

PERVERSION, FETISH, AND CREATIVITY:  
The Fate of Desire in “Utz”

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Honoré de Balzac was a passionate collector who grew up in painful circumstances with a cold and rejecting mother. “Cut off already from all affection,” he wrote, “I could love nothing, and Nature had made me loving! Is there an angel who collects the sighs of such ever-present feelings?” (Balzac, 1900).

George Sluizer’s film *Utz*, based on the novella by Bruce Chatwin (1998), is a complex and poignant portrayal of another collector, another man whose lot it was to have had his loving nature thwarted by circumstance. *Utz* is a many-layered film, weaving psychological, political, and cultural issues into an intricate tapestry, but it is also the love story of two unusual people. Sluizer tells us very little about the histories of Baron Kaspar Joachim von Utz and the woman we know only as Marta. His revelations are sparing and carefully timed. Nor does he give *Utz* much of a plot in the conventional sense. Yet he strikes chords that move the viewer deeply, perhaps more deeply than an ordinary narrative would have done. I focus in this study on how desire and longing—the “ever-present feelings” of Balzac’s dilemma—live and move in the lives of Sluizer’s subjects, and their fate in their world.

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## THE FILM

A fabulous collection of antique Meissen porcelain figurines is the central image of this film, and it is a very rich image indeed. Utz's collection attracts to itself the projections of all who see it. To Marius Fisher, an American antiques dealer (played by Peter Riegert), it means money. To the state museum in Prague it means the triumph of Communism over private ownership. To Utz's cynical old scientist friend Dr. Orlik (played by Paul Scofield) it means socks, and the countless other small conveniences he extorts from Fisher in exchange for hints on when the failing Utz might be willing to sell. But what do the figurines mean to Utz himself?

The engine of *Utz* is a mystery: Where is the priceless collection that Utz accumulated over the course of his life, protecting it successfully and at unknown cost first from the Nazis and then from the Communists? The answer to that second question is also the answer to the first: What did Utz's collection mean to him?

The film develops through a series of flashbacks and flash-forwards.<sup>1</sup> Utz (played by Armin Mueller-Stahl) is an elegant, driven, shy man. He is half-Jewish, born to wealth and privilege on a grand estate near the Meissen porcelain works. We learn that his father died when he was young; his mother is never mentioned. Somehow—we are not privy to the details—he has managed to preserve his life and his wealth through the political storms that ravaged mid-century Europe. When the film begins, however, he is an elderly man living with his collection in a run-down apartment house in Prague.

We first see Utz at a porcelain auction. His aggressive bidding defeats the dealer Fisher, who marvels at the exorbitant price he is willing to pay for a figurine. Utz explains that he must have this piece, since it will complete his set of all twenty-one Meissen monkey musicians; "I'm sure you understand," he tells Fisher. Fisher does not, and neither do we, at least not yet. This movie is a carefully constructed mosaic. Each piece adds to a cumulative portrait of Utz, his inner life, and the place of his collection within it, and each indirectly addresses the puzzle of the vanished collection.

After the auction, Utz returns to his hotel room. He unwraps his new acquisition, and takes it to the window to study it. A musical leitmotif in a minor key is heard for the first time. The music, and the sound of a woman's voice calling, joins this scene with the next, in which we see Utz as a child, entranced by a bowl of vigorous tadpoles that he is holding up close to his face. When he hears his name being called, he tears himself away, awkwardly crossing the empty expanses of garden and the deserted entry halls of the house on his scooter. Ignoring his grandmother's worried admonitions, he zooms past her toward another "fishbowl"—a vitrine full of Meissen figurines. There he stops, points to the porcelain figure of a harlequin within, and declares passionately, "I want that." "No," says his grandmother firmly. "Perhaps one day. It belongs to your father." The haunting music returns.

Back in the present, we see Utz as an older man struggling along a shabby street and up the three flights of stairs to his apartment. When he opens the door from the dim hallway an astonishing vision greets our eyes: hundreds of figurines illuminated in mirrored *étagères*. For a few moments he gazes at them, and we see his own face reflected behind them, as though he were one of them. Then he collapses.

