincial tenor in his values and appetites. Fantasy was the key to Honoré's self-image, the same fantasy that, despite some awareness of his delusions, was in effect his operative defense against those crucial years of emotional deprivation. Possessions, objects for ostentation and appearances, the use of titles, and admiring women of status—all were essentially one and the same to him: they all can be thought of as unconscious pleas for self-assertion or part of his world of magic. They all had a phallic-narcissistic quality that provided him with a conscious sense of mastery and of being the exception. His canes, his gold buttons, the paintings, the orgies, and women obviously differed in appearance, but not in essence.  

Feast and famine, vanity and self-restraint, rational intelligence and illogical ideas and decision-making—all were closely related and reflect various facets of his personality. A handful of devoted and consistent friends went along with his temperamental and unpredictable self-deception, as well as his obsession with writing. They tried to tolerate his inconsistencies, his whims, and his paradoxes.  

But who was the true Balzac? The dandy who worked for the better part of the day in a monk's cowl? The philanderer who fell in love with a woman beyond his reach whom he pursued for almost two decades? The keen observer of human frailties who was himself a lifelong prisoner of obsessional defenses? The waster of his own and other people's money?  

Intimate maneuvers allowed him to cope with his self-doubt and anxiety. His zeal and dogged determination on the one hand, and his caprices and eccentricities on the other, served as a bulwark against his morbid fear of rejection and being left out and nearly forgotten. This can be seen from the many rescue themes found in his novels and in the disorder of his own affairs, from which he needed rescue time and time again.  

In his early twenties he had started a series of business ventures that failed, one after the other. First, he became a publisher of French classics, doomed from the beginning since he was totally unacquainted with the publishing field. He then tried the type-foundry business, but only Madame de Berny's generosity and the fact that his sister managed to persuade their mother to lend him 85,000 francs prevented him from going bankrupt. His confusion about obligations and expenditures was endless. Within a few years he owed about 100,000 francs. This time his cousin Charles Sédition came to his rescue by settling with the creditors. Hyacinthe de Latouche, fourteen years his senior, helped by signing notes to various dealers, thereby abetting his
passion for adding to his collection. At the same time, Balzac told another of his protectors, the General Baron de Pommereul, that his name and honor were saved by his mother’s sacrifice and his father’s kindness.

With a clean slate once more, Honoré decided to settle down and begin his career as a fully committed writer. By this time he was already well on his way to becoming a highly acclaimed author. The first edition of Le Dernier Chouan appeared in March 1828. It more or less established his reputation, but he received only 1,000 francs for it, hardly enough to cover his running expenses, let alone his debts, which had again risen to almost 100,000 francs. His ability to ignore seemingly unsupported outside pressures and demands while pursuing his obsessions is a familiar psychological manifestation: he was able to erect invisible walls between contradictory acts and emotions, thus distorting the underlying significance of his behavior.

Clinically we describe such phenomena as a mechanism of isolation designed to cope with anything liable to cause anxiety or discomfort. Honoré was a master at it. His continuous acquisitions offer one example, his various business ventures and far-fetched entrepreneurial attempts another. The correlation is evident. There is neither any planning nor perspective: his knowledge of works of art or porcelain is limited, at best. And his experience in commercial enterprises is nonexistent. His relationship with women reflects much the same attitude, which never corresponded to any sense of reality.

His compulsions are well documented in his own writings. In fact, he retold his experiences in so many versions and elaborations, and so often, that we can understand his character and emotional conflicts without passing judgment. In Illusions Perdues, for example, Lucien Chardon, a poverty-stricken and idealistic young poet from the village of L'Hommeau, changes his name to Lucien de Rubempré when he is introduced to the leading light of the high society of the provincial town of Angoulême, Madame de Bargeton. They fall in love and soon become lovers. This is but one variation of his own encounter with the Countess Berny. As he writes: “Mme. de Bargeton was thirty-six years old and her husband fifty-eight. The disparity in age was all the more startling since M. de Bargeton looked like a man of seventy, whereas his wife looked scarcely half her age.”

As mentioned before, when Honoré was twenty-six, he made the acquaintance of the Duchess Laure d’Abrantès, renowned for her love affair with the AustrianPrince Metternich, by whom she had a son. Even though Honoré was still involved with the Countess Berny, he was soon in a well-publicized relationship with the duchess. This was followed shortly thereafter by an affair with the Marquise de Castries. All three women were appreciably older than he. His choices of mistresses is not surprising.

Balzac can broadly be described as suffering from manic-depressive manifestations correlated with obsessional defenses. Childhood and adolescence confronted him not only with a series of rejections and a variety of traumatic events but early on required him to renounce every kind of emotional support. As a result, he had only his sister Laure and a few casual friends. The root of his state of mind is found in his repeated statement: “I never had a mother,” which not surprisingly blossomed into a profound unconscious ambivalence toward women, and latent homosexuality.

Can he row effectively against the stream of his obsessive pressure? Evidently, he cannot. At the end of 1835 he founded an intellectual journal, the Chronique de Paris, wining and dining his distinguished contributors, and in the process incurring even more debts. He yearned to be the center of intellectual fervor, but it was not to be. Like his earlier commercial enterprises, the publication of the journal was doomed from the start and had to be discontinued.

This is but another example of Balzac’s conflict with reality, a condition that affected the entire nature of his existence. An exchange in The Wild Ass’s Skin sheds much light on the inner features of his mental functioning. The young hero, Raphael de Valentin, has lost his last sou in a gambling den and is about to commit suicide. Dazed, he wanders through the streets of Paris and enters the shop of an antiquaire. The dealer offers the young man a reprieve in the form of a talisman, a wild ass’s skin. The old man lectures him: “Moderation has kept my mind and body unruffled,” and finally puts the salient question to Raphael: “Is
not knowledge the secret of wisdom? And what is folly but a riotous expenditure of Will and Power?” Now comes Raphael’s fatal decision:

“Very good then, a life of riotous excess for me!”

‘Young man, beware!’ cried the other with incredible vehemence.”

This dialogue clearly echoes the conflict in Honora between conscience and abandon, restraint and self-indulgence. He is constantly struggling with unresolved, regressive crosscurrents which carry him back and forth between the narcissistic wound dealt him by his indifferent, uncaring mother, and his fantasy of the concerned, generous, and understanding woman, the kind of woman he describes in the person of Mme. de Stael in Louis Lambert or what he projects onto Eveline de Hanska.

Honora labored on all fronts to compensate for the lack of maternal love. He kept searching for attention and acclaim. He sought the love of older and socially more prominent women. His friendships with eminent artists were, in essence, complementary attempts to transform self-doubt into grandiosity (as his descriptions of his dinner parties or the admiration of his canes or buttons shows). His collecting is another variant of the same condition; his need for self-aggrandizement, which tended to ignore decorum, subtlety, obligations, and debts.

The pace of material consumption was accelerated by Balzac’s discovery that he enjoyed traveling. He had been to Neuchâtel in Switzerland for his first secret rendezvous with the Countess de Hanska, who as an admirer of his writings had been in correspondence with the author. He had also been to Munich and Vienna. Now he visited Italy and Switzerland, Sardinia, Holland, Saxony, and the Ukraine, always frantically driven by the same inner forces that made him a gourmandizer, a dandy, and an obsessive buyer of usually mediocre decorative and art objects.

In 1837, when he should have been devoting his time and energies to his Chronique de Paris, he took a trip to Italy. There he learned by chance about some ancient silver mines in Sardinia, going back to Roman times. He decided he would like to investigate the mines, and saw a business opportunity. So he set out on an almost Don Quixote-like journey, without any research or preparation, and completely ignorant about the conditions and circumstances on the island. En route he sent a note to Zulma Carrard that the journey was a failure and he is one illusion poorer.

When he finally landed on the island, it turned out to be what he had vaguely anticipated it would be—an illusion. The Genoese entrepreneur who had told him about the mines had already acquired the concession to exploit them, and they ultimately proved to be highly profitable, although not for Honora, of course. And so he left Sardinia as he arrived—without any preparation, without any knowledge of mineralogy or economic conditions, indeed quite similar to the way he used to acquire his works of art. He came back tired, empty-handed, and disappointed, but immediately ripe for another undertaking.

Living in Paris was too demanding, he explained to Eve shortly after his return from his Sardinian venture. In the village of Ville d’Avray, only ten minutes away, he would build a small but ideal house, “Les Jardins.” He bought the land and designed the house, which would be richly decorated with carpets, expensive furniture, and bronzes. In order not to disturb this fine composition, the staircases would be outside the building. And the land was sloped, so it would be perfect for a pineapple plantation.

