Possessed
Falkoff, Rebecca R.

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In his short documentary, Possessed (2008), Martin Hampton captures the struggles of members of an Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder Action Hoarding support group in London—people who self-identify as compulsive hoarders. The film is divided into four parts, each composed of a monologue by one group member who leads the camera operator through a cluttered dwelling, giving an account of his or her experience of hoarding. The hoarder in “Control,” the first of the four segments, describes the intricately cross-referenced catalogs he maintains to index the books and videocassettes neatly shelved four-deep, up to the ceiling, and across every surface in his apartment. He seems proud of his personal library, if also apprehensive about the lack of space: “I like having books to look at . . . I like having lots of stuff. Like if I had a three-bedroom house then it wouldn’t be a problem, cause I’d have enough room for all the stuff I’ve got, so I’d be quite happy.” Despite the meticulous record keeping, the expanding library takes on an almost supernatural power and begins to elude his control. He explains: “It’s not the way it should be. It’s starting to take over. And that’s sort of a bit spooky.” The contentment afforded by his collection is offset by an awareness of the slow approach of disaster: “At the moment it’s not too bad, but it’s very close to becoming
a real problem.” His control over the books and videocassettes is precarious—he situates disaster in the not too distant future—“ten, fifteen years”: “It’s like the walls of the flat are sort of closing in. It’s a bit like that thing in *Star Wars*, where they end up in the trash compactor. And the walls are coming in!” To inhabit a present structured by the dread of a domestic avalanche or some similar catastrophe is a recital of what it means to be human in the Anthropocene, living in anticipation of an apocalypse of our own making.

The second segment presents a different affective orientation: “Submission.” The hoarded space brims with consumer goods destined for prompt desuetude: cellular phones, computers, digital cameras, external hard drives—most still in their original packaging—as well as kitschy figurines, plush toys, and office supplies. The hoarder describes these purchases as the result of a dream-like state: “You see something and you want it so much. You’ve got no choice but to buy it. So, I suppose I don’t feel like I can, sometimes, not buy things.” As if hypnotized by flashes of opportunity, he is unable to resist a bargain. And when the embarrassment of riches arouses distressing indecision, he buys whole lots. He confesses haltingly to having racked up credit card debt of more than £40,000: “That’s more than my mortgage. And it’s just basically everything you see around you.” He describes the sense of panic he feels when visiting the post office, fearing the arrival of another order: “I recognize I can’t trust myself.” While the hoarder of “Control” relishes in the presence of his possessions, for the subject of “Submission,” the objects have lost their luster; they accumulate like an unwelcome residue of his helplessness. Like the dangerous environment the hoarder of “Control” has created, which seems to be exceptional and yet engenders an Anthropocenic sense of doom, the hoarder’s
indebtedness in the “Submission” segment is the norm for subjects of contemporary capitalism.2

If the juxtaposition of “Control” and “Submission” appears to mirror that between subject and object of the verb “to possess,” the documentary—and its title, Possessed—suggests that even in exercising control over things, we are possessed by them. Hoarding marks a dangerous threshold at which control over objects cedes to a sense of helplessness before the material world. That threshold—between control and submission, between the subject and object of the verb “possess”—may be used to draw a distinction between collecting and hoarding—a tantalizing exercise that finds provisional resolution in considerations of value.3 But such resolution is necessarily fleeting; value is unstable and hoarding, like fetishism, is rooted in conflicting perspectives about value. The ambivalence expressed by the subjects of Possessed shows how these conflicts take root not only between individuals but also within them, and over time.

The ambivalence is particularly evident in “Control” and “Submission” in the ascription of increasing agency to objects: “It’s starting to take over” becomes an uncanny refrain in the film. In a different idiom, new materialism takes up the ways in which matter eludes human agency and cognition.4 Broadly speaking, new materialist thought attempts to escape binaries that structure Western metaphysics and capitalism and to put critical pressure on the cultural turn that seemed—in caricature—to render the materiality of the world an effect of language. Jane Bennett’s vital materialism, for example, proposes a world composed not of inert matter transformed by human labor but of “actants” that can produce effects and change the course of events. In place of hoarder and hoard, Bennett sees a “hoard-assemblage” marked by porous boundaries between human and nonhuman matter. Bill Brown’s
thing theory, and more broadly, his decades-long attention to the “material unconscious” of literary and visual texts, is better able to speak to the practices of acquiring and keeping that result in hoards because he maintains some distinction between human and nonhuman matter and between subject and object, even as he troubles the threshold between the two. In his introduction to the 2001 special issue of *Critical Inquiry* titled “Things,” Brown distinguishes between an *object*, which participates unobtrusively in the experience of being-in-the-world, and a *thing*, which provokes a confrontation with materiality. The “thingness” latent in every object becomes evident on contingent occasions when its materiality intrudes. A pen that runs out of ink, a printer that jams, or a picture that tilts confronts us with a materiality that exceeds our intentionality and use.

Brown understands modernism—across literary and visual arts—as the aesthetic work of attending to or provoking the intrusions of material, of liberating thingness from the “fetters of modernity.” Modernity, he argues, subjugates matter to human ends; modernism is the aesthetic project of making manifest the indomitability of matter to reveal the limits of modernity. That formulation helps to explain the compatibility between the push and pull of modernity and its artistic movements and the scenes of control and submission that Hampton documents in *Possessed* and that characterize obsessive-compulsive and impulse-control disorders. The disruptions of use and order represented by what Brown calls “thinging”—bringing out the thingness of an object (i.e., its alterity)—are *symptomatically* vexing to those who suffer from obsessive-compulsive and related disorders. Given that the intrusions of “thingness” that define modernism for Brown overlap with the irregularities intolerable to those who suffer from obsessive-compulsive and related disorders, it is unsurprising that
scholars have proposed strong correlations between obsession and modernity. Lennard Davis, for example, writes: “To be obsessive is . . . to be modern.” He underscores the exceptional concentration of energy that is associated with success in a range of areas: “We live in a culture that wants its love affairs obsessive, its artists obsessed, its genius fixated, its music driven, its athletes devoted.” Davis understands obsession as an extraordinary concentration of energy, a monomaniacal passion. But as Hampton’s film, and the other texts I discuss in this chapter show, that concentration of energy, that consuming passion, consumes the impassioned in cases of hoarding and its precursors, beginning with bibliomania.

**Bibliomania to Monomania**

The sense of being possessed by possessions becomes increasingly insistent beginning in the nineteenth century, as collections spilled forth from curiosity cabinets, grand galleries, and the personal libraries of bibliomaniacs into the annals of medicine, where all sorts of object-oriented manias and maniacs began to accumulate. Those “possessed” by the material world appeared to early nineteenth-century psychiatrists to be suffering from some form of the ailment Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol named “monomania.” The French psychiatrist began using the term in around 1810 to describe repetitive and intrusive thoughts or actions: obsessions and compulsions. Monomania, like its precursor, “partial insanity,” left mental functioning unimpaired in all but one area. It was a form of insanity that could affect a large segment of the population, even those who appeared to be in full possession of their mental faculties. This relegation of madness to some small corner of the mind held great appeal for contemporary writers, as did the linguistic affinity between “monomania”
and “bibliomania,” which had been in use for more than 150 years to describe the passionate, disordered extremes of book collecting.