The next scene is the funeral of Utz's father, when the boy is around ten. The musical leitmotif is heard again, and it returns immediately afterward, when Kaspar's grandmother gives him the coveted harlequin. Both the theme and the statue seem to denote longing and desire.<sup>2</sup> Utz is a very young man when his grandmother dies, leaving him her fortune. His passion for Meissen blooms, and he begins to study it devotedly. The musical theme returns as we see him alone on his vast and magnificent, but empty, estate.

Next, in disconcerting contrast, the middle-aged Utz is at dinner in a Prague restaurant with Orlik, his best friend, and the dealer Fisher. They order trout and are told that there is none, even though they can plainly see several trout swimming in a tank just behind them. Now, however, Utz is no longer lord of the manor. *Those* trout, the waiter nervously whispers, are being saved for the Party members at the next table; for Utz and his friends, they do not exist. They will have to content themselves

with carp, spelled on the menu “crap.” Fisher and Orlik can laugh at this error, but Utz cannot; he is going to have to eat shit, and he is powerless to change his fate. The camera cuts from a close-up of the men sitting at the table to a long shot of the dining room, shrinking them until they are small figures in their sparkling surround. No longer the owner of grandeur, the director seems to be telling us, Utz is now owned himself, a prisoner in a showcase that belongs to others.

Utz’s apartment is invaded by officials of the state museum. They have come to catalog his collection, which must go to the museum when he dies. They are unappreciative and careless, and they break one of the pieces. Their heedlessness drives Utz to an agonized shriek: “*Be careful!*” Enraged by accumulated indignities and thinking of leaving Prague for good, he arranges a trip to a luxurious spa in Switzerland. Before he goes, he tells his servant to set the table for two; it is she who will be his guest that evening. In a close-up, her middle-aged face is wistful and serene.

Now attention turns to the servant, Marta (played by Brenda Fricker). We see her as a beautiful young woman living on the farm where she raises geese. She lies on the grass sighing in delight as one bird, with whom she has a very loving relationship, nuzzles her face and ruffles her hair with its bill. In another idyllic and sensual scene, she swims naked in the river, her goose swimming along beside her. But a horde of village men have been spying on her, and as she sets out for home, they chase her, armed with pitchforks and sticks. A passing car (Utz’s) spontaneously stops and lets her in.

Flashing forward again, we see Utz at the spa. Here, too, he is frustrated. Here is yet another restaurant where he sees what he wants, but cannot get it; the waiter pays no attention to him. The elegant women he awkwardly approaches look right through him, ignoring or disdaining his timid smiles. We hear the music of longing again as the aristocratic objects of his desire turn their attentions elsewhere. He sees other guests being waited on, other men kissing their sweethearts. He can observe and he can want, but he cannot participate. He decides not to join the bathers in the public pools, and retreats to his room. In his lonely bath, he recalls a day in the country hunting mush-

rooms with Marta. He finds a wonderful one. He triumphantly holds it up, and she responds with pleasure and excitement. He decides to go home.

Back in Prague, the antique dealer Fisher visits Utz. Rats are foraging in the vestibule of his building when they enter, but Utz doesn't notice them. His attention is focused on the magical world upstairs. Fisher is stunned by the contrast between the splendor of the illuminated and mirrored display inside the apartment and the squalor below. How did this magic come to be? "History was on my side," says Utz. "In the thirties it was Jews escaping from the Nazis, and later the aristocrats escaping the communist regime. They had excellent pieces of porcelain and needed money." The musical leitmotif returns. As Fisher watches, Marta lights a candelabrum and places it on the dining table. Utz puts an opera recording on the phonograph, and then takes out several small figures of aristocratic men and women, tentatively moving them together and apart to the glorious music of a soprano voice. Marta sits behind him smiling as Utz's expression becomes increasingly rapt. Finally, at the ecstatic peak of the aria, he selects two figures, a man and a woman carrying a child, and joins them in a harmonious dance. This is a climactic scene of shimmering sensuality and passionate sexual intensity.

