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PARADOXES OF COLLECTING

In about 1758, Thomas Gainsborough painted a twin portrait of his daughters, Mary and Margaret, one of several now well-known and on display in public galleries. The one illustrated here is in the Victoria and Albert Museum, titled *Portrait of the Painter's Two Daughters*, and bequeathed in 1876 by John Forster, most frequently remembered as friend and first biographer of Charles Dickens. The V&A reckons Mary about ten years old when she was painted and Margaret six; describing the painting the V&A remarks laconically, "oil on canvas (two canvasses joined)."

In 1833 the young John Forster had bought the work when it came up for auction. He acted jointly with an older friend, William Macready, and they were successful in bidding for Gainsborough's small painting (16 x 24½ inches). When they got home they cut it in half, "one head going to each buyer."[1] Macready died in 1873 and, in accordance with first-to-die terms previously agreed, bequeathed his daughter to Forster who had the two halves of the picture sewn back together and re-framed.

The heads of Mary and Margaret are on left and right hands of the painting, it is true, but it is also the case that across the middle Mary has her arm outstretched to touch Margaret's hair so that when the painting was divided, Mary was henceforth making an inexplicable gesture and missing an arm whilst Margaret had a mysterious hand descending onto the top of her head.

[1] E. K. Waterhouse, *Preliminary Check List of Portraits by Thomas Gainsborough*, published as the Thirty Third Volume of the Walpole Society, 1948-50, Oxford 1953.

The Painter's Two Daughters Oil Painting, ca. 1758 (painted). Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

What is it about a double portrait that Forster and Macready did not understand? They clearly did not recognise that if divided the painting would be badly damaged as work of art and aesthetically pleasing object. It seems that their collecting desire was for a trophy Gainsborough, a bit of original canvas on which he had painted, as if that canvas was some relic of a saint. Saints might well be defined as people whose fate it is to be divided into portable sections and shared out among the faithful – though in contrast to Gainsborough's work, the sum of the parts is often greater than the whole.[2]

[2] See, "Credulity," in my *Sample Essays* (London: Degree zero, 2020). In the opening scene of Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita* Humbert Humbert shoots Quilty through what becomes a bullet-riddled portrait painting, thus creating a sort of double murder. The untutored viewer (me) will take the portrait as a Gainsborough and, on a careless view, as his 1785 painting of Mrs Siddons, now in London's National Portrait Gallery. But, in fact, it's a painting only in the style of Gainsborough (as Lara Delage-Tiegel puts it in "Shadow of a Double: Taking a Closer Look at the Opening of Kubricks' *Lolita*," *Miranda*, 2010, part 3) and is in "reality" George Romney's slightly later portrait of Mrs Bryan Cooke (Ksiezopolska, Irena. "Kubrick's Lolita: Quilty as the Author," *Literature/Film Quarterly,* 2018). There is a back story linking Romney to a traffic in young women, as Juli Kearns narrates (http://idyllopuspress.com/idyllopus/film/lo_portrait.htm). Still, it's a pity that it is not the actress Sarah Siddons, famous for playing – at different times – both Lady Macbeth and Hamlet (Wikipedia will oblige). And the Gainsborough is less anodyne than the Romney.

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Collectors undervalue the objects they collect. This is a paradoxical claim because it is generally supposed that a collector just is someone who values objects: sometimes exclusively and obsessively, sometimes to the neglect of other affections and obligations. That neglect is real, but it's still true that collectors and conservation do not go together. It is very rare even today for a collector to think seriously about conserving an object so that it may pass to its next owner in at least as good a state as when it was acquired. Collectors live for the thrill of acquisition and they live for the present, perhaps another paradox since collecting is often presented as a future-oriented activity, aimed at building a collection which can then be described as extensive, valuable, the product of years of searching, and so on.

The British Museum is basically a warehouse for bits of objects torn from their context in order to satisfy someone's lust, someone's covetousness. The Elgin Marbles are the paradigm. You don't cease to be a treasure hunter if what you break off needs many labourers to carry away. In principle, you are doing exactly what a tourist does, looking at a mosaic fresco and surreptitiously levering off just one square centimetre. We know exactly what the result is: in due course, all that remains of the fresco is that above the height of a very outstretched hand. At this point museum curators interrupt the argument to suggest it is much better they remove the whole fresco and house it safely than allow it to be picked to death.