One of his companions, Léon Gozlan, remembered seeing some of Balzac’s scribbles on the bare walls of the building: “Here a casing of Parian marble—Here a pedestal of a column of cedarwood—Here a ceiling painted by Eugène Delacroix—Here doors in the manner of Trion. Here a mosaic parquet floor made of all the rare woods from the islands. These marvels never existed but as notes made in charcoal.”

It should come as no surprise that the house collapsed. The uneveness of the property not only rendered it unsuitable for construction but made it dangerous as well, for Honora fell and was incapacitated for several weeks.

Optimism and a belief in one’s self and one’s abilities are useful and supportive personality traits. However, it is also necessary to take into account what has been learned from past experience. Did Balzac refuse to look to his past, or to recognize that his distortions and exaggerations always repeated the make-believe games of his childhood, such as his hearing fine music instead of the scratching of his violin? All his actions were but
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remarkable illustrations of his primary fixation to masochism, to the emotional deprivations and disillusionment of his childhood. "Les Jardies" was just one of his many doomed undertakings.

His behavior bears all the earmarks of a traumatized child who, as an adult, finds ways of instinctual expressions that, compulsively reenact the disappointments of his formative years, and is often unable to differentiate between illusion and reality. In keeping with these characteristics, Honoré attempted to look at himself with a certain measure of amusement. He could laugh at himself, and was amused when his friend Gozlan added to the notes on the empty walls of another room: "Here a painting by Raphael, exceedingly expensive and one which has never been seen."124

In the autumn of 1840, Balzac moved back to Paris. "Les Jardies" had cost him close to 100,000 francs, bringing his debt at the time to more than a quarter million francs.

Given the distressing experiences of a loveless childhood, we understand that his optimism and almost blind trust were tantamount to a massive denial of nearly constant anguish and loneliness. Inevitably, that in concert with his bragging behavior was his way of mastering hopelessness and self-doubt. Toward the same ends he also believed in clairvoyants and spiritualism, and had an almost childlike faith in his signet ring called "Bedouck," given to him by a well-known Arabist, Baron von Hammer-Purgstall, who claimed it had once belonged to no one less than the Prophet himself. Then there were his canes, obvious phallic representations even to those skeptical of psychoanalytic interpretations.

The early times of loneliness and continued emotional distress had been the initial setting for his flight into imagination and inventiveness, not simply restricted to his literary creativity. He was a dreamer as his entire lifestyle, his business ventures, his houses, his eating habits, and, of course, his impulsive acquisitions of works of art show time and again. They all were obsessional defenses meant to ward off his desperate needs for reassurance and tangible support as proof of his own worth and eminence.

In September 1847, Balzac visits Eveline de Hanska for the first time at her estate in Wierzchownia, in the Ukraine. His enthusiasm is limitless: "Exactly like the Louvre," he exaggerates although the mansion is not small by any standard.

Does his rhetoric echo desperation? Is he trying to establish his uniqueness by magnifying whatever seems significant and meaningful to him at the moment? Was he in love with Éve or the Countess de Hanska, or with the grandniece of a former queen of France? Or was it the kind of attachment where love is essentially motivated by a deep-rooted need for closeness and support, and as a defense against that ever-present doubt a child tries to undo when he projects idealized concepts onto real people?

At times, Balzac himself is aware of his dilemma. Early in his relationship with Laure d'Arrantès, for example, he describes himself with a kind of candor and self-knowledge linked with his overall attempts to isolate the opposing tendencies within him. His self-knowledge is bold and yet on target:

In my five feet two inches I contain all possible inconsistencies, all contrasts, and those who consider me vain, lavish, obstinate, flighty, incoherent, foppish, negligent, lazy, unpurposeful, thoughtless, inconstant, talkative, tactless, unseemly, unpolished, restive, of uneven moods could point equally with good reason to those who would say I am economical, modest, courageous, tenacious, energetic, neglected, working, constant, taciturn, full of fineness, polite, always gay. Someone who calls me a coward will be no more mistaken than the one who calls me extremely brave in a word knowledgeable or ignorant, very talented or inapt; nothing astounds me more than myself. In the end I believe that I am but an instrument played on by circumstances.125

This is no poor insight for a young man of twenty-six. His self-portrait reveals a bold and yet rational character sketch, unromantic and stern, although perhaps not entirely unaffected.

Did Honoré ever overcome his intense feeling of loneliness? Did he ever abandon the image of himself as "the most melancholy man, the most unhappy among all the ill-fortunate ones?"126 All too often an irrational approach is taken to deny his depressive moods: "Now my plate is empty," he laments to his sister, "it is not gilded, the table-cloth is faded, the food insipid. I am hungry and nothing is offered to still my greed! What do I want... Ortolans, because I have but two passions,
love and fame, and till now nothing has been satisfactory, and nothing ever will," he concludes in disillusionment. 127

The point I am making here is that he is essentially very depressed, and to remedy this ever-present threat he has found a variety of obsessive devices. He is often despairing and because of it also insatiable, much like Cousin Pons. Did he see himself as ugly as he described Pons? Did he feel, like Pons, that he was a freak from birth? Did he find himself guilty of selfishness? Was he really "a man with a great soul, a sensitive nature"? Was "success with the fair" out of the question" for him? 128

Balzac tells his readers that "Pons contracted the unlucky habit of dining out," and that "the demands of digestion upon the human economy produce an internal wrestling-bout of human forces which rivals the highest degree of amorous pleasure." But here he is really talking about his own conflicts and impulses, his own passions and appetites for he is torn between progenital oral concerns and mature genitality and a fulfilling love relationship. However, he knows that he is not his own free agent for he loved his objects, his paintings, his carpets, his porcelain "as a man might love a fair mistress," he senses correctly. 129

His cupidity and extravagance are consistent with his mood-swings and the ambivalent tendencies in which monklike puritanical self-denial and overwork alternate with periods of self-indulgence and times of grandiosity. His letters to Eve, always full of sentimentality as well as constant chatter about his finances, tell us a good deal about his despair: "My need for you is like a hunger," he writes. 130 But this hunger sprang from far more tortuous depths than Eve could ever fathom.

Honoré spent ten weeks of the summer of 1843 in St. Petersburg and returned home more than ever determined to secure his alliance with the countess, although there were legal obstacles as well as her own hesitation to consider. The thought of marrying her provided him with a sound incentive for putting his affairs in order, and he seemed to make a more realistic effort to reduce his debts. For a time he seemed more purposeful in his pursuits, and perhaps life was even a bit less turbulent for him. Strains and crises did not appear quite as acute as heretofore. The reluctance of Eve, now widowed, to marry was dimin-

ishing. She had even given Honoré a substantial amount of money—"trésor loulou," he affectionately called it—to invest for her.

In the spring of 1844, Modeste Mignon was published, further reducing the author's debts. In the autumn, Eve, after having settled her affairs at home, decided to leave Russia and stay for a while in Saxony. Several months later, in the spring of 1845, she finally gave Honoré permission to visit her in Dresden. She and her seventeen-year-old daughter Anna had been joined by the young Polish Count Georges Mniszech, who had fallen in love with Anna.

The four traveled together through Germany, Holland, Belgium, and Alsace. They must have had a good time. They called themselves Saltingbanques, or buffoons, and gave each other nicknames. Honoré ordered two canes from his jeweler Froument-Meurice as a tangible confirmation of the bond between the two men who were in love with the two Hanska ladies. 131 There is little mystery in the significance of this gesture, since it constitutes yet another instance of the recurrent covert homosexual trace in Balzac's personality.

This was to all appearances the most genuinely carefree time in Honoré's life. One would have to make this assumption if only during this period he was able to exercise a certain measure of self-restraint over his spending. Nevertheless, in Rotterdam, he bought some antiques and was tempted to acquire an armoire.

But ultimately and hardly unexpectedly, his struggle failed. His resolve had been sincere, but he was incapable of living forever without this means of discharging tension. What had been a folly for most of his adult life had now become a passion. In the autumn of 1845, the Saltingbanques embarked at Toulon for a journey to Naples. En route, Honoré visited several antique dealers in Marseilles, particularly one named Lazard. A bill of sale dated November 13, 1845, lists a soup toureen, three sauce boats, ninety-four plates, twelve round dishes, nine long dishes, two large vases, a clock in gilded copper, and a set of coral jewelry. 132 A month later, when the shipment arrived in Paris, he complained to Lazard that three of the plates had been broken.