Monomania quickly swept through literary circles in France and beyond; writers began using the word to refer to a harmless quirk in the form of a fanatical enthusiasm for one subject.\(^{14}\) Despite the speedy diffusion of monomania in nonspecialist writings, the term was soon replaced in psychiatric writings by a spate of subtypes: manias and phobias “enriched by nearly all the roots of the Greek dictionary” in what Max Nordau dismissed as an exercise of “philologico-medical trifling.”\(^{15}\) Some of these ills relate specifically to objects and overlap considerably with hoarding: in addition to bibliomania, there was kleptomania (first called klope-mania), oniomania (compulsive shopping), and various collecting manias.\(^{16}\) Psychiatrists after Esquirol diagnosed kleptomania, oniomania, collectomania, and klepto-collecting in people who seemed unable to control themselves around objects; they, like the hoarder of “Submission,” could not help but to steal, buy, or gather. In these manias, the exercise of the aesthetic judgment of taste is transformed into something ego-dystonic—that is, discordant with ego aims and ideals—something “sort of a bit spooky,” as the subject of Hampton’s “Control” describes it.

The emergence of so many object-oriented manias in the course of the long nineteenth century attests to anxiety about agency that haunts the willful subject of modernity in his confrontation with stuff. This chapter traces that anxiety about agency from bibliomania to hoarding disorder. My attention to this history of object-oriented manias marks a departure from recent studies of hoarding in the humanities and social sciences, which have settled on a genealogy of the diagnostic criteria that begins with the 1993 publication of “The Hoarding of Possessions” by Randy Frost and Rachel Gross. While that article introduces questions of etiology
and classification that chart a clear pathway to the inclusion of hoarding disorder in the DSM-5 in 2013, my attention to the longer, interdisciplinary history of the diagnostic category brings into focus heterogenous thematic threads entangled in hoarding today. I demonstrate the conflation, in hoarding discourse, of the poetic disposition that defines modernism for Brown with the faltering will of the subject of modernity. Before Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Carlo Emilio Gadda made literary praxes of hoarding, fin-de-siècle psychiatrists Giovanni Mingazzini and Sante de Sanctis observed obsessive forms of collecting in patients who were seized by inexplicable urges to gather up and stash away twigs and other worthless items.\(^{17}\)

At the intersection of bibliomania and monomania and of literary and scientific texts, the drama of a will that falters before the object world begins to unfold. Physiologists, alienists, philosophers, and criminologists came up with various explanations for such weakened wills—degeneration and hysteria (along with menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation) were the most common.\(^{18}\) After surveying these theories, I turn to Freud, who sets aside physiological explanations to develop psychodynamic—that is, narrative—accounts of obsessions and phobias. In an 1895 paper written in French, Freud makes obsessions and phobias a product of mental disordering, a mésalliance of mismatching of ideas, feelings, and actions.

In his 1752 article on bibliomania for the *Encyclopédie*, Jean-Baptiste le Rond d’Alembert makes disordered keeping a function of disuse.\(^{19}\) The modern history of bibliomania heralded by the encyclopedia entry is apposite to a study of hoarding today because of the distinct relationship between a book’s use, which resides primarily in the immaterial, reproducible text, and its material form, which is what captivates collectors, maniacal, and otherwise.\(^{20}\) For
Walter Benjamin, use is fundamentally at odds with collecting—no matter what the object. “What is decisive in collecting,” he writes, “is that the object is detached from all its original functions to enter into the closest conceivable relation with objects of the same kind. This relation is the diametric opposite of utility.”

Printed books are notable as collectors’ objects because their use—reading the reproducible text—is already divorced from the material form of any single copy. The rift between the medium and message—that is, between the possession and use of books—is redoubled in literary texts about bibliomania that relate the travails of the bibliomaniac to the heroic feats narrated in the pages of his tomes.

Whereas the problem with bibliomania for enlightenment writers—for example, d’Alembert and Cesare Beccaria—rests primarily in its removal of books from use, in early nineteenth-century Britain, Romantics relished in the discerning taste of book collectors. By the 1830s, the popularization of the diagnostic category Esquirol invented is evident in literary treatments of bibliomania. Both Gustave Flaubert and Charles Nodier write of bibliomaniacs ruined—financially, socially, and morally—by their unrestrained passions. Already in fourteenth-century Florence, Petrarch recognized that reading too many books can be edifying or dangerous, leading some to knowledge and others to madness. The modern history of bibliomania reveals the extent to which too many books, as physical objects, are no less able to reap refinement and ruin.

In his *Encyclopédie* article, d’Alembert defines bibliomania as “the mad desire to own books and to [amass] them.” For the collector who lacks discernment, d’Alembert writes, the love of books—as objects removed from use—results in bizarre amassments rooted in a misrecognition of value: “It would be a little like the madness of a man who piles up five or six diamonds under a heap of stones.” Although bibliomania is, for d’Alembert, more
disorder than madness, it is close enough to merit the comparison. D’Alembert’s primary objection to the bibliomaniac rests in his failure to use books “as a philosopher does.” To appreciate the “true value” of a book is to recognize what is good and what is bad in the words and ideas it delivers. Whereas Richard Heber (1773–1833), an avid British book collector and the dedicatee of multiple early nineteenth-century works about bibliomania, claimed that it was not possible to live comfortably without three copies of each book (one for display, one for use, and one to make available to friends), d’Alembert approves of books used only for reading or sharing with friends. He reserves particular scorn for the collector who declines to use his own books, and so ends up borrowing from friends copies of books that he already owns. D’Alembert’s assessment of such behavior as a “highly sordid avarice” is predicated on the idea that use would diminish the value of books and that, therefore, their value rests primarily in the material form that is subject to wear.

In contrast to such greed, d’Alembert offers the example of “one of the brightest minds of this century,” who managed to acquire a “highly select library” that consisted only of what was worth reading. The discriminating librarian d’Alembert commends would reduce, for example, a twelve-volume work to a mere six pages, throwing the rest to the fire. D’Alembert praises this approach: “This way of forming a library would suit me very well.” That might seem like a bizarre statement for the coeditor of a seventeen-volume encyclopedia to make, but the encyclopedia itself is one such library, a distillation of all of human knowledge into a concise and useful form.

Not long after the publication of the Italian translation of the *Encyclopédie*, Beccaria, best known for his treatise *Of Crimes and Punishments*, wrote a short poem titled “Il bibliomane.” Like
d’Alembert, Beccaria took issue with bibliomania because it entailed making books decorative objects rather than reading and studying them. For the Enlightenment thinker, the thick darkness of so many piled up books seemed an affront to the luminosity contained within: “What value is there, if amidst such bright luminaries / He delights only in thick darkness / If, of the countless volumes / He contents himself with the external cover / Without ever having read or touched them / And sates his eyes with their ornaments and colors alone?”

Like his contemporaries in France, Beccaria scorns the bibliomaniac’s attention to the physical properties of books: covers, ornaments, and colors. But the engagement with books that Beccaria urges is also rooted in an appreciation of the material form—in addition to reading the immaterial text, the true book lover establishes contact between his body and the physical form of the book by penetrating its cover and touching its pages.

The first decade of the nineteenth century in Britain saw the emergence of an elite culture of book collecting. Rather than disdaining bibliomaniacs for failing to make proper use of books by reading them, writers celebrated the zeal and good taste of passionate collectors. In 1809, the Scottish doctor John Ferriar dedicated a mock-heroic poem to Heber, titled The Bibliomania. The poem begins by asking, “What wild desires, what restless torments seize the hapless man, who feels the book-disease?”

