

ARTIGO

Bruce Chatwin's *Utz* (1989): collections as material autobiographies

Utz (1989), de Bruce Chatwin:
coleções como autobiografias materiais

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ABSTRACT: The article deals with collecting in *Utz* (1989), by Bruce Chatwin. I read the fascination with collectors and collecting in the novel from and across two theoretical questions: (1) can objects enfold both a material status and an intangible effect as well as create an alternate narrative that would draw us away from commodification, objectification, and pathology? and (2) can the object confront us more with remnants of human life, with fragments of the representation of desire, and less with the residue of human labor? Kaspar Utz is a great collector of Meissen porcelain who the adverse events of history lead to living in Prague with his fragile treasures, under the malevolent eyes of a police state. Utz knows that a collector is almost an occult “theologian”, and his relationship with the Harlequins and the Colombines of Meissen has something idolatrous. Utz wages a silent war against the enemies that surround him, against the background noise of history, which would like to swallow forever these object-figures made of a substance refined by time. Utz’s lonely and manic life will become a game against the enemies, whose stake is the collection itself, an army of beings that must be removed from the brutal fingertips of tyrannical authority.

KEYWORDS: Chatwin, *Utz*, Collections, Lists.

RESUMO: O artigo trata do tema do colecionismo em *Utz* (1989), de Bruce Chatwin. Eu leio o fascínio por colecionadores e coleções no romance a partir de duas questões teóricas: (1) podem os objetos envolver tanto um status material quanto um efeito intangível, bem como criar uma narrativa alternativa que nos afastaria da mercantilização, objetificação e patologia? e (2) pode o objeto nos confrontar mais com resquícios de vida humana, com fragmentos de representação do desejo, e menos com o resíduo do trabalho humano? Kaspar Utz é um grande colecionador de porcelana Meissen que as intempéries da história levaram a viver em Praga com seus frágeis tesouros, sob os olhos malévolos de um estado policial. Utz sabe que um colecionador é quase um “teólogo” oculto, e seu relacionamento com os Arlequins e as Colombineas de Meissen tem algo de idolátrico. Utz trava uma guerra silenciosa contra os inimigos que o cerca, contra o ruído de fundo da história, que gostaria de engolir para sempre essas figuras-objetos feitas de uma substância refinada pelo tempo. A vida solitária e maníaca de Utz se tornará um jogo contra esses inimigos, cuja aposta é a própria coleção, um exército de seres que deve ser removido das pontas dos dedos brutais de uma autoridade tirânica.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Chatwin, *Utz*, Coleções, Listas.

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Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion
borders on the chaos of memories (Benjamin, 1968, p. 60)¹.

That's why I cry within myself the true sorrow / Of having been born late and only to
find you, / Made of ivory, stone, wood, / On top of an altar! (Régio, 2001, p. 79)².

The potential inwardness of objects is one of their most powerful characteristics,
ambiguous and elusive though it may be. Objects hang before the eyes of the imagination,
continuously re-presenting ourselves to ourselves, and telling the stories of our lives in ways
which would be impossible otherwise. (Pearce, 1992, p. 47).

I read the fascination with collectors and collecting in Bruce Chatwin's *Utz* (1989) in relation to two theoretical questions: (1) can objects enfold both a material status and an intangible effect as well as create an alternate narrative that would draw us away from commodification, objectification, and pathology? and (2) can the object confront us more with remnants of human life, with fragments of the representation of desire, and less with the residue of human labor? The novel follows the fortunes of Kaspar Utz, a collector of Meissen porcelain living in Czechoslovakia during the Cold War, and includes a collection of texts delving into the world of art collecting. This fascination with collecting and collectors revisits texts such as John Fowles's *The Collector* (1963), Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* (1987), Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), among others. Within these texts, characters are drawn to collecting in response to the shortcomings of the material world around them and to ever fleeting desire more generally. I will demonstrate the extent to which *Utz* suggests that collecting art objects help subjects, Kaspar Utz more specifically, to imagine alternate/alternative realities. By reading Chatwin's novel with respect to the two questions above, I hope to complicate the material bias that links the art object and the mortal subject on a route that unequivocally leads from memorialization, chaos of memories to *memento mori*.

The implications of this route are far from clear, however. The more prominent interpretation, popularized by Marxian thinkers such as Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, reads the imbrications among things, objects, and subjects as an indication of the global triumph of capitalism and the wholesale commodification of human experience.³ I propose we read between the blinds⁴ and illuminate the tangled relationships between man and his material things in his physical environment less as status trophies or dehumanized substitutes for human relationships

¹ Hannah Arendt, in the introduction to Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations* (1968, p. 42), states: "Collecting is the redemption of things which is to complement the redemption of man."