On February 18, 1846, he describes to Eve his latest discovery:
I have the portrait of Maria Leszynska [Eve's great-aunt]. It is not by Coype, but made in his studio by a pupil, Lancet, one believes, one has to be a connoisseur to doubt it is a Coype, it is an excellent family portrait. The frame is worth 75 to 80 francs to a dealer, and I only paid 130 fr. altogether. I could never lose money on this, according to Chevard; but among 3,000 paintings, I discovered a marvellous portrait (Holbein, Bronzino, Schidone are accused of this jewel without any proof). The frame can be sold for 100 fr., and I bought it for 120. Chenavard told me: 'Nobody could paint this picture today... M. Ingres couldn't do it; and one would ask a hundred louis, and wouldn't be able to produce such a solid piece of work, even if one's name were Decamps. It is not a great masterpiece, not a work which will be known; but it will hold its own in a room among masterpieces, buy.' Here it is worth 120 fr., in Poland it will be worth 1200. Balzac later elevates the portrait to a Holbein, lists it in his "Inventario of Personal Property" of the Rue Fortunée of 1848. In the same inventory, Balzac, always full of noble aspirations, also attributes a portrait of a woman to Alorli, usually known as Bronzino. Twenty-six other paintings are attributed to such masters as Domenichino, Palma Vecchio, and Giorgione. A reading of Cousin Pons indicates that the collection at the "Musée Pons" contained sixty-seven pictures, among them many works by the most outstanding masters, in addition to nearly two thousand other objects—clocks, porcelain, bric-à-brac. It is quite evident by now that Pons was in many ways a portrait of the true Balzac, behaving as the author would were he not held back by admittedly minimal self-restraint. Pons, or rather his collection, reflects the genuine proportions of Balzac's fantasy world.

In the winter of 1848, he once again visited the de Hanska estate, and after leaving, stopped off at a number of antique shops on his way back to Paris. In Dresden he made some substantial purchases from the dealer Louis Wolf, and in Mainz he visited the antiquaire Schwab, before arriving in Paris just a week before the outbreak of the February revolution.

On the day the revolution broke out, he wrote Wolf that he wanted his credit extended, referring to the special circumstances that existed ("l'état actuel des événements"). Schwab, he assures Wolf, had given him a whole year's credit. However, when the shipment arrived partly damaged, he tells Wolf that he has never had complications of this kind with dealers before, as if he had forgotten his complaint to Lazard. Meanwhile, he orders other objects from Wolf but informs him at the same time that he cannot remunerate him before the end of the year.

If Honoré tended to act out so many of his conflicts in his haphazard acquisitions, he showed another side of his character in the manipulation of his debts. He had yet to yield to his monetary limitations, even though he seemed painfully aware of them. In portraying Sylvain Pons, however, he could overstep those boundaries and buy to his heart's content.

The prospect of marrying the countess provided more fuel for his delusions. Secure in the knowledge that a bond with the woman he believed he loved was now assured, another man would probably have been content. Instead, this made Balzac even more of a slave to folly and ambition. In announcing his marriage to the Countess de Hanska, he writes to Zulma Carraud:

This union is, I believe, the compensation God held in store for me for all the adversities... the years of labor—I feel the happiness of youth, the flowery of springtime; I am going to have the most brilliant summer, the sweetest of autumns... I, the maltreated child, the misunderstood worker, often crushed under physical and moral misery. Ah! I shall not forget your motherliness, your divine sympathy with the sufferers.

Is he as happy and fulfilled as he sounds? Now he buys the house in the Rue Fortunée and proceeds to spend hundreds of thousands of francs in furnishing it lavishly. He tells Eve that all of this is being done out of his concern for her, and that she needs and deserves the proper surroundings. However, one needs little insight that he is actually serving his own fantasies and emotional needs by submitting to his perpetual craving for new supplies and constant replenishment. When he writes to Eve, now back in Wierzchovnia, that he is creating an abode for her where she can receive her cousin, the Princess de Ligne, one can recognize his identification with her.
TWO COLLECTORS

In September 1847, after completing Cousin Pons, he departs for the Ukraine. Again he is overcome by the wealth of the vast estate, where he spends four months with Eve. But coming home forces him to face reality once again. No sooner is he in Paris than the king, Louis-Philippe, abdicates and the monarchy is abandoned. Honoré watches the street fights and the ransacking of the Tuileries. Mixing with the rioters who were breaking into the palace, he carries home some decorations and draperies from the throne room, as well as some notebooks of one of the emperor’s children.19

The following September, Balzac returns once more to Wierzchovnia, this time to stay for a year and a half. He and Eve are finally married on March 14, 1850, and at the end of April they depart for Paris, via Dresden, where he makes still more purchases. Balzac will die of peritonitis just four months after the wedding, but not before adding the true crown jewel of his collection and his most treasured gem to his “jewel box” in the Rue Fortunée: the grandniece of a former queen of France.

* CHAPTERS *

Ventures of Passion:
The Vicissitudes of Martin G.

LOOKING BACK to the nineteenth-century and earlier, one is bound to find gaps in any inquiry into the trends of collecting and the personal manifestations under certain historical and socioeconomic conditions. Nor do encounters with contemporary collectors contribute many more answers to the tantalizing questions concerning the ultimate incentive: what is it that collectors are seeking? Even the dramatic candor and revelations in primary observation of a collector in action tend to grow hazy and incomplete. Still, proximity does permit one to examine a collector’s endeavors and patterns of behavior more closely. Thus we get an intimation of subjective incentives and objective aims. We see an individual style of expressing interest and enthusiasm, or, say, agitation or impulsiveness, or studious research and thorough knowledge. At times, one can observe a particular collector’s approach, which is rather like seeing an almost choreographed passion play—moving from infectious appeal and enticement, through temptation (occasionally raising notions of sin and desire) to the ultimate pleasure in obtaining the treasured object.

We recognize one trait shared by all true collectors—that there is simply no saturation point. There may be a shift in taste, or a change in area of interest and aims. There may be deeper knowledge and enlightenment, or resolutions to call a halt to erratic acquisition or to stop being a victim to impulsiveness or nonrational decision-making. I have often heard self-criticism and seen a tendency of self-censorship among collectors, but none of it contributed to more conclusive insight.

Any devoted collector longs for new supplies not unlike the body needs replenishment or an addict longs for another drink or drug or the compulsive gambler is unable to resist the gaming table or the races. This is far from saying that the motives behind the collector’s needs are antisocial or a version of dis-
ease. Rather, that we are concerned with an almost irrepressible passion. This is, as I have said before, the basic condition to all collecting, regardless whether the person prefers the rare and exceptional or the ordinary and mediocre, for the true nature of the drive, the inner pressures, are in some sense irreducible and have nothing to do with any external standards or judgment.

By whatever means a collector goes about his gathering of additions to his possessions—discreetly, prudently, ostentatiously as one can occasionally observe at auctions or pedantically after much research and soul-searching—the objects’ grip on their owner can be described and understood only in terms of an emotional experience that appears to demand a more or less perpetual supply. The objects thus represent but a modicum of fulfillment.

This pattern makes it clear why one must think only in terms of a modicum of fulfillment. The basic need for replenishment and good feeling is suspended temporarily by a new discovery or a new addition to one’s holdings. The elation over a successful find or acquisition is bound to pass sooner or later. Once the object has been incorporated into the collection and the initial affective sensation, the joy, the pride, the novelty have worn off, the unconscious memory of early longings reemerges in accordance with the mental processes of the return of the repressed. Time and again external reality is being tested, and the characteristic restless sets in until another pleasure-giving object has been found.

Martin G. was one of those unrepentant collectors who had occasionally resolved that he would “kick the habit” and no longer succumb to the collecting “bug,” not unlike the chain-smoker who tends to vacillate between more reality-oriented ego functioning and the suspension of mature, unambiguous control.

It was only in retrospect that Mr. G. could fathom the role collecting played in his current life. His two senior business partners relied on his acumen and thoroughness. One of them compared him to a resourceful inventor, full of new ideas and penetrating suggestions, while Martin saw himself more as an artist or, almost facetiously, a talented cook. His self-image, he thought, was more correct, since the artist retreats into his studio, essentially to hold a dialogue with himself, while the kitchen, less separate from the rest of the house, is the domain of the cook.

Several rooms in Martin’s home were reserved for his collection together with his extensive library, predominantly devoted to Oriental art and history. Invisible walls separated his living quarters, his office, and his avocation. He was a private man without strong emotional ties. Despite his success he was not at home in business circles, and, even when he was with like-minded collectors and scholars, he seemed to value his privacy and appeared not very approachable. While he worked hard and long hours, often well into the night, he saw his true challenge in his collection. Indeed, he used to refer to himself as “an underdeveloped intellectual,” because his ideal self was that of an academic, and not an entrepreneur. In both his business and his collecting, he always aimed for excellence.

Such characteristics are never isolated, and we are right to expect consistency. A pattern is reflected in a person’s values, as well as in his aims, interests, and cravings. Martin G. took the trouble to excel in his work and gradually came to rank among the best with his collection.