Ferriar likens book collecting to erotic conquest, describing the wistful glances and aching eyes of the dedicatee, and the “tempting charms” and sumptuous attire of volumes robed in blue and gold, or red morocco. The private library becomes a stage for romance; ubiquitous comparisons between book acquisition and erotic conquest forge homosocial bonds between male collectors. Although he medicalizes bibliomania, calling it “the book-disease,” Ferriar also
heaps ironic praise on Heber, whom he considers to be blessed “with talents, wealth and taste.” Ferriar playfully names his dedicatee the beneficiary of the labor of scribes and bookbinders: “For you the Monk illum’d his pictur’d page, / For you the press defies the Spoils of age,” as well as the toils of literary heroes and philosophers: “FAUSTUS for you infernal tortures bore, / For you ERASMUS starv’d on Adria’s shore.” At once the hero of romantic and epic feats of collecting and the ultimate object of the toils of Faust, Erasmus, scribe and illuminator, the bibliomaniac occupies an overdetermined morphological position. The fictional world of the poem spills forth from tomes, saturating reality with a material and narrative plenitude. The bibliomaniac is hero and prize, subject and object, lover and beloved; an actor in the worlds of fiction and reality. Bibliomania saturates the mock epic with indecision that anticipates Freudian fetishism, collapsing boundaries between the fictional world and reality.

The same year that Ferriar published his mock-heroic poem, the English bibliographer Thomas Frognall Dibdin responded with an epistle to Heber in the form of a mock treatise *The Bibliomania; or, Book-Madness; Containing Some Account of the History, Symptoms, and Cure of This Fatal Disease*. In the preface, Dibdin praises Ferriar for recognizing an illness that had escaped the sagacity of “ancient and modern Physicians,” and for depicting it with such pleasing rhymes. He finds the poem disappointing, however, because it lacks “rules for the choice of books,” as well as “curious, apposite, and amusing anecdotes.” The work Dibdin pens surpasses Ferriar’s mock-heroic poem both in its pseudo-medical sketch of book collecting and, more important, in its copious detail: example after example of accomplished collectors and fine manuscripts. Dibdin’s style, marked by a stringing together of digression after digression, a piling up of text atop “confused and indigested [foot]
notes”—embodies, in less than one hundred pages, a poetics of accumulation. The text thematizes, performs, and even nurtures bibliomania, offering counsel for novice and expert bibliophiles.

The structural mania of Dibdin’s work is evident, for example, in a sentence acknowledging the charms of poetry that vexed his decision to write in prose. The sentence spreads across five pages, hovering above the ample notes it prompts (referenced here with parenthetical numbers): “Whoever undertakes to write down the follies which grow out of an excessive attachment to any particular pursuit, be that pursuit horses (3), hawks, dogs, guns, snuff boxes (4), old china, coins, or rusty armor, may be thought to have little consulted the best means of ensuring success for his labors, when he adopts the dull vehicle of Prose for the communication of his ideas; not considering that from Poetry ten thousand bright scintillations are struck off, which please and convince while they attract and astonish.” The note on horses, which includes material on hawks, is composed of more than 500 words. The note names the first British book on sports of the field, Hunting and Hawking, and commends the perfect copy owned by Lord Spencer, who would later hire Dibdin to purchase books for the library at Althorp. After praising the collection of Frederick the Great, the note on snuffboxes surveys other prized curiosities: “It may gratify a Bibliographer to find that there are other MANIAS beside that of the book.” All manias seem to lead Dibdin back to that of the book: the collection of curiosities of John White of Newgate Street, addressed in the same note, for example, included “some very uncommon books.” In notes like this one, books intrude, conveying an insistent, obsessive quality of bibliomania.

The tendency toward amplification that distinguishes the style of the 1809 treatise—with all its digressions and notes—is made explicit in the conclusion, a flippant call for collaboration: “Let
it be the task of more experienced bibliographers to correct and amplify the forgoing outline!"  

Two years after the publication of *The Bibliomania*, the call for amplification is realized in a second volume bearing a similar title, *Bibliomania, or, Book Madness: A Bibliographical Romance, in Six Parts*, which counts more than 700 pages, including the reproduction of the first *Bibliomania*, as well as extensive indexes and notes. The longer *Bibliographical Romance* is organized into a series of dialogues set in spaces full of books. In the preliminary chapter, “An Evening Walk,” two gentlemen, Lysander and Philemon, arrive at a country estate and begin discussing books and reading with their host. Their conversation continues in the cabinet, the auction room, library, drawing room, and alcove. The dialogues are overwhelmed by the bibliographic notes, which list both the books found in the spaces and those that arise in conversation. The abundance of books crowding the spaces is mimed by the typography, which deluges the dialogue with references.

Dibdin’s bibliographic writings foster a mode of reading prone to interruptions and calculated to elicit the desires of aspiring bibliophiles. Both works on bibliomania play a critical role in defining and propagating the culture of book collecting and endowing it with the luster of a noble pursuit. Just as Ferriar noted Heber’s wealth (along with his talent and taste), the bibliomania Dibdin diagnoses affects “higher and middling classes of society” and is “almost uniformly confined to the male sex.”  

Not only does bibliomania afflict the aristocracy; but, like other forms of collecting, it is harmonious with the temporal idea of aristocracy: time ennobles people and lends value to things, rather than enfeebling people and degrading things.

The idea of book collecting Dibdin develops rests not only in the wealth and good taste he attributes to those who practice it
but also in the potential for prodigious finds, chance encounters that result in unexpected riches. For d’Alembert, the bibliomaniac resembles the madman who keeps a couple of diamonds mixed up in a pile of stones, whereas for Dibdin, the bibliomaniac is a cunning connoisseur blessed by chance. The tantalizing union, in *Bibliomania*, of the collector’s good taste and the gambler’s good luck helped to create wild anticipation for the 1812 auctions of the library of the Duke of Roxburghe, who had died in 1804. In the 1811 work, Dibdin gives an account of the provenance of the most valuable volume in the Roxburghe collection, a copy of Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, printed by Christophorus Valdarfer in 1471:

In one of the libraries abroad, belonging to the Jesuits, there was a volume entitled, on the back of it, “*Concilium Tridenti*”: The searching eye and active hands of a well-educated Bibliomaniac discovered and opened this volume—when lo! instead of the Council of Trent, appeared the *First*, and almost unknown, edition of the *Decameron* of Boccaccio! This precious volume is now reposing upon the deserted shelves of the late Duke of Roxburghe’s library; and, at the forthcoming sale of the same, it will be most rigorously contended for by all the higher and more knowing powers of the bibliographical world!39

Dibdin’s advertisement seems to have worked: the Marquis of Blandford—winning a bidding war against his cousin, the 2nd Earl Spencer—paid the record-breaking price of £2,260 for the Valdarfer *Decameron*.40 The evening of the sale, several prominent book collectors—including Dibdin, Spencer, and Blandford—founded the Roxburghe Club, an elite association whose membership would also include Heber. Walter Scott, who joined the Club in 1822, recognized Dibdin’s essential role in spreading bibliomania: “I fear you are a bad physician and rather encourage the disease
than cure it.” Dibdin remained a prominent bard of bibliomania, even writing a Bibliographical Decameron in 1817 with anecdotes of rare books and momentous sales, including that of the Valdarfer Decameron. In his 1832 Bibliophobia, written under the pseudonym Mercurius Rusticus, Dibdin happily relates a sequel to the Roxburghe auction: the 2nd Earl Spencer purchased the volume in 1819 for less than half the sum paid by his rival five years earlier.

In addition to helping to make bibliomania fashionable in an elite British milieu in the early 1800s, Dibdin develops a style suited to the subject, in which the reader’s attention to the immaterial text is frequently interrupted by the insistence of the material one. The typographical result of the “confused and indigested notes” advertised in the 1809 treatise is a mésalliance of text and note so that reading requires an unusual frequency of turning back and forth between pages. The work is hoard-like not only in its magnitude and in its disorder—the mismatching of text and note—but also in its “possessive realism”; Dibdin indexes a material world that is available for ownership. Although he reserves scorn for the book vendor who authors grandiloquent catalogs: “a great and bold carpenter of words: overcharging the description of his own volumes with tropes, metaphors, flourishes, and common place authorities,” his bibliographical works are no less full of flourish, nor are they any less calculated to excite the desires of collectors.