In the following scene, Utz and Fisher are in Prague's ancient Jewish cemetery, where Rabbi Loew, creator of the notorious *golem* of Jewish folklore, is buried. Utz tells the story: The rabbi wanted a servant to whom he would not have to pay wages, and in a hubristic imitation of God, he fashioned a mess of clay into the likeness of a human and gave it life and power. One day the *golem*—a Hebrew word meaning unformed clay—went berserk, tearing up trees and houses until its creator had to destroy it. Is Utz saying that the porcelain figures are alive? Fisher asks, and Utz answers, "I am, and I'm not. . . . They die in fire and they come to life again." He offers a personal manifesto: "A man-made figure is a blasphemy, and collecting is a form of idolatry. We Jews, and I call myself a Jew, make the best collectors because it's sinful—'because it's dangerous!'"

In another flashback, the Communist state decrees that single men must move into dormitories. Utz marries Marta, and so

is permitted to remain in the three-room apartment that houses his collection. After the formal ceremony, Marta, in a white dress and veil, kisses Utz on the forehead.

The music that accompanies Utz's play with the figurines, the "Song to the Moon" from Dvorak's opera *Rusalka*, takes on a deeper meaning when we learn in the next scene that Utz has a second obsession: opera singers. At first, Fisher is startled to discover pictures of famous sopranos festooning Utz's bathroom, their extravagant costumes hanging on the wall. Then, the camera shows us Utz at the opera, listening to their voices and focusing his gaze on their singing mouths, which are at the same time both fascinating and menacing. One singer tells Fisher, "He fell in love with my voice." He courts divas, inviting them for a stylized and romantic evening of dinner, dancing, and bed. But he rejects them soon after, becoming dismissive and contemptuous. Marta is jealous of these women. Cleaning up in the kitchen while Utz is dancing with one (in a style reminiscent of the dance he executes with the figurines), she deliberately smashes a dish; this is the first evidence of her rage, and a foreshadowing of what is to come. When we next see her, she is alone with Orlik at Utz's funeral, where she announces with satisfaction that no one else is there because she sent all the discarded lovers to the wrong church.

Flashing backward once more, we see Utz on his deathbed, paralyzed. He signals with eye movements to Marta that he wants his collection destroyed. Aware that he is watching, she breaks the pieces one by one on a glass table, starting with the harlequin that had belonged to his father, and she helps him to drop one of the figurines himself. In this second climactic scene, Utz is once again ecstatic and powerful. And this time Marta too is ecstatic and powerful, laughing with pleasure as she shatters the fragile figurines one after another. The recurrent "porcelain" leitmotif is heard for the last time.

After Utz's death, Fisher and the museum officials seek the collection. Fisher goes back to the village of Marta's youth, to which she has retreated, but she eludes him. She keeps faith with Utz and with their secret.

## DISCUSSION

But what *is* their secret? What are we to “understand,” as Utz put it to Fisher, from this story? As I have said, we know little about Utz. He has suffered great reverses in his life, and great danger and fear. He has the means to live anywhere, but he remains in depressed and despised Prague. He is obsessed with women, but has no enduring sexual relationships. Only his passion for the figurines never flags. It is renewed over and over again as he acquires them, protects them, manipulates them, and eventually destroys them.

Two intertwining musical images weave through the film. The first is the delicate and wistful “porcelain” leitmotif that is Sluizer’s commentary on Utz’s moments of desire and longing; the second is the ecstatic love song from a Czech opera that Utz himself chooses to accompany his dramatic ritual of consummation with the Meissen figures. This musical link between the two collections (of porcelain and of women) makes clear that the first is not exempt from the passion more concretely realized in the second, and that collecting is for Utz an activity that both expresses and contains intense feeling.

With these little statues Utz creates, over and over, dramas that excite, enliven, and delight him. One after another he stages stately masques in a world over which he exercises absolute control. The same quality of repetitive enactment of a compelling fantasy, and the need for total control over it, appears in his ritualized courtship and abandonment of singers. Utz’s collections are his avenue to the world of desire and passion, a world that he keeps starkly, although at times unhappily, at arm’s length in his “everyday” interpersonal life.