The interplay between the passion of possession and the emotional support deriving from magically imbued objects is, as we have seen in a variety of examples, a recapitulation of old longings for attachment, which in turn provides a sense of security and a feeling of mastery. And even though the possessions are only external tokens, their significance in the collector’s experience represents a salient distinction between the connaisseur and the collector. A connaisseur may cherish or admire an object, but receives little emotional support from its ownership. In other words, there is no affective attachment to the object. Thus, a majolica dish, say, may be an interesting or unusual example to a specialist or an antiquaire. He may admire it as a rare specimen and point out its unusual colors or perfect condition. However, he does not need to own the object and can live without it. The committed collector, on the other hand, cannot. A dealer is used to part with an object, but the collector cannot give it up. Hans Peter Kraus, the late bookseller, provided a succinct description of this difference: “Once a Kraus book, always a Kraus book,” he remarked to me with convincing self-confidence. Thus, to him a sale was no loss, as it would be to the
dedicated collector. The special and often personal effort involved in obtaining anything warranting collection and subsequently disposing of it is not perceived by the dealer as deprivation. In experiential terms, the dealer is the dispenser or supplier of magic objects. While ownership of the article in question may add to the collector’s mana (in other words, representing a narcissistic supply) the self-assured dealer adds nimbus to the object.

Martin G. usually preferred objects with a provenance, a particular history, with the name of the previous owner or owners and the dealers who had handled the specimens. He was a diligent man, quite in charge of himself, and for complex reasons seemingly too balanced a person to idolize or even animatize objects. “They don’t have a soul, do they?” he once remarked. Still, he was inclined to rationalize his preference for objects “with a history” by hinting at some sentiment of distinction and prestige.

It is true that a list of previous owners or of exhibitions in which an object has been shown or of publications in which it has been cited or reproduced sometimes reads like a family tree of a peer, or is on a par with those of racehorses, as Horace Walpole once remarked. To some collectors, it is like a borrowed lineage or genealogy, the more so when some of their objects are treated as evidence of their status or specialness. However, neither Martin nor many of his fellow collectors would willingly accept my argument of a hidden link with such basic affects.

In the years of his focus on things Asiatic, Martin’s interest had shifted from Japanese prints and netsukes (those ingeniously conceived buttons in ivory, wood, even stone and metal), to porcelain and paintings, and more recently to early Chinese bronzes. He still held on to many of his earlier acquisitions since he was never quite prepared to part with something he owned. Over the last few years, he had made several major additions in terms of quality, rarity, and provenance by which, he explained, he was paying tribute to the past.

There was a kind of pattern to the course of his interest. He went from marginal and in the beginning extraneous acquisitions to discerning selectivity and competitive procurement. All this is characteristic of most discriminating collectors.

Despite a measure of restraint, Martin G. was an affable man, willing to show me his rooms filled with Oriental objects, leaving the impression of a small, private museum. Since I had scant knowledge of his area of specialization, he drew my attention to some clearly outstanding and to him exciting specimens. He explained many details, especially with regard to the bronzes, pointing out how they had been cast. He made some elucidating comments about the various designs, and how they compared with other examples from the same area and period. There was more than a hint of pride in his descriptions, and, in the case of several remarkable specimens, sheer pleasure of possession.

At this point the objects in one’s collection are, strictly speaking, no longer foreign bodies. Instead, there is now a magical link to them for the owner tends to experience his possessions as mute but nevertheless demonstrative expositors of himself. Or, in the case of provenance, he sees himself as the appreciative and worthy successor, if not the heir, to an illustrious predecessor. By attributing elements such as rarity, merit, beauty, or superiority to a jar or a bowl, Martin G. not only conveyed his admiration for early Chinese art and craftsmanship but also betrayed his dedication to and emotional dependence on this craving.

As a rule, showing one’s collection is an intrinsic part of a collector’s way of self-expression. There are exceptions, such as an acquaintance of mine who will show his latest acquisition but nothing else, or Count Antoine Seilern who would discourage visitors unless they could prove a particular scholarly or aesthetic interest. These are facets of a psychological style of exhibitionism in reverse. Others display some part of their collection as evidence of their taste or foresight, like people who explain that they bought “their” Jackson Pollocks or vintage automobile or tribal art with the courage of their own conviction before museums had provided them credibility. There are, of course, all possible nuances of such performances. But all they establish is an attempt to infer exceptionality.

Few collectors are consciously aware of the inner processes aimed at maintaining, if not fortifying, an ideal self by letting the objects speak for them or, not infrequently, borrowing a particular identity because they help support a narcissistic expansion.
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What was Martin G.'s guiding impulse in collecting? The manner in which he explained and commented on many of his objects, and here and there their meaning and history, contained a measure of self-display. He repeatedly stressed their uniqueness, their unblemished condition, and the proof of true craftsmanship. His rather large house abounded in all kinds of Orientalia—Chinese and Japanese paintings and decorative objects, and sculptures from India, Nepal, Cambodia, and Hindu-Buddhist Java. He still kept his collection of netsukes, even though he was no longer adding to it. He liked to reminisce about certain pieces and told here and there a story such as his good fortune in obtaining this or that piece, about obstacles, blunders, and discoveries. Occasionally he had just blind luck, he admitted, all the while watching my reaction to the objects as well as to his various remarks. He then volunteered that he had to curb his desire for high-quality items because they had become too expensive, largely due to the activities of new Japanese collectors. It was hard to say whether the resolution he expressed in this regard was truly meant. If so, he would indeed be an exception among collectors.

A while ago he had received an invitation to the home of a prominent Oriental fellow collector, an elderly gentleman with a predilection for archaic Chinese bronze vessels. In the course of the visit, the man showed Martin a particularly fine wine jar (hui) from the Shang dynasty (1766–1122 B.C.). Eventually, Martin could reconstruct the approximate price the man had paid for the jar and, even though it was high, it seemed to Martin a wise purchase on all accounts. Specimens of such quality and elegance are scarce, the older collector explained, and known in only two or three collections. Meanwhile, the man sounded as if he had to defend the acquisition. Dedicated and erudite collectors, being somewhat aware of the underlying nature of affect and the conflicts with respect to their decisions, often feel a need to justify themselves.

After this visit, Martin G. suddenly found himself at a crossroads in his collecting endeavors. He felt that he now had to look for comparable pieces. Having been treated as an equal by a highly respected and knowledgeable senior collector, he had to persuade himself that he was indeed his equal.

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Martin readily found justifications for improving his collection, regardless of his previous resolution to stop accumulating more objects. He reminded himself that his success as a businessman had been due to his calmness and equanimity. Yet the other collector's specimens had left him in a state of reverie. Was he envious? Was he resentful? Did the man's outstanding examples mobilize, or rather demobilize, ancient and largely hidden feelings of insufficiency which had to be undone by way of competition?

There could not be any doubt that the true meaning of his reaction went back to far earlier, intrapsychic conflicts which lay at the bottom of this recent experience. While a good part of the desire of possessions is a continuation of early reparative needs, there are now overlays and a fusion with other aims. The older collector's display of such rare and desirable specimens had reactivated early feelings of insufficiency, which had in effect been largely responsible for Martin G.'s dogged perseverance in his business life. In his infatuation with the objects in his collection, he led a separate and almost romantic existence, simultaneous with his day-to-day obligations but in contrast to them, as if part of his critical faculties had been put aside.

I have seen this kind of response in several collectors. It is akin to that of the intoxicated gambler in the casino or the excited buyer carried away by the auction-room fever. Unconscious demands for mastery and possession are fused with a hunting instinct and, to some extent, competitive-aggressive aims. Occasionally, the aggressive provocation may be turned against oneself, for example by outbidding a competitor, often only to enhance one's self-esteem and not for the love of the object. Such individuals may keep on bidding for objects at far higher prices than they would ever have considered if they were under less emotional pressure.

In Martin G.'s case, another collector's admirable possessions had had a mortifying effect against which he felt he had to stand guard. When a better or more desirable object is found in someone else's possession by a collector, complicated emotions arise—admiration, envy, a notion of anxiety, distress, feelings of inferiority or, in extreme cases, rage—no one of which excludes any of the others. There is a logic to such various responses: in-
solar as these objects are magic-laden they imply that the owner is endowed with greater power than you. This leads to a feeling of potential subjugation and subsequently to a need for reaffirmation by way of symbolic equivalents. And because of their unconscious link with the instinct for self-preservation, such needs must not be frustrated.