Dibdin’s writings are not catalogs, but the synecdochic the mode of reading they elicit is similar to that which art critic and collector Mario Praz conveys with superlative: “I assure you that no reading has ever compelled me to such quick and decisive action as the reading of an interesting catalogue.” Umberto Eco—himself an avid book collector whose passion verged on mania—describes the roguish pleasure he finds in such reading: “To read catalogs means to discover unintended details, and so to switch from a pulp
detective novel in which the killer is the butler to the unpublished crime story in which the writer is the victim and the reader is the gentleman thief.” In the mystery of the catalog, the victim is the naive narrator who has unwittingly exposed a secret treasure, a scenario that recalls the discovery of the Valdarfer Decameron by the “searching eye and active hands of well-educated Bibliomaniac.” Catalogs, like Dibdin’s bibliographical writings, elicit a kind of reading that resembles fetishism insofar as it privileges part over whole and entails zeroing in on a particular detail.

Dibdin and Ferriar treat bibliomania with playful ambivalence, characterizing it as a heroic—or at least worthy—endeavor, more eccentricity than illness. Two decades later, in France, bibliomania—and the literature it inspires—transforms to coincide more closely with the increasingly widespread diagnosis of monomania. While in Ferriar and Dibdin’s Britain, the bibliomaniac is an aesthete whose diagnostic sobriquet conveys friendly jest, Nodier and Flaubert present bibliomaniacs with wonder and pity. In 1836, when he was almost fifteen, Flaubert wrote “Bibliomanie,” a story based on a report published earlier that year in the Gazette des tribunaux about the murder trial of a monk who owned an antiquarian bookshop in Barcelona. During the trial, the defendant was alerted to the existence of a second copy of an incunabulum he owned and thought to be unique; he flew into a rage so terrible as to convince the judge of his guilt. In Flaubert’s telling, the bibliomaniac conforms to the medical profile of monomania: “This passion had entirely absorbed him. He scarcely ate, he no longer slept, but he dreamed whole days and nights of his fixed idea: books.” Bibliomania, for Flaubert, was not the learned passion of a cultural elite whose collections were testament to refinement. Rather, he returns to the enlightenment disdain of book collecting as a passion divorced from the use of
Flaubert’s bibliomaniac is a Faustian figure who abandons God for books, and then hands over even his soul: “He had been a monk, and for books he had abandoned God. Later he sacrificed for them that which men hold dearest after their God: money. Then he gave to books that which people treasure next to money: his soul.” Though convicted of murder, the defendant in Flaubert’s story is guilty only of being so devoted to books that he cannot muster the energy to defend himself. After the verdict is delivered, the bibliomaniac borrows the second copy of the incunabulum from his defense attorney and, weeping, tears it up.

In 1831, Nodier published the short story “Le Bibliomane,” which begins: “You all remember good Théodore, upon whose grave I just placed flowers.” Nodier’s bibliomaniac—like the books he pursues—is a relic of the past, one worthy of commemoration. In life, Théodore was so consumed by his passion for books that all other interests dissolved into the single fixation, and so he becomes a caricature of monomania. If he glanced at a woman, it was only to take note of what she wore on her feet, and then to lament the waste of fine leather that might have been used to bind books. He considers global diplomacy only in relation to the resulting fluctuations in the price of leather and paper.

Nine years later, Nodier published “The Book Lover,” setting out a taxonomy of characters of the “age of paper”: bouquinistes, bibliophiles, bibliophobes, and bibliomaniacs. Through a series of aphorisms, he distinguishes bibliophilia from bibliomania as selection to accumulation, order to disorder, care to neglect, and minutia to mass—binaries that recur in recent attempts to distinguish between collecting and hoarding: “The bibliophile selects books; the bibliomaniac amasses them. The bibliophile examines each book carefully and keeps it in its place on the shelf; the
bibliomaniac piles up book upon book, without even looking at them. . . . The bibliophile works with a magnifying glass, the bibliomaniac with a measuring stick.”

The restraint of bibliophilia can give way to the excesses of mania: “The bibliophile often becomes a bibliomaniac when his mind deteriorates or his fortunes increase—two grave afflictions suffered by the best of men, though the first is much more common than the second.” Making wealth analogous to mental deterioration as a causal factor, Nodier scoffs at the prestige bibliomaniac had achieved among British Romantics. His disdain anticipates the strengthened associations between aristocracy and degeneration that will take shape over the course of the century, as well as their fin-de-siècle literary and aesthetic correlates, decadence and crepuscularismo (the twilight school). For Nodier, the decay of the bibliophile’s mind is mirrored by a civilizational decline: “The bibliophile is no longer found among the elevated classes of our progressing society (and I beg your pardon for using this hideous gerund).”

Nodier draws attention to books as physical objects dangerous in their ensemble. He names one book collector in particular: Antoine-Marie-Henri Boulard, once a “sensitive and scrupulous bibliophile,” who descended into the throes of bibliomania and amassed some 600,000 volumes in his six-story Paris home. In Nodier’s description, the books transform into precarious building materials: “piled like the stones of Cyclopean walls” to form “poorly supported obelisks.” Nodier recalls a frightening visit to the bibliomaniac’s home when, in response to a question about a particular title, “Boulard looked at me fixedly, with that gracious and humorous air of good-fellowship which was characteristic of him, and, rapping with his gold-headed cane on one of the huge stacks (rudis indigestaque moles) [rough and undigested mass],
then on a second and third, said, 'It’s there—or there—or there.’” 55

Quoting Ovid’s description of Chaos, Nodier emphasizes that the tomes have become indistinguishable, but also suggests that they hold potential both as sources of learning and as raw material for metamorphoses.

The gigantic stacks, their uncertain equilibrium shaken by the tapping of M. Boulard’s cane, were swaying threateningly on their bases, the summits vibrating like the pinnacles of a Gothic cathedral at the sound of the bells or the impact of a storm. Dragging M. Boulard with me, I fled before Ossa could collapse upon Pelion. Even today, when I think how near I came to being struck by a whole series of the Bollandist publications on my head from a height of twenty feet, I cannot recall the danger I was in without pious horror. It would be an abuse of the word to apply the name “library” to menacing mountains of books which have to be attacked with a miner’s pick and held in place by stanchions! 56

Bibliomania remakes fine books as raw materials used in unsteady constructions; they are Cyclopean walls, insecure obelisks, Gothic towers, and mines. When bibliophilia deteriorates into bibliomania, it becomes “an acute illness bordering on delirium.” When it reaches that fatal point of paroxysm, all connection to the intellect is severed, and the accumulation of books could be mistaken for any other mania. 57 At this point, what once appeared to be an intellectual exercise of taste becomes a manifestation of anatomical difference. Nodier calls on phrenologists to “discover the collector’s instinct . . . within the encasing of bone that houses our poor brain.” 58

The medical community took note: just two years later, in La Médecine des Passions (Medicine of the Passions), the French physician Jean Baptiste Félix Descuret cites Nodier’s essay and expands on his account of Boulard. 59 Nodier is more interested in the
menacing amassment that results from Boulard’s obsession with books, but Descuret focuses on the praxis of the mania and its etiology. He considers bibliomania to be the slowest to lead to complete ruin and the most seductive among the collecting manias, which include passions for stamps, military pins, porcelain tableware, coins, snuffboxes, and shells. Boulard, in Descuret’s account, was a religious man of good taste and learning, a highly respected notary who left his practice to his son and dedicated himself to books. Collecting became a daily routine: he would wander among stalls and stores and would never return home without a stack of books. Boulard’s sensible wife urged him to read at least some of the books on his shelves before purchasing more, but the bibliomaniac would not listen. He became sullen and crotchety and began buying books on credit and hiding his purchases from his wife. Once, he stayed out all night out of shame at having ordered three carts worth of books. When he finally returned home, his wife made him swear off any further purchases. Boulard agreed, but abstaining from his one passion, he lost his appetite and fell seriously ill. Only his physician suspected that the cause of the mysterious illness was nostalgia for book buying. To cure the ailing bibliomaniac, Boulard’s wife and doctor devised a plan; they invited a vendor to set up a stall and call out his wares just below the patient’s window. The siren’s call gave Boulard the strength needed to rise from bed; he visited the stall and joyfully returned to his old ways.