The ritualized repetition that Utz displays in his drama with the figurines and his stylized seductions of singers is characteristic of the particular adjustment to a dangerous inner (and outer) world that is usually called *perversion*. His use for erotic ends of inanimate objects (porcelain figurines, opera costumes) or parts of animate objects (the singing voice, the open mouth) is characteristic of the particular erotic behavior usually called *fetish*.

*Perversion* and *fetish* are words that evoke intense feelings in

the world at large equal measures of fascination and disgust.<sup>3</sup> Psychoanalysts have theorized about these concepts in ways both overlapping and widely divergent. While most writers agree that perversion and fetish depend on substitution—of part for whole, of nonhuman for human, of inanimate for animate, as Stoller (1985) puts it, observational studies of the way such substitutions are integrated into ordinary lives are rare. Stoller has done some important work in this field, but his work on this aspect of perversion has so far attracted little attention. He recognized erotic fetishism as “containing in its structure mechanisms of defense that are central for understanding all human relationships” (p. 121), and went on to make a telling and characteristic point: “The capacity to substitute . . . helps make life bearable—even enjoyable—when intimacy, insight, and lovingness would be too intense” (p. 121). Stoller’s resistance to reductionism, his attention to detail, and his capacity to remain emotionally close even to sometimes very distancing behavior, gave him a uniquely humane view of what he called “the erotic imagination.” Sluizer shares Stoller’s gift for “naturalistic observation” (Stoller, 1985, pp. 1–9), and in his film he gives perversion a human face. In this tradition, my goal here is not to engage in the controversies over the etiology of perversion and fetishism, but to delineate, in an exploration of Utz’s life and passions, *how* perversion may “make life bearable”—and how Utz’s collection served for him as the “angel” of which Balzac spoke with such longing.

It goes without saying, I hope, that this discussion is a commentary on only one facet of the immensely complex and multifaceted organization that is a human being. In fact, my point is precisely that Baron Kaspar Joachim von Utz is *not* a one-dimensional caricature of a man who can be defined by any given aspect of his emotional repertoire. He participates in all the intrapsychic, interpersonal, and existential (political, cultural, social, etc.) dimensions of the human sphere. As I understand it, and as I will try to explicate, a neurotic condition of perversion can and does exist simultaneously with other dynamics. Utz’s perverse characteristics are one aspect of his personality, but not the only one.

## PERVERSION

There are many views of perversion, reflecting, as I see it, the likelihood that perversion is not one discrete psychological organization. In this study I take the view that perversion is a compromise between defense and enactment, one way of externalizing the strain of simultaneous love and rage when such contradictory feelings cannot be altogether accepted and contained intrapsychically. Many such balances between defense and enactment may be enshrined in the ritualistic substitutions of perversion and fetish. Perversion finesses the problem of ambivalence by substitution (of a symbolic love object for a more vulnerable or more dangerous real one) and by ritualized drama, both of which interpose emotional distance between subject and object, and so keep both parties “safe” at times of intense feeling. It is a compromise formation, and like all compromise formations it has two faces. It permits gratification of desirous feelings and discharge of angry ones where that would otherwise not be possible, yet in the very distancing that affords safety, it defends against more immediate and intimate connections with the beloved object. The contour of this compromise is the landscape that Sluizer paints so masterfully in *Utz*.

## A VERY BRIEF COMMENT ON PERVERSION IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

Freud related perversion in various ways to conflicts between the desire for sexual pleasure and the fear of punishment. He (1905) felt that perversion is the “negative” of neurosis in that neuroses *inhibit* pleasure in their manner of dealing with internal conflict (through repression and symptom formation), whereas perversions are a creative way of achieving pleasure *in spite of* unconscious fears of retribution or loss. His understanding roughly was that there were two means by which the imagined threat could be held at bay, thereby allowing sexual pleasure to be pursued in safety. The first was through the guilt-assuaging acceptance of a lesser (symbolic or actual) punishment—a sadomas-

ochistic solution (Freud, 1919). The second was through the magical use of a fetish (1927, and see the next section).