² Original in Portuguese: "Por isso choro em mim a mágoa verdadeira / De ter nascido tarde, e só te vir achar, / Feito em marfim, pedra, madeira, / No cimo dum altar!"

³ In what follows, I do not argue with Jameson or Baudrillard on the extent to which their views on material things and/or objects hold some truth. I simply propose an alternate/alternative route in relation to material things and collections in Chatwin's *Utz*.

⁴ A reference to the expression "read between the lines", to read between the blinds is an ironic act of courage, as Peggy Kamuf phrases it in her "Introduction" to *A Derrida Reader*; it is to welcome limitations "as a chance to open the shutters and the blinders of thought to what comes from its other, beyond any one language or idiom. Let your language play in the slanting rays ... Listen to Colombine's laughter." (Kamuf, 1991, p. xiii) We return to *Utz* and his Colombine Meissen figurines.

or markers of class, domination, and control and more as agents of self-creation. If we space Chatwin's *Utz*, it is very likely that "the art of this text is the air it causes to circulate between its screens. The chainings are invisible, everything seems improvised or juxtaposed. This text induces by agglutinating rather than by demonstrating, by coupling and uncoupling, gluing and ungluing rather than by exhibiting the continuous, and analogical, instructive, suffocating necessity of a discursive rhetoric." (Derrida, 1986, p. 75)⁵ It is my contention that lists (an alternate and alternative rhetorical device) help Chatwin and his narrator breathe new life into the phenomenon of novel writing in general and into art collecting and collections in particular.

Utz is a florilegium, which is a type of anthology or the gathering of a bouquet of sweet literary blossoms, and a list of flowers. At the very beginning, at the moment of Utz's funeral, "a blanket of white carnations covered the oak coffin – although he had not foreseen the wreath of Bolshevik vulgarity that had been placed on top: red poinsettias, red gladioli, red satin ribbon and a frieze of shiny laurel leaves." (Chatwin, 1989)⁶ This list is taken up throughout the novel and continues its many iterations: paulownias, begonias, cinerarias, fields of buttercups, municipal marigolds, the odour of lilac and philadelphus, a peony-printed peignoir, lilies-of-the-valley, myrtle, roses and hollyhocks, cornflowers, poppies, knapweed, scabious, larkspur, geraniums, rudbeckia, purple phlox, shasta daisies, the robe with appliqué roses on the shoulders and the flowered housecoat Marta, his maid and later wife, wore at the very end. *Utz* also couples and uncouples, glues and unglues a collection of texts delving into the world of collecting: articles for the press (the Northern Renaissance of the emperor Rudolph II with his attending cabinet of curiosities or the one on the psychopathology of the compulsive collector), direct and indirect literary references (Woolf, Borges, Coover, Chekhov, Gide, Goethe, Kafka, Schnitzler, Zweig, Meyrink), improvised or imagined meetings with prominent figures, including the mathematician, physicist, and philosopher Graf von Tschirnhaus; "the pederast" historian and archeologist Winckelmann; the architect Konstantin Melnikov, renowned collector George Costakis and fashion designer Madeleine Vionnet, amongst many others.

One of the screens, so to speak, that makes the chainings (in)visible in relation to *Utz* is the time Chatwin spent at Sotheby's auction house and his experience there with collecting and collectors. Chatwin even developed elsewhere the "instructive, suffocating" theories on the motivations for collecting: arguing the desire to possess beautiful, but impractical, objects comes from a suppressed necessity to keep on moving, an inheritance from our nomadic ancestors. Analogically and not necessarily autobiographically, the eponymous protagonist of *Utz* is obsessed with his collection of Meissen porcelain figurines, guarding himself from the external world – "Marxist-Leninism had never got to grips with the concept of the private collection. Trotsky ... made a few offhand comments ... But no one had ever decided if the ownership of a work of art damned its owner in the eyes of the Proletariat. Was the collector a class-enemy?" (Chatwin, 1989) – and retreating to his real world populated by material things – "this world

⁵ Derrida obviously refers to Jean Genet and the quoted excerpt might be replicated, in a vulgar and banal manner, in relation to many pieces of literature. I must, therefore, add that the excerpt from Derrida is used as illuminations on Chatwin's *Utz* as well: chainings caught up in the conflict between visibility and invisibility; juxtapositions of improvised rhetorical devices; agglutination of ideas/themes rather than their logical exposition or analogical demonstration; and patchwork mosaics achieved by the use of lists that couple and uncouple or glue and unglue.