Descuret emphasizes the economic futility of Boulard’s bibliomania: the 600,000 or so volumes on which the former notary squandered most of his fortune were sold for next to nothing after his death in 1825. The physician also notes, contradictorily, that for years after Boulard’s death, his books flooded the Parisian market, causing a drop in prices. The account concludes with a detail that Descuret
Chapter 1

deems most interesting from a medical perspective: one room in the home had been barricaded shut; when movers broke down the door, they discovered obscene and morally corrupt works. The physician concludes that Boulard, a religious man, had purchased the vile works with the intention of burning them. Because of his passion for books, however, he had put off the unbearable act of penance indefinitely. At the core of the notable case of bibliomania, then, is the tragedy of a hero whose moral rectitude is undone by his fatal flaw of loving too much. In Descuret’s interpretation, the bibliomania is constitutional, Boulard’s failure to burn the obscene books is but a symptom. But one might just as well have reached a conclusion that reverses the causality; the drive to acquire ever-more tomes was the result of a desire to bury ever-deeper the shameful secret at its core. Boulard became a cause célèbre in Paris; the awe-inspiring magnitude of his collection and the obsession from which it resulted still generated interest in literary and medical communities long after his death; Flaubert even gave the name Boulard to the bookseller who sends a parcel to the convalescent Emma Bovary.61

Object-Oriented Manias

The compulsive, all-consuming nature of Boulard’s bibliomania is also evident in forms of kleptomania. In 1816, the Swiss psychiatrist André Matthey first diagnosed the monomania, naming it “klopemania.” Though subsequent writers rename the diagnosis “kleptomania,” “the stealing monomania,” and then “magasinite,” some basic features remain unchanged: the compulsion to steal is divorced from need and generally experienced as ego-dystonic.62 The first case Matthey relates is that of a wealthy young woman endowed with a healthy spirit and a good character, save for her frequent
impulses to take whatever crossed her path: gloves, handkerchiefs, and various other knickknacks. Fearful of discovery and ashamed of her habit, she prayed to God to help her stop, but remained helpless when an opportunity presented itself. Matthey’s other examples include King Victor Amadeus of Sardinia, the wife of a German physician and chemist, and a well-raised Alsatian soldier who was hanged for his petty thieving. Matthey discusses one case marked by pathologized keeping as well as taking. A government employee in Vienna stole so many household utensils that he had to rent two extra rooms for them; he never used the stolen goods, nor did he have any intention of selling them. Though he does not offer much detail about the etiology of klopemania, Matthey emphasizes that it is a form of partial insanity exhibited by people who otherwise appear to be in full possession of their faculties.

The sixth, and last, of Matthey’s examples is drawn from Johann Kaspar Lavater’s *Essays on Physiognomy*, published between 1775 and 1778. Lavater describes the case of a physician who suffered from an inexplicable compulsion to steal from his patients. So unwitting were the doctor’s misdeeds that he would forget about the keys, snuffboxes, scissors, thimbles, spectacles, buckles, spoons, and other trinkets that ended up in his possession. Lavater declares the physician to be unfortunate rather than wicked, assuring his readers that the involuntary, mechanical gestures would be as innocent, in the eyes of God, as any other “indifferent, thoughtless action.” He speculates that the compulsion could be traced to the physician’s mother, who must have been afflicted with a strong urge to steal while she was pregnant. Although Matthey offers four examples of male thieves and only two of women, kleptomania subsequently comes to be associated almost exclusively with young women of means who could afford to buy the things they stole. Physicians and psychiatrists attributed the urge to steal to
the hormonal fluctuations of pregnancy, lactation, menstruation, and menopause.  

Both Lavater and Matthey write before department stores changed the scale and scope of shopping as a leisure activity. Like contemporary forms of hoarding, the compulsive stealing Matthey describes does not have immediate commercial relevance. In 1840, C. C. H. Marc introduced kleptomania as a possible mitigating factor in legal proceedings as kleptomaniacs bear little or no responsibility for their unwitting behavior. This medicalization of stealing contributes to the reproduction of social hierarchies; irrationality is reserved for those of means. As Wilhelm Stekel writes: “Cynics have maintained that theft is kleptomania if the offender is rich or has political influence.”

The French psychiatrist Valentin Magnan coined “oniomania”—from the Greek ónios for sell, and mania—to name an uncontrol- lable, obsessive urge to buy things. Magnan’s buying mania was a hereditary affliction, transmitted with increasing intensity, in his example, from grandmother to father to son. Oniomania is an important precursor to hoarding in part because Nordau writes that the pathology Magnan identified offers a new way of understanding excessive acquisition not as an exercise of taste, but as evidence of degeneration: “The present rage for collecting, the piling up, in dwellings, of aimless bric-a-brac, . . . appear[s] to us in a completely new light.” Nordau contrasts oniomanics to those who “fancy themselves millionaires,” whose spending is a conscious expression of their aspirations and their “delusion as to their own greatness”—in short, those whose shopping is ego-syntonic. The oniomanic, for Nordau, is instead someone who, like the hoarder of “Submission,” is “simply unable to pass by any lumber without feeling an impulse to acquire it.”
In his study of the gathering and keeping practices among patients confined in an asylum, Mingazzini brings the growing scholarship on kleptomania to bear on irrational forms of collecting. He classifies the obsessive behaviors he observes based on whether the objects gathered and kept were of one kind or many—“mono-klepto-collecting,” “poli-klepto-collecting,” and “poli-klepto-mono-collecting.” Unlike the kleptomania that afflicted bourgeois young women in major city centers where shopping had become a popular leisure activity, the klepto-collecting Mingazzini observes directly is limited to the things of little or no value—twigs, strings, leaves—available to his subjects, who were confined in asylums. He emphasizes the prevalence of gathering practices among the institutionalized: “It is well known to all who possess even limited experience with asylums that there are inmates who exhibit a constant tendency to gather the most useless objects that have been abandoned in their dwellings.”\(^{73}\) Mingazzini concurs with the diagnosis of kleptomania in cases where the stolen goods are abandoned or returned to the rightful owner as soon as the patient comes to his senses—that is, in cases in which kleptomania seems to be not only limited in scope (as in partial insanity), but also in time (as in temporary insanity). He also notices that a number of patients at the asylum stash away whatever odds and ends they pick up. The conclusion Mingazzini reaches from the study of eighty-eight patients—that degeneration is in large part to blame for the object practices he observes—is consistent with the theories of his contemporaries. What is remarkable about his study is its ambit: Mingazzini considers practices of getting and keeping various objects, noting the age, gender, and diagnosis of the patients, as well as whether they experience agitation or distress when the objects are taken away.
Sante de Sanctis offers a different interpretation of ego-dystonic forms of collecting in an 1897 paper titled “Collezionismo e impulsi collezionistici” (“Collecting and Compulsive Collecting”), which establishes a link between alcohol consumption and compulsive collecting. The paper centers on the case of a sixty-three-year-old woman who had long suffered from nervous disorders, but who sought treatment for a bizarre habit she had developed. About four months earlier, she had been seized by a compulsion to gather all sorts of detritus—scraps of food, hair, bones, straw, rags—which she stored in a secret area of her home. The collecting was ego-dystonic—she considered it to be madness and dismissed the items she saved as “all that crap.” She also confessed—reluctantly, and with some shame—that she often stashed things away out of a fear that her neighbors might use them against her in some act of witchcraft. Although she knew that this was not possible, she nonetheless could not rid herself of the idea that she had to keep the detritus from ending up in the wrong hands. Such details led de Sanctis to suspect that her “compulsive fixation on gathering” is different from other forms of collecting; it was something “primitive,” a sort of “psychic tic.” De Sanctis’s patient collects useless filthy detritus because she is seized by a mania to do so and cannot help it.