Since Freud, psychoanalytic writers have understood perversion in many different ways, among them (and this is a very small sample) seeing perversion (1) as defensive sexual behavior in the face of narcissistic insult or deficit (Goldberg, 1975); (2) as a denial of differences, both generational and gender, resulting in anal sadism (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1978); or (3) as a normal development that is retained in *all* individuals in order for the sexual passions to remain alive (Marucco, 1997). Most writers (for example Khan, 1979, and Nersessian, 1998) take quite a dark view of perverse psychopathology, which they tend to see as “deeper” than neurosis—unconflictual, fueled by destructiveness rather than sexuality, and with intractable acting-out as the inevitable result. Stoller (1985), however, explicitly challenges Freud’s long-accepted separation between perversion and neurosis: “I do not believe that neurosis is the negative of perversion—I believe, rather, that perversion is an erotic neurosis” (p. 134).<sup>4</sup> Dimen (2001) objects to the very concept, on the grounds that it is pejorative and without clinical usefulness.

My own view inclines toward Stoller’s end of the spectrum. There are many ways of keeping passion and desire alive; some of these include perversion or fetish, and these are distinct *in some ways* from those that do not. The point made by Dimen (2001) and her colleagues about the need to avoid pathologizing is a valid one, and Stoller’s naturalistic approach seems to me exemplary in that regard. But the naturalistic approach is not often elaborated in the *clinical* psychoanalytic literature. Its realization in the persons of Utz and Marta made visible to me Stoller’s concept of an erotic neurosis and the many forms it takes within ordinary lives.

## FETISH

The American Heritage Dictionary (third edition) defines a fetish as (1) “An object that is believed to have magic or spiritual powers,” or (2) “an object of unreasonably excessive attention or reverence.” Psychoanalytic writers have come to more diverse understandings of what a fetish represents and what its latent

meanings and functions are; like perversion, this diversity reflects the complexity of the subject. However, most analysts, beginning with Freud, see the use of fetish as a way of simultaneously fulfilling desire while magically defending against the unconscious belief that such fulfillment will result in intolerable destruction or loss. A fetish may be either a thing or a part or aspect of a person—a shoe, for example, or a foot or a voice. It is an *enduring* substitute for the object whose loss is feared, a substitute that can withstand whatever passions are directed toward it and in its persistence “prove” the immunity of the object to destruction. (One such scenario is Freud’s [1927] view that the fetish was a penis equivalent, which by its very presence assuaged the fear of castration, leaving the anxious male free to pursue his pleasures with a woman). A fetish is also controllable as no real complete other person, in all his or her complexity and difference, can ever be; thus the frequent conjunction of fetish and sadomasochism. In this scenario, the magic of the fetish allows for the disavowal of the threatening separateness—physical and psychic—between the self and the desired object that make loss and disappointment inevitable. It permits the illusion of self and other as a perfect unity that no passion can sunder. Because the compromise formations of perversion are so often accomplished by the use of such idealized, externalized, and indestructible objects, fetish is often associated with perversion, although it need not be.

In yet another scenario, the fetish is seen as a defense against sadistic destruction of love objects, both internal and external. Payne (1939), following Klein (1946) and echoed later by Stewart (1970) and Bach (1994), pioneered the view that a person feeling threatened by his or her own overwhelming aggression may seek reinforcement against it in the magical form of the fetish.

Stoller (1985) points out that the fetish may be a *representation* of the longed-for other, or aspects of her, such as her breast, her skin, or her voice (pp. 131–131). He emphasizes that a fetish can be not only a means of access to an erotic object, but also an erotically exciting and/or soothing object in itself—porcelain, smooth as a mother’s skin, for example, or the strains of a heavenly female voice, may provide blissful entrée into merger with

a desired object. In *Utz*, we see both of these uses of fetish. The porcelain figurines are objects of erotic desire in themselves to Utz; the mouths, voices, and appurtenances of the singers arouse him, and allow him to experience and satisfy, if briefly, *sexual* desire.<sup>5</sup>