Curio seekers are everywhere. In 1813 during renovations to Windsor Castle a coffin was discovered which, from outward indications, looked as if it might well contain the missing remains of King Charles the First. The coffin was duly opened in the presence of the Prince Regent. The King's physician, Sir Henry Halford, conducted an examination of the contents which did indeed comprise the body of a man with a severed head and other features which distinguished the missing Charles. Sir Henry duly wrote up and published his findings, but omitted one curious part of the story. In the course of poking around in the remains of Charles the First, Sir Henry removed (1) part of the vertebra on which the axe had fallen; (2) a lock of hair; (3) a trimming from the beard; (4) a tooth. He had a box made to contain these items and at dinner parties would pass round the vertebra for curious examination by his guests. No one

outed these invitations to a beheading until 1874, thirty years after his death. His inheritors delayed until 1888 before grudgingly returning to Windsor Castle the missing bits.[3]

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In May 1840, Great Britain introduced adhesive postage stamps for pre-payment of postage and so for the first time ever and anywhere, people started to send and receive letters franked with Penny Blacks and Twopenny Blues featuring the head of the young Queen Victoria. These vignettes were looked upon as something separable from the letter itself. Very quickly, people – mostly, it seems, young ladies with some leisure – began to remove postage stamps from their envelopes and paste them into improvised albums or use them for decorative collages, glued onto tea trays and such like. New stamps rapidly appeared on the daily mail, Penny Reds materializing in 1841, and so variety was provided and served to sustain curiosity. Other countries soon began to produce their own stamps. The use of stamps to show pre-payment spread very quickly, replacing the older pan-European system of post-payment on delivery, and none of the first stamps of Great Britain are rare. However, the pastime which the appearance of stamps enabled started in a way which has continued to affect what actually happens to stamps collected or simply saved. Almost no one cared very much, if at all, about what collectors do now call *Condition*. Stamps were peeled off letters or cut off carelessly. They were then stuck down again and, later, as the hobby was commercialized, mounted using specially manufactured hinges. Every time they changed hands, some new damage was inflicted; millions of these early stamps survive, but only a tiny proportion are in good condition. Human spittle, repeated glueing and hingeing, thumb marks, damp cupboards – all have worked to ensure that a Penny Black today very rarely looks like the thing which was stuck to a letter in 1840. Most of them are miserable specimens. The situation was from the start paradoxical and remains so. It is a perfectly general truth that collectors damage the things they collect. They have little or no notion of the collectable object as something which it is appropriate to conserve for transfer from one owner to the next, one generation to the next. Collectors experience disillusionment with the objects they assemble; once acquired, they often

[3] Lake, Crystal B. *Artifacts: Artifacts How We Think and Write about Found Objects* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 182-85. Yuri Leving pointed out the appropriateness of linking to Nabokov in telling this story, something I had missed even though it is in plain view on the mantelpiece of a title.

cease to fascinate. The collector responds to the absence of lasting satisfaction by moving on to a new chase, a new object.

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In the twenty years that he lived in America, Vladimir Nabokov (who never learnt to drive) spent most of his vacation time being driven across the country by his wife Véra or a paid student chauffeur. He thereby acquired the knowledge of highways and motels needed to write *Lolita* as a road-trip novel. In an interesting 2015 book, *Nabokov in America*, Robert Roper documents all this and the fact that this was not the main purpose of the trips. Nabokov was constantly on the move in search of butterflies. He was an advanced collector and held paid curatorial posts in natural history museums. When trapping specimens in the net, he was also recording where, at what height above sea level, on what plants and in the company of which co-occurring species his captives were taken. Nabokov was also an expert in butterfly genitalia, differences in which are central to distinguishing species and subspecies, and he published serious contributions to the study of lepidoptera.[4] But just like the most neophyte collector, he was always removing a butterfly from a habitat, killing it to pop into a glassine and later pin to a board, store in a drawer. Dead and pinned, the real butterfly loses its grace – for half a butterfly's beauty is in its flight. Nabokov would have been able to identify many species from their flight habits alone.