J. Paul Getty shared Martin G.'s predicament. His diaries of an "incurably hooked collector" provide abundant proof of this:

In 1960, I was once again determined to reform.
July 15: I think I should stop buying pictures. I have enough invested in them. I am also stopping my buying of Graeco-Roman marbles and bronzes. I'm through buying French furniture. My mind is set. I am not going to change it.
The best laid schemes . . .
Unfortunately, that was the year that the Snyders-Boeckhurst The Pantry and Bonnard's Woman in the Nude were made available for sale. Set mind or not, I was unable to resist. The following year, Peter Paul Rubens' breathtakingly luminous Diana and Her Nymphs Departing for the Hunt was offered to me. Again, I couldn't resist . . .
Sorry as I am to make the admission, I am not only an addict. As the foregoing record—and the history of my art collecting activities between 1965 and 1975 prove, when it comes to collecting, I am also a chronic prevaricator.\footnote{140}

In Martin G.'s case, the events followed swiftly. Shortly after his visit to the collector of Chinese bronzes, a museum curator mentioned some rumor of a mysteriously important archaeological discovery at an unspecified area on the Chinese mainland. There was a hint of some outstanding Bronze Age discoveries, and a few weeks later there was talk in the art market of bronze vessels and jewelry from the same find.

At first Martin G. did not seriously consider following up on this kind of hearsay information, especially with so few facts and details to hand. Intimations of new discoveries have been tempting collectors for many centuries. Old graves and extensive burial sites have attracted plunderers at least since Roman times. The remains of old settlements or tombs have furnished some of the most exquisite examples of ancient art and craftsmanship. However, the vast majority of rumors about such finds usually come to nothing. And yet, regardless of his doubts, the story he had heard had indeed fueled Martin's imagination. To ease his incredulity, he spent several nights at home weighing the pros and cons in his own mind.

Even if the rumor actually turned out to be true, did he need to improve on his current holdings? That was about the first question he asked himself. But he was also quite aware of his ambivalence. And then: could he afford to acquire another group of significant objects? However, one or even a few choice objects from the find would unquestionably enhance the prominence of his collection as a whole. Moreover, the expense involved would be justified because the value of the objects was bound to increase, he reasoned with himself.

This is the kind of self-searching uncertainty that accompanies many a collector's attitude. Martin G. argued back and forth with himself as if he were pleading his case before a jury. The actual issue is the conflict between an inner demon and the pangs of conscience.

Martin was not blind to his own bias. We must keep in mind that the entire course of his thinking and his current turmoil derived from a comparison of his own collection with that of another older collector. Seeing and admiring somebody else's possessions may arouse competitive and at the same time admiring feelings which do not necessarily exclude frustration, if not de
dependency. Under the circumstances, the older man's impressive objects reawakened in Martin early doubts and a sense of inadequacy. Now, he argued with himself, he had to come to a decision: he could either succumb to this irritating deeper and not entirely conscious sense of inferiority, or he could act and live out his competitive fantasies.

It was in view of these acute mixed emotions that Martin finally decided to investigate the rumor. He followed a habitual practice of inner accountancy of debits and credits by which he tried to overcome his momentary predicament. This marked the beginning of what turned out to be a long and quite extraordinary odyssey. It was a solitary and nearly cloak-and-dagger undertaking in which the stakes in emotion, time, and effort were considerable. However, insofar as he was now being driven to find reaffirmation, he took up the challenge.
His first stop was Hong Kong, since he was traveling there for business negotiations anyway. He had many important commercial contacts in that curious outpost and knew several local art dealers as well as middlemen. He also was reasonably sure that if there was any truth to the fact of the recent discoveries, the quite reliable bush telegraph would have some more conclusive information. Although there were no clandestine excavations in the Republic of China, as there were elsewhere in Southeast Asia and Latin America, it was always possible that a few select objects might have made their way from the mainland into the Crown Colony. In practice, he thought, the ties of old family connections and obligations were still strong, despite the teachings and philosophy of Mao.141

Within a few hours of his arrival, he was in touch with a number of different people he believed might be able to help him. He dispatched a go-between to a runner from whom he had bought a few fine objects on a previous visit, and he had spoken to a well-established and reliable local dealer in Oriental art whose erudition and extensive experience was beyond question. He had also contacted a certain Mr. Lee, an enigmatic sort of middleman but an inexhaustible source of local information, sometimes reliable and sometimes not.

It was this man who invited him to one of those obligatory meals that many Chinese prefer as a prelude to significant negotiations of any kind. Martin took it as a good omen and accepted. Having known the man for several years, he believed that he could distinguish between his persiflage and his factual and often worthwhile information. Or so he told himself.

Dinner lasted well into the night. The two men discussed Martin’s collection as well as other collections in Hong Kong, in Europe and the United Kingdom, and in the United States. They spoke of travels, visitors, and political issues. Finally, and as it seemed almost casually, the rumors about the recent excavations came up in their conversation.

Now Mr. Lee became politely effusive, and Martin G. was quick to note that Mr. Lee’s replies to many of the probing questions were somewhat evasive and contained few, if any, hard facts. Nevertheless, Mr. Lee’s attempt to sidestep certain inquiries told Martin more than some of the direct answers he received. There was one piece of information that Mr. Lee did provide, and that was the news that a certain Professor Y., a distinguished Orientalist, and the very man Martin intended to consult on the matter, had also arrived in Hong Kong.

What we have to this point is the buildup of Martin G.’s involvement in the chase after the newly discovered objects, the anxiety-arousing deliberation, and the first and ever-so-slight anticipation that his quest might be successful.

The next morning, he tried to get in touch with the professor but the man had left his hotel at an early hour, and Martin was told that he would not be expected until the late afternoon. He now felt at loose ends. Looking for clues to where Professor Y. might be, all of a sudden Martin felt confused and even anxious. The suggestion of the alleged new finds was too powerful to remain secret. While he was about to contact another dealer, the telephone operator in his hotel gave him a message from Mr. Lee, who wanted to see him at his earliest convenience.

When Mr. Lee arrived a few hours later, he produced some snapshots of a few objects which he said were from the new excavation, adding that they were due in Hong Kong shortly. Even though the photographs were by no means of professional quality, the objects reproduced looked very promising. However, as Martin G., along with most collectors, knew, judging the quality and importance of objects from simple photographs is risky at best. One of the photographs showed a fang yi, bronze urn, of apparently unusual shape and intricate designs, but hard to decipher. Still, there was enough indication of fine workmanship. Martin was instantly reminded of several specimens in collections in Scandinavia, in Taiwan, and in the United States.

Nevertheless, now that he had seen the snapshots, he was really suspended between doubt and excitement. If the objects turned out to be genuine, he thought, he might spend his last penny on them, since it would be the opportunity of a lifetime. On the other hand, a mistake would not only be costly, but, even worse, could seriously embarrass him, because there are no secrets in the small world of collectors.

Would there be any chance to consult with experts such as Professor Y. before he made a commitment? His initial enthusiasm became tempered with some sobering thought. Would he be able to obtain a few small metal samples for spectroscopic and possibly thermoluminescent tests? And even though Martin
was convinced of Mr. Lee’s reliability, the man’s expertise was hardly the last word in this field. More than once he had sold a motley group of genuine and forged objects—not with malice but simply out of ignorance. These were some of the questions that ran through Martin G.’s mind.

Mr. Lee added that these objects had been discovered in Hunan Province on what had been an ancient temple site. His informants had told him that some of these bronzes had changed hands before government representatives had arrived on the scene, and official archaeologists had taken over. The few examples that had found their way out would soon be arriving in Hong Kong.

A perplexing tale indeed, Martin thought. But it was not atypical in cases of clandestine origin, and not only in the Far East. Martin’s resolve not to acquire any more objects—a promise to himself that he was incapable of keeping—was only a matter of time, as almost all collectors are aware. Self-restraint is not common among dedicated collectors, as J. Paul Getty made quite explicit. However, few collectors are aware of their unconscious motivations, and even temporary abstinence, is usually more than they can bear. Martin’s temporary curtailment of further acquisitions became almost unendurable once he began to see certain gaps in his own collection, especially in the light of another one.

The incidental details in such cases may vary considerably. All sorts of circumstances and events can trigger feelings of envy, inadequacy, or self-doubt in a collector. What counts here is that Martin G. could not remain indifferent, essentially because the recent experience had rekindled old conflicts and anxieties. Almost before he had any conscious awareness, he was once again enmeshed in an internal crisis that echoed earlier times in his life.

There is a mysterious lure in such states of diffuse anxious expectation. It is rooted in an emotional and surely eroticized force, outside of one’s rational control. There is an element of winning or losing, getting or yielding. It is an inner plight collectors as well as gamblers experience repeatedly, and in some instance even ritualistically. At this particular moment, Martin G. was unable to get himself out of this predicament. He changed his travel plans and decided to stay on for a few more days, if only to gather more information.