Scenarios like these are representative, but not comprehensive, examples of the many psychoanalytic views of fetish that have flourished over the years. They are sketches of common psychological themes that come up for many people under widely varying circumstances. For this reason, I disagree with Nersessian's (1998) view that fetishistic behavior indicates "serious pathology"; it may, but I think it more accurate to consider the use of fetish a psychological technique that can be used across the entire spectrum of psychopathology. I do concur with the school of thought that sees in fetish a way of handling sadistic impulses, but here too I hesitate to make assumptions about any implied depth of pathology. Sadistic impulses in themselves are not pathological. Indeed, they are both universal and indispensable; they are necessary drivers of such important aggressive phenomena as vitality, curiosity, and the ability to compete. Certainly they can be frightening, but occasional recourse to magical reinforcement against them (like walking very carefully on a pavement—"Step on a crack, break your mother's back") is very common and not particularly ominous in itself. As Bach (1994) points out, the necessary developmental task for all of us is to find the point of balance from which we can enjoy the excitement of action and fantasy without risking the loss or destruction of other or of self. A little magic can sometimes help in this task. It is when we *fail* to find that point of balance that perversion, or the use of fetish, becomes dangerous.

The psychoanalytic ideas about perversion and fetish that have proliferated over the last hundred years illuminate many facets of these deep and puzzling psychological developments. But the film *Utz*, as a work of art so often can, illuminates the experience of a *person*—not one facet or another, but a whole person, struggling within the conditions of his life to maintain his vitality in the best way he can. While perverse fantasies and behavior may be dramatic, criminal, or even deadly, lesser degrees of perverse preoccupation are extremely common—some

psychoanalytic writers feel they are universal—and they may be subtle, private, and relatively benign. For every sadistic murderer, there are dozens of movies about sadistic murders and millions of people who enjoy watching them.<sup>6</sup> Such interests may be ways of enjoying severely destructive and sadistic impulses while defending against enacting them in the pursuit of passion.

In other words, perversions may be ways of enabling desirous *and aggressive* release, both of which are necessary for erotic vitality. Depending upon the balance between loving and hateful passions in any given person, the perversion will be weighted more to one or the other. In Sluizer's *The Vanishing* (see no. 6), the murderous passions win out; in *Utz*, the loving passions are stronger. Perversions may take many forms, but they have in common a quality of enactment; they are stylized, ritualized, repetitive dramas compulsively played out by individuals (male or female) to engage their passions when other ways are foreclosed or seem too dangerous. *Utz* calls our attention back to Freud's early, normative, and nonjudgmental view that perversion is one of the many creative ways by which human beings muddle through the demands of their lives (Freud, 1905).

#### THE FATE OF DESIRE IN *UTZ*

*Utz* collects porcelain and women. It seems clear that aspects of his collecting behavior are characteristic of both fetishism and perversion. Collecting is by no means always a manifestation of perversion, nor is a collection necessarily a fetish. However, identification of the perverse organization that underlies *this particular* collector's behavior allows a fuller understanding both of *Utz* himself and of his curious asymmetrical relationship with Marta. In his collecting he is sure that his love objects are in his control, whether they be Meissen figurines, his one-night divas, or his servant.<sup>7</sup> The drive to acquire and reject, to court and dismiss—whether in the auction house, the opera house, or his own home—all these allow for some play of both his desirous and his sadistic impulses, and in so doing release the pressure to act upon them in more threatening ways. His perverse compromise protects him, allowing him to experience sexual and aggressive passion, but also to avoid the kind of loving erotic en-

gagement with a truly separate other in which disappointment and risk, and the rage they evoke, are inevitable.

We don't know enough about Utz and Marta to speculate responsibly about their early relationships with their parents. We do know that they are lonely people. Utz lost his father early. We learn nothing at all about his mother, and the only childhood caregiving figure we see is the serious and anxious grandmother in her starched white coat. Even as a child Utz seems detached from her; his passions are directed to dramas enacted behind glass or on stage. The vigor of the tadpoles and the more highly elaborated, if less lively, world of his father's Meissen figurines, the grandeur of the opera—these offer dramatic scenarios of passion, but no real people to love. In the film Marta as a young woman is shown alone, accompanied only by the beloved goose with whom she expresses and enjoys both love and sensuality. We do see clearly that as adults, Utz and Marta have a strong and loving attachment—but an eccentric and asexual one, the limitations of which allow both to avoid the dangers posed by an intimate erotic relationship.