⁶ Kindle version, no page number.

of little figures was the real world. And that, compared to them, the Gestapo, the Secret Police and other hooligans were creatures of tinsel. And the events of this somber century – the bombardments, blitzkriegs, putsches, purges – were ... many noises off.” (Chatwin, 1989).

Another needed reading between the blinds is that *Utz* is a collector from Prague, and that his passion for collecting porcelain carries him through the conflicts of the 20th century: world wars, the suppression of the Prague Spring by Soviet Troops in 1968, his persecution by the Czechoslovakian communist government, and his necessity of time to evacuate the porcelains “before they were requisitioned by the canaille.” (Chatwin, 1989). Chatwin’s *Utz* agglutinates round the idea that artists/collectors, in general, sense that the order of this world is not as firm as it pretends to be; no thing, no self, no form, no principle, no politics is certain. Everything is caught up in (in)visible and never-ending metamorphoses, in the unfirm lies more of the future than the firm, and the present is nothing but a collection of hypotheses that one has not yet gotten around (Kosuth, 1993; Musil, 1995, p. 269). Thus, the collector is not positioned in relation to a lack, collecting is not merely about beauty, pleasure, scarcity or even perfectness, collectors and collecting are not primarily about filling a gap.⁷ Collecting might turn out to be a psychopathology, but Chatwin argues in *Utz* that it is first and foremost (and perhaps simultaneously) an aesthetic enterprise (the collector is “the most useless refugee, an aesthete!”), a quest, a polymathic impulse, just like porcelain itself, not just another exotic, magical, and talismanic material, but “The substance of longevity, of potency, of invulnerability ... Porcelain [a metonym for collecting itself], *Utz* concluded, was the antidote to decay.” (Chatwin, 1989) In this context, collecting is not an inoperative praxis, the collector does not necessarily suffer from a psychopathology in terms of affects and interpassivity,⁸ and to produce a taxonomy of the collector is not undoubtedly a mission to be carried out in literature.

As expected from literary texts, we do not know whether some of the exotica kept in the cabinet of curiosities of the Schloss Ambras assembled by the emperor Rudolf II’s uncle, the notoriously famous Archduke Ferdinand of Austria, really included a Cellini salt-cellar, Montezuma’s headdress of quetzal plumes, mandragoras, basilisk, a bezoar stone, a unicorn cup, a gold-mounted coco-de-mer, a homunculus in alcohol, nails from Noah’s Ark, “the phial dust from which God created Adam” (Chatwin, 1989). What we do know, however, is that the narrator has to undertake some research on a collector of Meissen porcelain and is sent to Prague. We follow the narrator’s quest because *Utz* already possesses the grail (his treasure

⁷ This and the other *via negativas* are directed at some volumes dedicated to collections in general and to collecting in Chatwin’s oeuvre in particular: Bal (1994), Baekland (1994), Cardinal (2001), Bredekemp (1996); Diken and Laustsen (2020); Hepburn (2010); Pearce (1998); Rees (1992), Shelton (2001); Tutter (2021). I must add that our desires and experiences of reading entail compromises, achievements, responses, strokes of luck, propinquity. Hence, Krzysztof Pomian’s study, which examines the history of collecting in early modern Europe and describes the myriad treasures, from paintings and antiques to religious relics, that found their way into the private collections and public museums of the time will be only referenced in a footnote (Pomian, 1990). Another author who deserves to be mentioned is Walter Benjamin, who unpacks his library in a memorialist endeavor to rescue “a book he might never have given a thought” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 64). Both authors, in their own ways, develop a historical anthropology of collections and shed light upon the genesis of collecting as well as upon the conflict between aesthetic and historical sensibilities.

⁸ A state of passivity, particularly cognitive or emotional passivity, enabled or facilitated by the appearance or potential of interactivity.

is more than 1000 priceless Meissen figurines), which is like life for him. Utz's quest has been successful but his task is now to discover how to keep his life/collection out of the hands of those who do not appreciate its aesthetic/life-breathing value, "the canaille". Yes, Utz's life is like that of an anchorite who lives in seclusion, whose surroundings are plate-glass shelves, all of them crammed with valuable porcelain, reaching from floor to ceiling. Actually, Utz's Prague apartment is his own cabinet of curiosities, which is in turn his private shrine.