One hears occasionally about a sixth sense in the determined, inveterate collector. There are those who pride themselves on never having come back from a journey, even a casual one, without one or the other discovery. “Serendipity leads collectors into the mysterious extra-sensory world where telepathy, clairvoyance, and premonition are commonplace,” Wilmarth Lewis, known among his friends as “Lefty,” related from his own experience in discovering all possible documents by and about Horace Walpole (now in the Yale University Library). “Making all allowances for the collector’s tendency to dress up his discoveries and to forget the times when these occult impulses led to nothing, there remains a good deal that cannot be accounted for by the five senses,” he observed.186

Indeed, Martin G. himself had been lucky on a few occasions. Once, he found a very fine Sung celadon bowl with sensitive flower designs in a secondhand store in a small town in Holland. Another time he walked into a bric-a-brac shop where the shopkeeper had shown him a drawer full of old tiles. “Middle East,” he mumbled. But Martin knew better. He bought the whole lot, which he immediately recognized to be rare and delicate terracotta tiles depicting scenes with men and animals, from about the first century of the Han period (206 B.C. to A.D. 221).

Martin G. was not an amateur. He kept up to date on the pertinent literature and most of the major museum collections. Over the previous few years, he had bought with care and increasing knowledge. He liked to explain his infatuation as a kind of guardianship. This is a spurious rationalization one hears now and then from certain collectors whose obsessional motives seem to require an apparently acceptable explanation. Martin G., like many collectors (particularly, it seems, of antiquities and medieval and tribal works of art), tried to reinforce his dedication with a rather partisan a priori picture of himself as only a temporary safe-keeper of the objects in his collection. This is a transparent attempt to camouflage the emotional commitment anyone makes to collecting, and the deeper links that account for the habit.
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Early bronzes had a special emotional claim on Martin. He had studied the differences in form, types of the often compelling variations of iconographic details, and their chronological development. In fact he had once bought a much admired *ting*, an archaic food vessel, from Mr. Lee. It was one of the most outstanding examples of the middle Shang period (about the fifteenth century B.C.)—an object of rare elegance and precision. Now, while talking to Mr. Lee, he could not forget how well this piece had held up. It had been shown in several exhibitions and reproduced in a major publication. The photographs Mr. Lee had just shown him, poor though they were, promised some extraordinary objects, better than anything in the Royal collection in Stockholm, in the Freer Gallery in Washington, or anywhere outside of China, for that matter or perhaps not even there . . .

Several days after this overture by Mr. Lee, when nothing more had been heard from him, Martin got restless. Few collectors have the ability to wait patiently once an object they truly cherish is near at hand. Waiting usually tempers hopes and expectations, and the tension of suspense is hard to bear. This is in line with childhood anxieties, such as the dread of being left alone and unprotected, which require instant gratification. The impatience of many collectors is usually due to those unresolved childhood frustrations. Martin’s restlessness was also kindled by a lingering suspicion that he might be the victim of a hoax. Nevertheless, he decided not to return to the States, for the moment. “I couldn’t help myself,” he confessed, revealing a sense of ineffectualness, the exact opposite of what he had hoped to achieve, almost with the aid of those magical new objects.

These emotional fluctuations are germane to collectors like Martin G. Very often, it is the actual obtaining of the sought-after object that counterbalances the inner and ever-present dread of running out of tangible support. Only a message from Mr. Lee was necessary to put Martin in a different mood. On the telephone, the dealer mentioned some more photographs and also murmured something about a few sketches of newly found specimens. A few hours later they met once more, and the sketches were produced. They proved to be rough but readable, and seemed to support the likelihood of a most unusual find.

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True, Martin quickly spotted certain stylistic variations from well-known pieces of the same type, but this did not suggest that the new discoveries were copies or forgeries. Rather, to the contrary, since Martin knew that forgers usually follow the rules, preferring to stick to fine examples of a particular type of object and eschewing variations that may inadvertently reveal the fake.

There were only two possibilities, Martin told himself: either he was being tested by accomplished and unscrupulous frauds, or he was very close to the source of a major discovery. A tantalizing sense of excitement was by this time overriding his earlier doubts—a distinctive trait that marks the obsessive collector.

At this very moment, a prominent international dealer suddenly arrived in Hong Kong. This was the same dealer who had supplied Martin’s collector friend with some of his most important bronzes. Could this man have heard about the excavations? The dealer would hardly waste his time in Hong Kong, Martin reasoned, if there were any question as to the authenticity of the find. And then there was Professor Y.’s presence. Martin still had not got hold of him. In one respect this was reassuring, but at the same time the arrival of a potential competitor hit him like a physical blow. In the midst of what he felt to be confusion and menace, it never occurred to him that these men were collaborating. This dawned on him only much later.

Martin G.’s association with the Far East was not coincidental, nor was it entirely romantic. His first encounter with the Orient came when, as a young college professor, he had received a postgraduate fellowship in economics. One of his publications drew the attention of an industrial firm, which offered him a position far more alluring than any he could then find in academia. It was the beginning of a rewarding career that involved frequent travels in the Far East and in Southeast Asia. Industrious and efficient, he was so successful that he eventually accepted an even more challenging position. He explained the strong appeal of Oriental art as a welcome relief from the rigors and responsibilities of his work. At the end of the day, he felt the need for aesthetic and spiritual relief.
Martin G. had been born during the interval between the two world wars to a socially and economically well-situated family. His brother, four years his senior, was a sports fan with little inclination for learning and education. He later became the manager of a local department store, much to their ambitious mother’s dismay. Because he was a better student, Martin regarded himself as being better than his brother. The brother and a couple of his classmates used to tease Martin, calling him a sissy and a mama’s boy. He remembered two dramatic clashes in which his father had taken his brother’s side, and he had retreated to another room to be comforted by his mother.

The mother was an amateur painter whose work had been shown in several local church benefit exhibitions. Martin had always thought that her still-life paintings inspired his early love for flowers and butterflies. As a child he had made a collection of pressed flowers as a Christmas gift for his mother. When asked what he wanted to be, his usual reply was a gardener or botanist, largely because this had his mother’s approval, but also because it set him apart from his unimaginative brother.

Everything changed at the time of World War II, when Martin’s father joined the armed forces. Unlike his brother, Martin did well in school; also unlike his brother, he had few friends. He was something of a loner. He was twelve when the family learned that his father had been lost on a mission in Southeast Asia. The consequences were critical in more ways than one. Because his father had been away for more than a year, it took a while for the full impact of his death to hit Martin. His mother’s behavior changed immediately and perceptibly. She became moody and, at times, impulsive. Their financial condition deteriorated. The brother helped by leaving school and getting a job as a plumber’s assistant. When the war was over, Martin earned a college scholarship and determined to pursue a career in economics.

He married a college classmate shortly after accepting a promising position in the business world. His wife had a natural assertiveness and sociability, and she responded instinctively to his newfound appreciation of Far Eastern art and culture. They combined a somewhat belated honeymoon with a business trip to Taiwan and Japan, and there they acquired various decorative items for their new home. A few months after their return, his wife was injured in a tragic car accident that confined her to a wheelchair for the rest of her life. She asked Martin for a divorce, but he refused.

Thus, the beginning of their marriage coincided with Martin’s early years of serious collecting. He sometimes referred to this as a time of preparation, of “going to school again.” So far, his enjoyment of Oriental art had nothing of the intoxication he eventually found irresistible. Together, he and his wife visited museums, made the acquaintance of other collectors as well as some scholars, and improved their knowledge through diligent reading. All this infused a kind of tenderness and pathetic sensitivity into their relationship. Even so, Martin could hardly hide his sexual frustration.

It was about this time that he heard of the death of an eminent scholar-collector who had owned some rare bronzes. He inquired as to the fate of these objects and learned that the executors were organizing a sale by public auction. This seemed to intensify his interest and, after thinking it over, he later concluded that this is when his true collecting instinct emerged. He found himself with a burning desire to obtain some art works of established merit and provenance. The distinction of the objects in the sale was beyond question. He and his wife discussed how to proceed, and began to pay attention to the rumors and gossip that are quite common in the small community of specialized collectors and experts in any field.

Various strains were at work here. Martin’s early interest in aesthetics had been stimulated by seeing his mother paint, he thought. Also, and probably more importantly, he wanted to underline a greater closeness to her, thereby stressing his being different from his stronger older brother, who used to bully him. His business acumen and skill were yet another triumph, insofar as he had superseded both his brother and his dead father in this regard. In this context it was not without relevance that he had achieved his successes in the same geographic area where his father had lost his life, a fact of which he had been only dimly aware before our conversations. In addition, as his attachment to his wife turned from love to companionship, he found himself spending more and more of his time and atten-
tion on Far Eastern art and artifacts. Now the death of this re-
spected collector and the disposal of his belongings marked a
turning point in Martin’s life.