Nearly all the butterflies ever caught and killed by collectors have turned to dust. Only in advanced museum collections do butterfly specimens survive for more than a season. Some collectors are really only interested in the thrill of the chase, of netting and killing a rare specimen. They may pin their catches to boards but can't really be bothered with the cost and palaver of serious conservation practices. They mainly want the chase – and when today's chase is over, they want tomorrow's. Nabokov, a very highly cultured European, never visited Venice because, as he put it with a shrug of the shoulders, "No Butterflies."[5]

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[4] See, for example, *Fine Lines. Vladimir Nabokov's Scientific Art*. S. H. Blackwell and K. Johnson, eds. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

[5] John Lanchester, "Nabokov's Dreams," *London Review of Books*, 10 May 2018.

The carelessness about conservation which is almost universal across collecting fields suggests that the psychological dynamic of collecting is in some important way indifferent or oblivious to what one might call the autonomy of the object, whether natural or cultural. The objects are things through which gratifications are sought – they are things good to gratify oneself – but those gratifications do not require much attention to a longer-term future for the object itself. The thrill of the chase, fascination with the exotic, hope of making a discovery, a covetous desire to own, all tend to push concern for the object itself into the background. That is paradoxical, since collectors are people who supposedly collect things. Even when the things are living creatures, the same carelessness about the object occurs. Public collections of living animals are notorious for their neglect of the creatures they cage; the history of zoos is a history of manginess and cruelty.

All this rather tends to make collecting of any kind look morally dubious despite the innocent façades of many collecting fields. It's easy to see that there is something odd about collecting birds' eggs if only because it reveals the collector as someone who blanks out what might have happened next. And making someone into a stamp collector is a standard trope to designate a pitiful character. But, in contrast, making someone into any kind of bug collector is usually a way of upgrading them.[6] Nabokov as writer and lepidopterist has proved a powerful double act.

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It is possible to give an account of *Lolita* making heavy use of the collector trope and Nabokov does enough in his text to licence such play.[7] Humbert Humbert spots, pursues, and captures Dolly Haze, using her for his own gratification. True, he is fascinated by her, by her beauty, and by the grace of her movements so meticulously and lovingly described. But he doesn't recognise in her a person with rights of her own, her own aims and goals. In captivity, she deteriorates under his care though finally making a fraught escape from Humbert's net.

A passage in Stacy Schiff's life of Véra Nabokov is more revealing than its footnote status might suggest. Schiff tells the story of a 1944 fresher at Wellesley College who gives her name in the first meeting of Nabokov's class:

[6] The admirable Mr. Farebrother in *Middlemarch* is an example; relevantly, he is also a man frustrated in love.
[7] John Fowles picked up and ran with the possibilities when he wrote *The Collector* (1963).

> "'Do you have any idea what that means?' he asked, scrawling it on the board, analysing its composite pieces, making buzzing circles in the air, and thoroughly humiliating the student in the process. 'I think he forgot there was a person there,' remembered the Wellesley alumna, who never went back to class. Her name means 'mosquito' in Russian." (139)

"I think he forgot there was a person there" more or less sums up the bottom line of every ethical critique of Humbert Humbert's character. And all because he is driven by a collector's passion blind to differences between words, insects, and nymphets.

I am not being original in indicating the possibility of developing such a critical reading, though it is a reading which will only take us so far. Is there anything else to say? Well, we could ask, What – if anything – connects the style of Nabokov the butterfly collector to the style of Nabokov the writer? I want to suggest that allusion and word play, assigned such a prominent role in Nabokov's writing, satisfy him – let's say, psychologically – in a similar perhaps identical way to curio seeking and bug hunting. In an individual text, Nabokov does not structure his allusions – hinting at links to just one other writer or language as a sort of parallel text. Nor does he discipline the puns for which he evinces such hopeless-case ardour. Allusions and wordplays appear pell-mell, as if brought out by a magpie collector from a cabinet of curiosities accumulated over many years. (Nabokov read dictionaries, cover to cover).