It is a collection of Meissen porcelain, art objects rather than "real" territoriality, which provides Utz with his life-story. The narrator makes us believe that Utz is obsessed with his collection because it grants him control over both time and space. Outside the aura of his collection, Utz may deliquesce amidst the things gone awry in politics, for are not collections the "psychic ordering of individuality, of public and private relationships, and of time and space" (Pearce, 1995, p. 279)? Utz's life-story is a journey-escape from the present political chaos but it is also a journey-immersion into an imagined community, his porcelain figures and himself, a family, a consolation, a vocation, and a rescue. Utz experiences the present time by tiptoeing on both sides of the Iron Curtain: he lives in communist Prague and he holidays in Vichy once a year. His journey in the present time is intermingled with a journey into a life-giving experience, collecting and safeguarding the collection, his treasure. The result of this peculiar crisscrossing of space and time is the creation of the art of this text, which is the air it causes to circulate between its screens as its author responds to the challenges of the unfirm, mutating and transmutable, contemporary world.

Patrick Meanor in *Bruce Chatwin* (1997) comments on parallel figures of collectors such as the Soviet Union's leading private art collector George Costakis, referenced in *Utz*, who turned his house into a sort of museum of products of the Futurist school. Pilar Escriche-Riera develops on this piece of information: "The authorities allowed Costakis to keep the collection in his home provided he left it to one of the state museums on his death. Similarly Utz planned to escape with his treasures on his way to Vichy after the communist bureaucrats entered his flat and photographed all of his treasures so that on his death the state would know what might be missing." (Escriche-Riera, 2009, p. 74) Utz's life-collection is threatened by the powers that be and risks becoming a state museum or a mausoleum.

Utz equates "the manufacture of porcelain [, which] was an approach to the Philosopher's Stone" (Chatwin, 1989), with the making of gold. The collection of Meissen figurines metamorphoses into the alchemical philosopher's stone or the grail in that they transform captivity (to the act of collecting itself) into creativity (as of ways to mislead "the canaille"), death (as to Utz's lack of desire to live in Communist Prague) into life (his desire to go on collecting or safeguarding the collection). These metamorphoses take place continually and Utz the collector becomes appraiser, refugee, food connoisseur, comparatist ("The object ... was not really in his line – although he would like it in the collection 'for the purpose of comparative study'" [Chatwin, 1989]), scholar, pretender and Marta in her turn moves on from being a maid, an aesthete, a great cook, his wife, to being a great pretender and baroness. As with every end, Utz dies; his Meissen porcelain collection disappears in a maze of mystery and puzzle and his wife Marta goes back to the countryside where she looks after her garden and the gander who run freely in her yard, including the narrator in search for answers, for the whereabouts of the collection: "And she raised her eyes to the rainbow and said, 'Ja! Ich bin die Baronin von Utz.'" (Chatwin, 1989).

Metamorphosis is also present in *Utz*'s reference to a creation myth told through the story of Yossel the Golem of Rabbi Loew, the Jewish legend of the clay figure brought to life by cabbalistic clay molding, ritual, and recitation: "All Golem legends derived from an Ancient Jewish belief that any righteous man could create the World by repeating, in an order prescribed by the Cabbala, the letters of the secret name of God. Golem meant 'unformed,' 'uncreated' in Hebrew. Father Adam himself had been 'golem' – an inert mass of clay so vast as to cover the ends of the Earth" (Chatwin, 1989). This molded man made of clay, like the figurines of porcelain *Utz* collects, is supposed to work for his maker and "Yet on the Sabbath – since all God's creatures must rest on the Sabbath – his master would remove the 'shem' and render him lifeless for a day." (Chatwin, 1989) This self-reflexive or metafictional insert relating the creation story of the golem sheds light on *Utz*'s acts of collecting porcelain because they are simultaneously "alive and they are dead" (Chatwin, 1989). This insert ends with an ironic and thought-provoking question: can it be said that "art collecting is idolatry?" (Chatwin, 1989).

The next question, "Do your porcelains demand their own death?" (Chatwin, 1989), is a foreshadowing of things to come. Like Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths", this revelation/foreshadowing provides a key to deciphering a text that is a mirror image of the universe, embracing all possibilities of time/space, its continuum, its quantum mechanics, its angular momentum, in short, the entirety of creation, which also involves destruction. Collecting and collector are so intertwined in *Utz* that the fate of the collection is left suspended for the time being. Is it going to be "museumified", is it going to be displayed in an artist's house-museum subsidized by the state, is it going to be purloined by the corrupt State or by the rather "deceitful" Marta? Alternatively, as it is likeliest the case, is it going to run its course of life-giving force and reach its end in destruction?