There can be no argument about one’s appreciation of a mas-
terpiece. However, when a collector puts greater emphasis on a
name or a pedigree than on the object itself, this involves other
indicative factors. It separates the object from its initial meaning
and underlines different hierarchies. Thus, when an object gains
in significance or value simply because of its history such as its
pedigree or other propensities, it sheds light on deeper needs of
the owner (namely, needs for reassurance such as those felt by
primitive man when ancestral skulls and bones provide magic
support).

In Martin G.’s case, it was not the pedigree of the late collec-
tor’s bronzes that drew his attention. Rather, it was the fact that
here were some outstanding examples the likes of which could
not easily be obtained. For Martin the circumstances were some-
what different. He was in a conflict brought on by his wife’s
nearly total physical dependence. He was in need of new incen-
tives. In the beginning, under the impact of the accident, select-
ing objects and collecting had helped eliminate (or so he saw it)
the straits on their relationship and given them new, construc-
tive ideals. It was a quite conscious means of coping with their
frustration. Collecting soon became a dominant feature of their
lives, and, as far as Martin was concerned, quickly developed
from a pastime to a tantalizing passion.

The convergence of the death of the prominent collector and
the condition of Martin’s marriage owing to his wife’s physical
state seemed to sanction Martin’s reinforced dedication. He re-
called the time of his father’s death, remembering that, initially,
he had felt almost numb about it and could only empathize with
his mother’s grief. It was her bereavement that gave the event a
pathetic poignancy. How could he help? But also, were there
grounds for self-pity? He had a vague comprehension of a sym-
monic equation between his father’s death in the Orient, his
mother’s emotional withdrawal, and his awareness that he had
little to lean on. It was at this time that he found himself prey to
uncertainty and, simultaneously, resolved to find protection
from further harm and “to make good.”

These are only fragments from a complex life-history. What is
relevant here are the echoes of stress and lingering anxiety
which made discharge of tension imperative. Martin did not in-
tend to find this relief through further and more significant ac-
quisitions. However, under such circumstances, one’s affects
tend to fluctuate, and behavior can easily be overruled by un-
conscious needs for triumph, canceling out notions of uncer-
tainty and disorientation.

At the time of these events Martin was still a young man,
in view of his achievements and standing in business. The col-
clector who had just died was considerably older than Martin,
and he too had had a notable career in industry. As a result,
Martin felt a certain bond, and he now mourned the sincerely
admired older man. In a deeper sense, he had represented the
father whose absence Martin had begun to miss during the later
years of his adolescence.

Now Martin considered to bid on one or even more of the
objects, thinking of them as signs of a posthumous bond, not
being aware that his feelings about these objects contained some
residue of the cult of holy relics or that this was analogous to
animistic beliefs in transmigration of power, even mana (which,
as I have shown before, govern preliterate peoples’ concern
with ancestral bones). Here Martin inadvertently followed their
example and joined those collectors who, due to underlying
conflicts, look for an imprimatur which, in essence, guarantees
approval and consent. One may assume that such habits reveal
remnants of old, unconscious ambivalence and primitive ag-
gressive wishes in well-rationalized disguise.

Let me pursue this point a bit further. Concern with provo-
ence and pedigree of collected objects is understandable as
well as historically valid. But this does not mean that such incli-
nations do not rest on magic thinking and irrational emotions.
The same holds true for a preference for unblemished or perfect
objects, like a mint-condition coin or an uncut first edition of a
desirable book.

However, when preference becomes obsession, insistance,
and perfection or previous ownership replaces all other consid-
erations, we are looking at several phenomena: the obsession
with perfection may be connected with irrational fears or be a
manifestation of hostile-destructive defenses, or it may cushion an unconscious fear of one’s own imperfections. Or take the example of the pedigree. Previous ownership, as Walter Benjamin recognized, provides the owner with an identificatory solidarity with the past as if the previous owner’s or owners’ magic had been incorporated in the object.

As I have discussed earlier, objects imbued with such irrational attributes serve essentially the same purpose as the head of St. Mark or the toe of St. Anthony or a piece of the Holy prepuce or a nail of the Holy Cross. They are essentially meant to put the collector’s uneasiness about his appetites to rest.

These events occurred more than a decade before Martin G. came to Hong Kong. He had acquired some outstanding specimens which had belonged to his much-admired deceased collector-friend. Meanwhile, with diligence, fine taste, and substantial knowledge he had built a remarkable collection and achieved a position of esteem among the cognoscenti in his field. He had become a generous lender to exhibitions, and his house was open to scholars and students with whom he liked to exchange views about their shared interest. Yes, he was flattered when he was complimented, or his name appeared in scholarly publications. Recognition and acclaim infuse a renewed belief in one’s special qualities and can enhance anyone’s self-image, especially that of a devoted collector. I have yet to meet a collector without a measure of guilt, conscious or unconscious, about his “frivolities,” as one man put it.

Martin G.’s Hong Kong sojourn was actually part of a business routine, this time worked out and scheduled as a result of rumors about the recent exciting discoveries in mainland China. Martin used to insist on separating his business activities from his collecting. But this is not to say that they were watertight compartments. Indeed a Hong Kong banker with whom he had quite frequent dealings, was an equally devoted collector (in his case, of fine examples of Chinese calligraphy).

At this time, Martin G. was surprised to find how absorbed he had become in this particular treasure hunt. His tension during his dealings with Mr. Lee reminded him of a child on Christmas Eve. He met Mr. Lee again, this time at the dealer’s apartment.
Torn between his still-not-abandoned hope of owning an un- 
questioned masterpiece, and the self-condemnation that was 
part of his dilemma, he was only half aware of his wish to excel 
by obtaining such treasures for his collection.

Mr. Lee was no Pied Piper. It was Martin’s own monomania 
that at this juncture made him follow Mr. Lee to Kowloon, on 
the other side of Hong Kong Harbor. It was a typically dark, 
sweet-smelling grocery store in one of the city’s innumerable 
mazelike alleys. Here they were greeted by the shopkeeper, who 
first addressed Mr. Lee in Chinese and then made a few polite 
remarks to Martin in halting English. Another man appeared 
from the back of the store, and the conversation continued in 
Chinese. The whole scenario, Martin felt, was like a conclave 
from which he had been excluded. They all then proceeded to a 
dimly lit storage room, filled with bags and baskets. One of the 
men removed a large basket, lifted another out of the way, and 
brought out a tea chest. While the grocer removed a few layers 
of cottony paper from whatever it was covering, the Chinese pa-
laver continued. The setting was reminiscent of a ritual dis-
róbement, Martin thought. The unwrapping of the bundle, he 
said later, had the air of a secret-society ritual. Since he knew 
that he was not going to see the objects in the original photo-
graphs, the response was not overwhelming. However, on ob-
serving Mr. Lee’s evident captivation with what was going on, 
his spirits rose once again. The dealer had not deceived him, he 
told himself. If there had been any deception, they both had 
been duped.

The entire experience was the more mystifying to Martin G., 
because he felt like a young child again who cannot follow the 
talk among grown-ups and does not quite understand their ges-
tures and actions. However, he still retained enough of his com-
posure and objectivity to be able to describe later on all the de-
tails of what had gone on in those few frenetic moments. He 
kept trying to remind himself that in the end it was all just a 
inspiring game. Then he began to see himself as a coward in-
volved in a dubious transaction, quite contrary to his customary 
business ethics. In the peculiar atmosphere of secrecy, intrigue, 
and restiveness in the room, he tended to confuse the roles and 
forgot whose game it was. He had always considered himself 
rational, level-headed, and astute. Now, he felt green, blunder-
ing, and overwhelmed by a nagging sense of bewilderment, “as 
if there were no way out,” to recall an oft-quoted Chinese phrase.

What strikes the listener in Martin G.’s account is his perse-
verance and indomitable determination, which seems more like 
that of an obdurate child than an adult business executive. 
What had led him to this dubious undertaking? Had his over-
whelming desire to own objects better than those of his fellow 
collectors threatened his self-image? Or should one see his be-
havior within the frame of his life experience and a new search 
for some serious purpose after the tragedy that had affected his 
his marriage? All of a sudden he found himself in the midst of, and 
especially in collision with, smugglers and tomb-robbers.

The grocer handed Mr. Lee two small objects, which had to be 
taken to the light in order to be clearly seen and examined. Now 
Martin got a glimpse of what appeared to be a pair of superbly 
cast tai lou, the Chinese name for buckles or dress hooks, with 
delicate gold inlays. They were doubtless of an early, and proba-
bly archaic period—if they were authentic, Martin thought. He 
found himself trembling. He could feel his heart pounding in 
tremors of triumph. Holding the hooks in his hand, he almost 
physically felt his doubts and misgivings vanish. His uneasiness 
gave way to a new moral and emotional lift. Had he really made 
the “once in a lifetime” discovery, the evidence of magic that 
every true collector dreams of? While all these thoughts were 
racing through his mind, he realized that he had almost forgot-
ten even to examine the fang yi or p’ian (water vessel) he had 
been looking forward to seeing.