Pressing for more details about the “curious, inexplicable phenomenon,” de Sanctis learns that his patient had found wine to be a useful remedy for ongoing anxiety and that she had been drinking wine every day since roughly the time that the strange collecting behaviors began. Noting that “obsessions and . . . compulsions develop in minds weakened by intoxication,” de Sanctis prescribes complete abstention from alcohol. Within fifteen to twenty days, the collecting stopped, though the patient continued to feel urges to gather things and continued to suspect her neighbors of ill will.
De Sanctis remains troubled by the case. Because the patient’s paranoid thoughts and accompanying compulsion to collect persist even after she stops drinking and collecting, he realizes that alcohol was not the cause of the “collectomania” but only an exacerbating factor. What causes this ego-dystonic form of collecting, then? De Sanctis distinguishes between “instinctive” collecting, found in “animals, idiots, the insane, epileptics, drunks, children, and the senile” and “collecting with obsessive ideas and rationales” like the patient’s paranoid fantasies about her neighbors. In such cases, collecting is a symptom of something opaque; it cannot be attributed to hormones, degeneration, or alcohol nor can it be considered an exercise of taste. De Sanctis offers no definitive explanation, and the case opens onto a disordered psychic expanse governed not by the ego or by physiological factors but, as Freud will aver, by the significance of particular objects and by obsession-generating mésalliances.

Objects and Obsessions

In his writing about possessions, Freud tends to be more interested in the significance of single objects than in collections or accumulations. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), collecting seems so unremarkable a diversion of libidinal energy that it serves as a paradigm of obviousness. “When a lonely maid transfers her affection to animals; or a bachelor becomes an enthusiastic collector,” Freud explains, “these are instances of psychical displacements to which we raise no objection.” Though these ego-syntonic attachments may represent diversions of libidinal energy from the narrow road to genital sexuality, they move along well-cleared pathways. Perhaps these substitutes—animals instead of a husband, objects instead of a wife—also seemed
unremarkable to Freud since he was a passionate collector of more than 3,000 Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and Chinese figurines and other objects. The clutter of antiquities in his office was sufficient to make some visitors nervous. In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), he writes: “Shortage of space in my study has often forced me to handle a number of pottery and stone antiquities (of which I have a small collection) in the most uncomfortable positions, so that onlookers have expressed anxiety that I should knock something down and break it.” As a rule, Freud dismisses their concerns—“That however has never happened”—though he provides examples of exceptional occasions when he did break objects in symptomatic “accidents,” as when he knocked the marble cover off his inkpot. Just a few hours earlier, his sister had visited and remarked: “Your writing table looks really attractive now; only the inkstand doesn’t match. You must get a nicer one.”80 Freud interpreted her words to signal an intention to give him a new inkstand, and so he performed the seemingly clumsy but actually “exceedingly adroit and well-directed” movement that shattered the marble cover. He offers other examples of targets for such “accidental” acts of destruction; in each case, they are motivated by the significance of the object rather than the cumbersome abundance.

Although these examples deal explicitly with collecting, Freud’s discussions of obsessional-neuroses and obsessional symptoms (including fetishism) are more pertinent to the object-oriented manias charted above and to the recent emergence of hoarding as a disorder and a symptom. In 1895, Freud began to challenge the hegemony of degeneration as a causal explanation for various mental processes, noting that relevant symptoms could be more productively understood through the detective work of tracing affects back to the thoughts and memories from which
they originated. He proposed that persistent, unwanted ideas—obsessions and phobias—result not from degeneration but from a mésalliance. To ward off a distressing idea, the neurotic separates it from the associated emotions. The idea is repressed and the free-floating affect is left to attach itself to another idea which, charged with this “false connection,” becomes obsessional. The mismatching of thoughts and feelings—the disorder itself—is generative; it rouses the intrusive, unwanted force of obsession.

Neurotics, for Freud, are not susceptible to “possession” because of degeneration, intoxication, or just having a uterus and all that goes with it, but because of the disorder of thoughts, feelings, and actions, mismatched, and in cluttered disarray. When, for example, a medical student reproaches himself for all sorts of immoral acts—murder, incest, arson—Freud surmises that feelings of guilt were prompted by his having read in a medical textbook that masturbation causes moral degradation. The student blamed himself for the depraved acts in place of the one of which he was actually guilty. In 1905, Freud announced a definitive rejection of the utility of the concept of degeneration: “It has become the fashion to regard any symptom which is not obviously due to trauma or infection as a sign of degeneracy. . . . It may well be asked whether an attribution of degeneracy is of any value or adds anything to our knowledge.”

Freud returns to obsessions in his 1909 *Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis* to develop a theory of intrusive thoughts and compulsive behaviors as representations of opposing ideas in a plastic form. *Notes* details the treatment of “Rat Man,” a “clear-headed and shrewd” young university-educated army officer afflicted with compulsions and obsessions, including intrusive thoughts about a torture involving rats. The case pivots on the affective orientations of control and submission registered in the
first two segments of Hampton’s film, as the patient is “possessed” by fears that something awful might happen to his father or to the woman he loves. Cast in a paternal role through transference, and performing it with the gusto of strong countertransference, Freud explains the mésalliance that powers obsessive thoughts and compulsive actions with an analogy suited to the themes developing in the analysis: “We are not used to feeling strong affects without their having any ideational content, and therefore, if the content is missing, we seize as a substitute upon another content which is in some way suitable, much as our police, when they cannot catch the right murderer, arrest a wrong one instead.”

The violence of a police state resonates with the Rat Man’s obsessional idiom and professional life, and of course, with the experiences of analyst and patient—both Jewish—in Karl Lueger’s Vienna. The example also speaks more broadly to the experience of the modern subject, rendered helpless—according nineteenth-century psychiatry—by hormones, degeneration, intoxication, the phantasmagoria of the arcades; or even, as in Freud’s model of the unconscious, by the disordered mismatched mess of the mind.

In the analytic treatment, the Rat Man’s memories and symptoms begin to constellate around an elusive childhood episode, one that “evades any final elucidation,” in part because it exists in several variations in unconscious fantasies, and has been subject to a complicated, ongoing process of remodeling. Sometime between his third and fourth year—during the fatal illness of an older sister—the patient committed a misdeed. Freud suspects that the transgression was masturbation; the patient’s mother recalled a biting incident. Punished with a beating, the boy flew into a terrible rage and “hurled abuse at his father even while he was under his blows.” This abuse, however, took a peculiar form; as he knew no insults, he called his father by the names of common objects,
shouting: “You lamp! You towel! You plate.” The episode made a “permanent impression” on both father and son: the former never beat the boy again; and the latter became a coward, “out of fear of the violence of his own rage.”

Fixing suddenly on the objects close at hand, the young Rat Man divided his father, preserving the one he loved and turning the one he loathed into an inanimate object. The father he loved would always be with him; the one he hated was buried in the deepest depths of the mind, taking on the role of a violent super-ego punishing him with enigmatic obsessions. The masturbation and castigation of the remote episode were substituted with rage (a second crime: that of wishing the father were dead) and fear (a second punishment, inflicted on himself).