Yes, the collection is most likely turned to quantum pieces of porcelain, vitreous debris not unlike the leftovers from a supernova. Other remnants or residues of collecting and collectors are to be found in *Utz*: Grimm's etymological wordbook on the name *Utz*; the palaeontologue turned cataloguer and collector of flies, Orlik; the giant list/catalogue/collection exchange between Frederick William of Prussia and Augustus of Saxony; the anachronistic mirrored dream palace built by Mies van der Rohe; the list of specialities coming from *les princes gastronomes*; the minor acts of style demonstrated by Marta the cook and seductress; the mention to a list of railway stations from Ventimiglia to Bari; The *Cyproea moneta* classified by Linnaeus; *Utz*'s studies on alchemy; the mementos of an operatic career and the succession of mistresses. Overall, the act of collecting in *Utz* is a selective, active, life-giving disposition of an interrelated set of differentiated objects (material things, ideas, beings, experiences) that contribute to and derive almost cosmic meaning⁹ from the very collection that is tentatively curated.

On the one hand, the collection gives life to *Utz* because in the People's Republic the valuable porcelains collected were surety for his good behaviour and his safe return. On the other hand, the life the collector gives the collection stems from a paradox between seriality and singularity, between life and death of the collection: "any exclusive passion for a single object

⁹ I return here to Kamuf's Colombine's laughter in that it is the (ironic) recognition of new life being breathed into a stuffy state of affairs. Colombine was often the only functional intellect on the stage and she aided her mistress to gain the affections of her one true love. She is sometimes the lover of Harlequin.

on the part of an art lover suffices to demolish our hypothesis. It is quite clear, however, that the unique object is in fact simply the final term, the one which sums up all the others, that it is the supreme component of an entire paradigm (albeit a virtual, invisible or implicit one) - that it is, in short, the emblem of the series." (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 91). In *Utz*, the act of collecting is not necessarily a rudimentary way of mastering the outside world, of arranging, classifying and manipulating it; the act of collecting does not necessarily institute possession of the object; the art of collecting rather "represents the continual recommencement of a controlled cycle whereby man, at any moment and with complete confidence, starting with any term and sure of returning to it, is able to set his game of life and death in motion." (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 95).

The metamorphosis of the collector into a "physiognomist of things", completely captured by the unique provenance and singularity of each object, forces the collection to pass through a forest of things and both collection and collector end up getting lost in it. Both sovereign and slave, life-giver and life-taker, the collector and his collection are tangled within the fate of each unique piece; but, at the same time, the collector's own fate is also tied to that of the collection, to that of the objects he owns and to those he does not have yet. Even when a collection transforms itself into a discourse addressed to others, as in public museums or for social vertical mobility and prestige, we may deduce from *Utz* that it continues to be first and foremost a discourse addressed to oneself. Collecting is one way of living within the chaos of the world or the chaos of memory and transforming it, briefly, into sense/self. We may also deduce that the thing, the form, the principle underlying the words collection (Latin *colligere*, to choose and gather together) and religion (Latin *religare*, to unite and bind together) is uncertain, improvised and juxtaposed in the novel.

Collections are material autobiographies, they may be said to represent the *nec plus ultra* of existence: life itself. If we abstract the power relations in the Elizabethan age (the system of patronage) and social ambition itself, collections and the figure of the collector in *Utz* make air circulate through Shakespeare's sonnet 18 (Atkins, 2007): "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." The collector/artist/poet gives life to and receives life from the art object: the ordinary life of the collector may be brief but his curating art is ideally long-lived. Yet life, a different type, is also found in the second epigraph to this article and in the collections of the Portuguese author; yet life, a different type, finds *Utz* metamorphosed as flâneur in *Malá Strana*: "In the Church of Our Lady Victorious, the waxen Spanish image of the Christ Child, aureoled in an explosion of gold, seemed less the Blessed Babe of Bethlehem than the vengeful divinity of the Counter-Reformation" (Chatwin, 1989); yet life, a different type, sets the imagination of *Utz* into turmoil: "a rosary, a crucifix, and a scapular of the Infant of Prague." (Chatwin, 1989).

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