The buckles were “dazzling,” to use Martin’s own word. He 
saw evidence of rare skill in the masterful casting of what under 
his magnifying glass appeared to be fantastic animals, possibly 
dragons or birdmen. He traced the peculiar arrangement of in-
terlaced foliage and geometric decorations entwined with fig-
ures he could not decipher at the moment. Iconographically, the 
two pieces seemed related to early Eastern Zhou (seventh 
to sixth centuries B.C.) designs. The exquisite patina would 
eventually provide proof under radiographic examination, he 
thought immediately. As he closely checked the objects he 
stopped suddenly and looked up, startled. Anyone watching 
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more like fondling, since he had been so carried away by his enthusiasm. However, he had suddenly recalled something he had learned years ago—that fine copies had been made, and patinas forged during the Sung era (tenth to thirteenth centuries A.D.). Could the hooks actually be early forgeries?

Trying to hide his confusion, he gestured to Mr. Lee that it was time to terminate the visit. He must have been quite guarded in his demeanor, since Mr. Lee at that point had no notion of what Martin thought or felt about the objects. No one had mentioned a price nor was there any reference to a place of origin. There was no discussion as to evidence of ownership, let alone a feeling of authenticity, although such issues were surely not of the grocer’s concern. Did he wish to consider the tai kou? Mr. Lee asked.

A quick appraisal of the situation told Martin that this was no time for long deliberation, let alone for later consultation with Professor Y. Moreover, what did the professor know about these particular finds? An old sensation recurred, an awareness of many collectors. He felt embarrassed. He would not dare offend Mr. Lee. The man had given him an exceptional opportunity. He would never offer him another object if he showed ingratitude by turning down this chance. He now felt like a best-loved child, a sentiment unmistakably revealing much of the psychological condition of the collector.

Martin remembered that several years before he had acquired an early Chinese bronze from a European antiquaire. After a few weeks he had changed his mind and asked to return it. When he handed the well-wrapped piece to the dealer’s secretary, she did not even open the package. All she did was hand him an envelope with a check for the returned object. While Martin had been received on this occasion with impeccable courtesy, he was never again to be shown an object of more than average quality by that particular dealer. Or, at another time, a dealer had shown him a fine bowl which he liked but wanted to think about. He asked the man whether he could reserve it for a week, and the dealer agreed. When Martin returned a few days later in order to finalize the purchase, he was told by a salesman that there had been a misunderstanding. The bowl had previously been offered to another collector who had now decided to obtain it. Martin never set foot again in the gallery.

Looking at such vignettes as a whole, one is soon aware that the relationship between collector and dealer is different from any customary buyer-seller contact because of an apparently more complex interplay, largely due to the intrinsic power that accrues to the dispenser of magic provisions. This predicament is one of the most potent assets of the successful dealer, whose role is often closely akin to that of physician, priest, or shaman.

For the moment, the only reply Martin allowed himself was that he would prefer to examine the hooks in the more comfortable and relaxed surroundings of Mr. Lee’s premises. They left the dingy back room of the grocery store and went out to the alley. To Martin it had been a magic place where a dream had come true. It took him a few moments to regain his composure. In retrospect, he understood that he had been disconcerted partly because of the fact that the objects that had been offered were to him unfamiliar ones. From the snapshots that had been shown, he had formed a mental picture of what he was going to see and possibly acquire. Dedicated collectors delight in anticipating objects that they might be able to obtain. In his own mind, Martin had already rearranged one of his display cases in which he would show his new vessel or vessels. One of the photographs shown to him had been that of a jung ji, or bronze urn, reminiscent of one of the very finest examples in a famous European collection.

Now he felt obliged to make an immediate decision about the tai kou. All he knew was that he had either seen two very special variants of a well-known type of artifact, or two very clever pastiches, or possibly copies, made hundreds of years ago, probably during the Sung period. Thus, they would only be some eight hundred years old, and did not go back nearly two or three millennia. Wherever Martin looked, there emerged a series of arguments pro and con. It was as if he were conversing with an invisible alter ego.

I have encountered these silent soliloquies with surprising frequency among those collectors who have little capacity to resist temptation—a struggle in which it seems that an inner counterpart to one’s self instinctively recognizes the menace entailed in an ungodly desire. We saw it earlier in the case of Paul and his secret language with his toy dogs. There is also the report of Cardinal Mazarin’s well-known “conversation” with his
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paintings shortly before his death. These monologues articulate the collector's powerful emotional commitment by implying that the object is in some respects subject.

We see the same seemingly extraneous force in Martin G.'s reaction to the buckles. There is both need and anxiety. On the one hand, he desperately wants the two buckles for the satisfaction of owning them and the curious pleasure of having found and almost discovered them in the underground market. On the other hand, he is also perturbed because, first, he may be buying fakes—even eight-hundred-year-old fakes—and, second, he might lose these rare specimens to another collector if he hesitates too long to make up his mind about them. How is he to decide what course to follow? Recognizing his uncertainty, he became angry with himself because he began to understand his bewilderment as a refusal of responsibility.

Mr. Lee may have sensed something of this conflict. When they arrived at his home, Martin was ushered into a room that served as a photographic studio. Here Mr. Lee put first one and then the other part of the buckle under a strong magnifying glass. He squinted in satisfaction at what he saw, and invited Martin to take a look himself. When he noticed Mr. Lee's apparently genuine expression of delight, his own doubts vanished. He felt transformed, as if released from an almost physical pressure.

Luxuriating in his newfound self-confidence, he embarked on a new course in his thinking. The tai kou were unquestionably genuine. He was ready for bigger game now that his uncertainty had disappeared. Was he determined to court another bout of anxiety? Did the strain itself have an irresistible attraction? Was he ready for another masochistic exposure? Martin would not have admitted then that this was like a need for self-punishment. Nevertheless, he acknowledged later, at the time of our encounter, that once he had felt the relief, he was ready to face still more stress. "I didn't want to leave one stone unturned," since he had already gone that far, he implied.

The following morning, he suggested to Mr. Lee that they both might have been led astray, and that the superior objects from the find might already have been bought by the important dealer who was also in Hong Kong, or even by Professor Y., acting on behalf of an anonymous buyer. Still hesitant, Martin telephoned the hotel where the professor was staying, only to hear that he was on his way to the airport. Immediately his doubts returned. Why couldn't he reach him? And the professor's inaccessibility became another stumbling block.

Thereupon he decided to telephone another of his acquaintances, a well-known dealer in Taipei. In guarded language he hinted at the reason for his extended stay in Hong Kong. He was clear-minded enough to realize that in the small world of Oriental art the whereabouts of a leading authority such as Professor Y. could be traced very quickly. The dealer could tell him nothing other than the name of the university where the man was expected to arrive at any moment. However, he volunteered that he also had heard of the unusual pieces recently brought out of mainland China.

Being so close to what seemed to be a rich strike had not simply increased the intensity of Martin G.'s passion. It also seemed to have brought out an inordinate yearning for more possessions as if he had been looking, though not consciously, for more irrational anxieties.

Mr. Lee remained confident about the tai kou and in his modest way persuaded Martin to finalize the purchase. And Martin, now in a state of competitive elation, admitted that no other acquisition had brought out so many facets of unexplained and unexpected emotions.

It was only months later that he understood the concurrence between the state of his homelife and the self-balancing effort of his Hong Kong venture. He recognized that the presence or departure of the professor gave, or did not give, a sophisticated business executive a plausible rationale for chasing after some rare and to him magical objects. Whatever he inferred from Professor Y.'s expertise was due to his readiness both to believe and to be deceived. He was used to having his reliance on people betrayed—if not by them, then by events. His father had been absent, and even before his death he had sided with Martin's brother. His mother was, in effect, absent once they were informed about his father's death. And Martin had prematurely lost any fulfilling intimacy with his young wife.

He began to understand that his all-absorbing involvement with finding and collecting rare works of art was hardly less than a flight to escape from repeated disillusion. It was his
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answer to an urgent need for replenishment, if not an essential guaranty of life and continuation. It is evident how and why Martin G. was compelled to collect by a deep and turbulent hunger for retrieval and healing with the aid of tangible things as a protective shield against disillusionment.

The actual course of events following the Hong Kong episode makes no difference with respect to the motivating factors. It should only be a reminder that, inevitably, the collected objects remain just that—objects. They may elicit feelings, but they have no life. And so it is the search—successful or not—that ever promises hope, suspense, excitement, and even danger. The quest is never-ending. It is, as one can see time and again, bound to repeat itself, while the ultimate pleasure always remains a mirage.

PART FOUR
EXCURSIONS INTO HISTORY