The young Rat Man’s sudden fixation on objects close at hand resembles the scene in which the Freudian fetish originates, that of a traumatic encounter with sexual difference, perceived as lack. The origin of the Freudian fetish in a sudden fixation evokes the synecdochic mode of reading elicited by texts like Dibdin’s Bibliomania and the catalogs that drive Praz to the auction house.

The Rat Man case history anticipates Freud’s elaboration of the specific form of negation associated with fetishism: Verleugnung, or disavowal. Although “Fetishism” was not published until 1927, Freud presented a paper, titled “On the Genesis of Fetishism,” at a meeting of the Vienna Psycho-Analytical Society in 1909, while he was writing Notes. In “Fetishism,” Freud describes a patient very much like the Rat Man who disavows—that is, at once denies and affirms—his father’s death, and develops a moderately severe obsessional neurosis. According to Freud: “The patient oscillated in every situation in life between two assumptions: the one, that his father was still alive and was hindering his activities; the other, opposite one, that he was entitled to regard himself as his father’s
successor.” The traumatic information consistent with the reality that the father is dead contrasts with the current of mental processes that accords with a wish: that the father is still alive. Freud describes the father in prohibitive terms; the assumption that corresponds with the wish that the father is still alive does not fill the young man with the joy but rather hinders him from action. Analogously, the traumatic reality disavowed through oscillation—that the father is dead—does not grieve him, but instead represents the happy fact of succession.94

The example of disavowal is doubly ambivalent: the disavowed traumatic reality coincides with a wish; the wish fulfilled is instead figured as a trauma. Freud does not specify any fetish object in this account of the young man who disavows his father’s death—a notable omission, given that the subject of the essay is fetishism. What the Rat Man case history makes clear is that obsessions are like fetishes—fixations that represent, in a plastic form, opposing ideas. The indecision that defines the Rat Man’s obsessive symptoms is articulated in Notes as resistance to narrative causality. The Rat Man cannot tell a story. Propelled by the obsessive idea that he owes money to Lieutenant A, the patient describes a series of exchanges, itineraries, and attachments that Freud cannot quite make sense of and certainly does not expect his reader to, even with the help of a map included in the text. When the Rat Man attempts to explain the terrible punishment, his speech devolves into a series of ellipses. Freud reads on the patient’s face a “very strange, composite expression,” which he interprets as “one of horror at pleasure of his own of which he himself was unaware.”95 Unpacking the overdetermined expression as a causal sequence, Freud matches the conscious horror with the repressed pleasure that is its cause.

The British psychotherapist Adam Phillips discusses the way in which clutter itself achieves plasticity like that Freud sees in the
composite expression in a 2001 essay about his treatment of a “mildly agoraphobic” painter in his mid-thirties. The patient was raised in a “ramshackle but comfortable” bohemian household that contrasted with “more normal” orderly homes of childhood friends. As a teenager, he decided what to wear by using what he called the “mess-dress” method. He would empty the contents of his dresser and wardrobe onto the floor and wear whatever he happened to reach for. When the patient’s mother objected to her son’s messy room: “You can’t find anything in this room!” he explained that that was indeed the point: “Our clothes should come find us.” Similarly, when he began painting, the artist would fill up the canvas too quickly: “It was as though painting was too exciting, or too illicit, or too something, and he needed the clutter to stop what he thought of as the real painting happening”—a feeling he relates to an early fear of premature ejaculation. Though his own canvases were chaotic, the patient was influenced by the work of Francis Bacon, whose paintings he judged to be uncluttered and barren, but still “rather claustrophobic.” When he read of Bacon’s technique of beginning new paintings by throwing paint at a blank canvas, “Everything fell into place.” Mess allowed the painter to rehearse a disavowed desire, providing a setting in which chance and intentionality coexist in undecidable suspense.

The cradle of psychoanalysis, Freud’s office, was a shrine to such disorder. Implicit in the discussion of accidents in The Psychopathology of Everyday Life is the idea that clutter can act, in toto, in ways different from the sum of its parts, creating an inviting setting for deliberate accidents—a setting in which the workings of chance and desire are indistinguishable. The unconscious itself is a chaos that fosters the mismatched elements that motor obsessions and phobias in Freud’s early writings. Without the intervention of an analytic interpretation, these forms of chaos resist narrative
causality; they are like Elena Ferrante’s *frantumaglia*, a “storehouse of time without the orderliness of history, a story.”\(^9\) The science of interpretation is rather the art of making order, of clearing out, or at least organizing such storehouses. Phillips writes: “Psychoanalytic theory—and indeed, its highly ritualized practice—has an aversion to clutter.”\(^10\) To make order—to match up ideas, feelings, actions, and objects to others with which they belong—is to elaborate a necessary sequence, or to tell a story.

The failure to elaborate a necessary sequence has become a defining feature of hoarding in recent psychological research. In their chapter on hoarding in a clinical handbook on obsessive-compulsive disorders, Frost and Steketee describe an “information-processing deficit” wherein obsessives “define category boundaries too narrowly,” a feature they call “underinclusion.”\(^11\) Because every possession seems unique and irreplaceable to the hoarder, he is unable to settle upon a classificatory system adequate to encompass the glorious multitude of things. Underinclusion gives rise to a praxis of keeping characterized by distraction, indecision, anxiety, and avoidance:

The hoarder begins to read a book but must stop to do something else. The book cannot be returned to the shelf because it is now in a different category—books being actively read. It is placed on the coffee table. Next, a cookbook is consulted for dinner and it too cannot be returned to the shelf because it is being used. It is deposited on the back of the couch. The dictionary used next cannot be re-shelved, lest the person forget the word he looked up. This process is repeated until there are books everywhere, none of which can be returned to its shelf because they are all different in their own category. Their new position in the room has meaning because each position represents a different category, and an idiosyncratic sort of organization exists, but the ultimate result is clutter and chaos.\(^12\)
Frost and Steketee name the repetition of this process “churning” because the objects are constantly turned over within the same space: “This is repeated until the piles are so large and numerous that they begin merging (or collapsing) into one large pile. With each new attempt to organize and discard, everything in the pile is examined and moved to the new pile or repositioned in the old pile.” Churning replaces the thematic organization conventional in domestic interior spaces with a temporal one, that of objects organized by their being currently or recently in use, creating incongruous juxtapositions along the way: important documents piled with old newspapers, tchotchkes with treasures. The temporal organization is both subjective and unstable; things are arranged not according to the date of acquisition or manufacture but according to the most recent contact with the hoarder.

The reorganization (or disorganization) of objects according to temporal rather than thematic criteria can be restated as a privileging of displacement over condensation and of the linguistic axis of metonymy over metaphor. The linguistic analogy conjures a corpus of structuralist thought that, with Roman Jakobson’s 1956 essay on the linguistic basis of two types of aphasic disturbances, came to be associated with neurological differences. Indeed, Michel Foucault’s discussion of aphasia patients in The Order of Things is a picture of the same churning practices Frost and Steketee describe: “The aphasic will create a multiplicity of tiny, fragmented regions in which nameless resemblances agglutinate things into unconnected islets.” These unconnected islets soon bear a closer resemblance to boats in a harbor, with rafts and passengers moving between them: “In one corner, they will place the lightest-coloured skeins, in another the red ones, somewhere else those that are softest in texture, in yet another place the longest, or those that have a tinge of purple . . . or those that have been wound
up into a ball. But no sooner have they been adumbrated than all these groupings dissolve again.”