There is continuity between Nabokov's prose and that of "Vivian Darkbloom" in the hapless, parodic "Notes to Ada" at the end of *Ada or Ardor* (463-79). Take, for example, the final note (479) where *gamine* in the main text (describing Ada) is glossed by Darkbloom as "lassie," an idea which would never have occurred to me and made me laugh, disturbing my neighbour who looked askance from his *Daily Telegraph*. But I go to Google and "lassie" is there on the front page, no kidding, so I conclude that Nabokov is here taking one last – literally, last word – dig at the foolish dictionaries which in 2020 have yet to learn their 1969 lesson. "Lassie" my ass. But it seems I am not to be allowed the last word:

> "May I point out," says the time-travelling author, "that the word *gamine* which Miss Darkbloom glosses as 'lassie' appears in my text (pages 460-461) as a loan word, used in a parodic English language blurb for my book (the wretched publishers, you see…), its optionally italicized Frenchiness intended to provide a little *frisson* where most needed. I fear Miss Darkbloom was unnecessarily conscientious in providing a translation for an English word. One would not, for example, trouble to gloss *café* as 'café' though one could use the example to

> show that English makes use of diacritical marks, albeit inconsistently: the accent on café is retained because it keeps us safe from a spelling pronunciation, but a circumflex on *Hotel* would be merely tiresome, as the French appear – I am time-travelling again – also to have concluded. It is not my *role* or rôle to arbitrate in either language, but…" [*continues, page 94*]

It's true, in *Ada or Ardor* Nabokov anticipates the drift of the serious part of my argument:

> Pedantic Ada once said that the looking up of words in a lexicon for any other needs than those of expression… lay somewhere between the ornamental assortment of flowers… and making collage pictures of disparate butterfly wings (which was always vulgar and often criminal). *Per contra*, she suggested to Van that verbal circuses… might be redeemable by the quality of the brain work required for the creation of a great logograph or inspired pun and should not preclude the help of a dictionary… (169)

Nabokov is struggling here. He knows there is something maybe not quite right in collecting one's words from dictionaries rather than from one's head or heart, and taking as much pleasure as he does in arranging one's finds. He tries to get off the hook with the claim that he is more diligent (and successful) than most, which is true but doesn't quite acquit him.

Paul Ricoeur provides a thumbnail summary of Freud's position which is relevant: "art is the non-obsessional, non-neurotic form of substitute satisfaction."[8] That's arguable[9] but it licences a parallel claim that collecting, and all that surrounds it, is an obsessional, neurotic form of substitute satisfaction. Antiquaries, collectors, curators, all assemble not only objects, but knowledge of those objects and a great deal of that knowledge will comprise obscure fragments, each no more than a centimetre square, suitable for enlivening footnotes or anecdotes, but devoid in their broken state of any aesthetic unity or emotional charge. Such things can be developed only within a whole work and for prose that means within a narrative. Of course, Nabokov knows very well how to do narrative, and at length, but he does love his curios too and like many curio collectors cannot resist pulling out just one more from the cabinet. Maybe *just one more* is sometimes one too many, like the thousandth holiday snap which, as you make your excuses, your host just has to show you. But the excuses may be

[8] *Freud and Philosophy* (1970), 163.
[9] The obvious move is to argue for a non-reducible play instinct which is what Schiller does in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794) and Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* (1938). Melanie Klein's concept of an irreducible epistemic drive – we just like to know things – is similar in intent.

hastened by some obscure sense of that host's loneliness - or grief: "Eccentricity is the greatest grief's greatest remedy."[10]

Nabokov's father died in 1922 from an assassin's bullet intended for another Russian politician and Nabokov always marked the day of his father's death; in 1945, his brother Sergey died in a German concentration camp. As a direct result, Nabokov never visited Germany again, despite having lived there for fifteen years in the 1920s and 1930s. Sergey was imprisoned for five months in 1941 on charges of homosexuality but released; at the end of 1943 he was arrested for less well-defined reasons which amounted to sympathizing with the enemy – which he did – and was sent to KL Neuengamme where he died of dysentery and starvation.

[10] *Ada or Ardor,* 271.