The possibility of a neurological basis of hoarding has conjured a curious case in the annals of medicine: that of Phineas Gage, a Vermont railway worker who survived an 1848 blast that drove a tamping rod through his skull and brain. Twenty years after the accident, the physician who treated had treated Gage, John Harlow, published an account of his patient’s incredible recovery, as well as the personality changes that followed. A single sentence in the report has garnered the attention of neuropsychiatrists researching hoarding because it seems to suggest a link between hoarding behaviors and disturbances in the frontotemporal lobes: “He conceived a great fondness for pets and souvenirs, only exceeded by his attachment to his tamping iron, which was his constant companion during the remainder of his life.” Gage’s new fondness for souvenirs, including the tamping iron, evokes hoarding practices. The case follows the semiotic pattern of underinclusion: a privileging of metonymy, continuity, displacement, and souvenir, over metaphor, similarity, condensation, collection. With the examples of aphasia patients and the case of Gage, studies of hoarding return to the old idea of a material cause like degeneration or physiology, as in Nodier’s call to phrenologists to “discover the collector’s instinct . . . within the encasing of bone that houses our poor brain.”

Too stubborn an allegiance to binary structures of signifying systems distorts the meaning of underinclusion, which may look more simply like attention to what is at hand—myopia, yes, but also magnification, that is the proverbial failure to see the forest through the trees. A 2001 New Yorker profile of the “polymath book and ephemera collector” Michael Zinman shows how underinclusion is often just indecision or even the resolution not to look
for a forest until there are enough trees. In “The Book Eater,” Mark Singer describes the “critical-mess theory” developed by Zinman and his friend William Reese:

“It’s the most intriguing thing is how a collection like Michael’s gets built,” Reese said, by way of explaining the practical ramifications of the critical-mess theory. “When you start on something like this, you say, O.K., here is a genre, here is a field. And I’m just going to buy it, whatever it is that I’m collecting—signs from homeless people, imprints from before 1801. You don’t start off with a big theory about what you’re trying to do. You don’t begin by saying, ‘I’m trying to prove x.’ You build a big pile. Once you get a big enough pile together—the critical mess—you’re able to draw conclusions about it. You see patterns.”

Whereas Phillips’s patient’s mess-dress method entails delegating decision making to chance, Zinman’s critical-mess theory is rooted in a positivist epistemology. Patterns emerge when a critical-mess has been reached: to be a collector, you must first be a hoarder. Yet some abstraction, some structural principle must intervene; no matter how much you churn cream, you will not get butter florets without a mold.

I churn, I stammer, I resort to cliché. The readymade linguistic units of cliché may help to tame a mess, to make it critical. More helpful, however, are the handy tools of Brown’s thing theory, which distinguishes between objects, which unobtrusively lend themselves to use, and things, which confront us with their materiality. For Brown, modernism is the literary and artistic project of provoking encounters with matter that bring out the thingness latent in every object. The path for such a conception of modernism was cleared in part by the history charted in this chapter, which begins with d’Alembert’s repudiation of bibliomania, because it entails relishing in the material form of a book rather
than putting it to proper use by reading. Bibliomania was then reappropriated and celebrated by a rarified circle of book collectors in early nineteenth-century Britain. The most prolific bibliographer among these Romantic book collectors was Dibdin, whose *Bibliomania* and related works develop a literary style to match the subject matter. Dibdin’s bibliographic writings prompt a mode of distracted reading that anticipates Freudian fetishism because it entails fixing upon some detail in place of the whole. Following Esquirol’s introduction of monomania into the psychiatric lexicon, literary and medical treatments of bibliomania began borrowing from each other, and the mania for book collecting came to resemble other object-oriented manias. What these manias share with each other and with contemporary elaborations of hoarding is that they render the willful subject helpless before irrational attachments to things. Departing from the medical consensus that understood these attachments to result from degeneration or hormonal fluctuations, Freud proposed a psychodynamic model of obsessions, attributing them to a mismatching of elements in the mind. This disorder, Phillips shows in his case history, “Clutter,” can be organized through the psychoanalytic reconstruction of a story that weaves cause and effect across expressive elements. The primary processes of condensation, displacement, and questions of representability, which translate unconscious material into symptoms and other expressive forms, cannot distinguish between wishes, memories, feelings, and thoughts and things.\textsuperscript{112}

The Possessions of Others

Martin Hampton’s *Possessed* ends with segments titled “Stasis” and “Abandon.” Each features a support group member whose mother has recently died. Both homes are first
introduced in a sequence of three shots in the film’s opening credits. The first is of gloved hands scrubbing a plastic container in a sink surrounded by clean dishes and empty plastic bottles. The sounds of running water and aggressive scrubbing contrast with the silence of the next shot, which is of used cotton rounds piled in and over a cardboard box. The camera pans down slowly from the peak of the cotton mountain to the base, which fills the screen. The shot lasts more than twenty seconds—almost one-sixtieth of the length of the entire film. Used at a rate of one or two a day, the makeup-stained cotton rounds are an image of duration; the time of accumulation—a year, perhaps—is like passing days scratched on the wall of a prison cell. The movement of the camera emphasizes the magnitude of the heap but also suggests a futility that extends to the medium itself; capable of reproducing motion, the moving camera serves only to dramatize the stillness and stasis of the cotton rounds. As the woman leads a tour of her home, the camera focuses on “bizarre objects”: traces of her body, like the stained cotton rounds and a box of matted hair, as well as empty containers of household products, clothes, papers, and plastic bags with unknown contents. Like the hoarder in “Submission,” the one in “Stasis” narrates ego-dystonic acts of acquisition, or in this case, reacquisition; she describes waking up in the middle of the night to find herself outside riffling through trash bins to rescue objects she discarded during the day. Throwing things out only to retrieve them from the trash, documenting stillness with a moving camera, the segment captures the static indecision that defines fetishistic disavowal.

The third of the three shots in the opening sequence is of the hoarder of the “Abandon” segment performing a series of futile gestures. He bends down, sifting through a heap of clothing, papers, and stuffed polypropylene bags, then shifts some papers
to the top of the heap. He stands, the papers tumble back down. He starts to mumble something unintelligible. He takes the magazine he holds folded under his arm, refolds it, and puts it back under his arm. Motion in this shot and in the segment, “Abandon,” is confined to such vain gestures, and to images of nullity—dust churned up as he riffles through piles of papers and clothes, his face twitching furiously. His rummaging also churns up a pornographic image: a photograph of a woman’s body, from shoulders to knees, with her legs spread. The hoarder does not seem to notice the girlie magazine, though it occupies the center of the screen for almost six seconds.

Why does the film, otherwise so respectful of the struggles of the support group members, include such an egregious violation of the hoarder’s privacy? True, the film is dedicated to its subjects’ unusual, often obsessive patterns of acquiring and keeping, and of course, to the squalid chaos of their living spaces. In “Abandoned,”
stills of filth include the inside of a refrigerator, encrusted with ice and mold; decorative objects, cobwebs, and a bare lightbulb, all caked thickly in dust. But these images seem less prying—though in “Abandon” and the other segments, they serve to ironize the hoarder’s monologue—because they are clearly relevant to the documentary’s theme and to each individual’s struggle. The shot of the girlie magazine seems an intrusion of a different order because the hoarder does not appear to consent to or even recognize the presence of the image in the film. But Hampton’s inclusion of the image also, and more critically, thematizes the ethics of the documentary by evoking the primal scene of fetishism: that of the little boy’s perception of sexual difference.

The difference that Possessed invites the viewer to confront is not sexual difference but mental illness. In Freud’s account of fetishism, the perception of difference is terrifying because it arouses the threat of nondifference; if the woman has no penis, the little boy realizes, his own must be in danger. With this violation of the hoarder’s privacy, Hampton invites the viewer to ask whether the terrifying picture of hoarding is actually an image of the viewer’s own proximity to the object praxes the film documents. The sense, captured with the image of being precariously close to being possessed by objects, is what drives the history of the pathologization of acquiring and keeping charted in these pages. The image seems to dare viewers to look at the hoarder’s suffering and turn away, disavowing their perilous vulnerability to possession.