As Sluizer suggests repeatedly, Utz is a man of great sensuality. We see that Marta is a sensual woman in her reactions to the goose and to the wild mushroom. She has made a life without passionate sexual relationship. We do not know exactly why, but we are given a powerful clue in one terrifying view of the violent and rageful men of her village, who, convinced that she has taken her pet goose as a lover, label her a witch and enact an extremely threatening vision of outraged adult sexuality. Marta has her own terrors, and so can respect Utz's. He concentrates on his porcelain, and she, after losing the goose in her escape, concentrates on him.

They are both, in their quiet ways, bitter and oppositional. Prague suits Utz's "melancholy temperament," he says, and so he remains there, his passions carefully compartmentalized, complying (superficially) with the communist authorities. His friend Orlik criticizes him for this, but in fact Utz is a secret rebel, and in his conversation with Fisher in the cemetery he makes clear how much he enjoys the angry power of breaking the rules. (Etchegoyen, 1978, discusses at length the pleasure in rule breaking that he feels is characteristic of the perverse trans-

ference.) Utz is not the patsy that Orlik implies, and he has a rapacious side. Even as he himself struggled to survive the Nazis and the Communist takeover he was taking advantage, he tells us directly, of the misfortunes of others to build his extravagant collection.

But he is aware that his rule breaking and his preference for personae over people are as dangerous as they are seductive. He points out the fine line between a person and a construction—"Adam [also a notorious rule-breaker] was not only the first human being, but also the first ceramic sculpture"—and he goes on to consider the antisocial aspects of the *golem*, another sculpture ambivalently celebrated in Jewish folklore, who comes to life, and to disobedience, with catastrophic consequences. "A man-made figure," Utz makes clear, "is a blasphemy." This view of the *golem*<sup>8</sup> and its enactment of its master's projected rage hints that Utz's passionate attachment to his own clay idols contains more than a little fury.

Underneath her obedience, Marta too harbors a secret defiance. Her refusal to make herself sexually available in the expected way evokes the sadistic rage of the men of her village (and may, in fact, have originated in response to the brutality of their sexuality). During one of Utz's staged seductions, she gives a hint of her own usually suppressed rage by smashing a plate in the kitchen. Sluizer gives us a hint as well, with a split-second glimpse of an ominous cast projected onto one of the figurines. Thus the director links Marta as well as Utz to the ambivalently charged collection of porcelain, and makes it, explicitly, for both of them a symbol of rage as well as of love. Later, Marta delights in thwarting his ex-lovers' wishes to either visit him when he is dying, or to attend his funeral.

Utz and Marta are joined by Utz's facilitation of Marta's sexual compromise—the sadomasochistic constellation of jealous desire, voyeuristic excitement, and rage that they enact in the safety of their home every time he trysts with one of his singers. They are joined, as well, in his ritual play with the porcelain figurines, which she facilitates and enjoys by lighting the candelabra and playing an aria from *Rusalka*; these enactments are *their* trysts.<sup>9</sup> Utz and Marta's perverse alliance with each other is estab-

lished through the medium of Utz's collection(s) and their complex and interdependent desires, fears, and loves.

The director takes pains to show us that this is no happenstance. There is a dynamic compromise here. It contains (in that word's twin senses of inclusion and control) love and hate, beauty and pain, and it serves them both well. Although Utz and Marta are married, he does not bed her, Orlik explains to Fisher. But when Fisher expresses sympathy, Orlik is matter-of-fact. "It is not sad. She loves him." And he loves her. They are devoted to each other. They understand and protect each other; they long for each other when separated; they facilitate the fulfillment of each other's needs and desires; they assuage for each other the feeling of alienation that haunts them. But their committed love, their sadomasochistic bargain, serves at the same time to *defend* against the physical, passionate, bodily love that can take over the self and threaten its temporary loss in ecstatic penetration of and merger with the other.

Neither Utz nor Marta can experience passion comfortably in the unpredictable relationships that occur with complex, whole other people. When she gives him his legacy from his father, Utz's grandmother tells him that porcelain with its skin-smooth surface meant phallic potency, beauty, and immortality to the ancient Chinese. Porcelain serves for Utz as a connection with both father and mother, which in its perfection and its lack of sovereignty disavows the risk of pain, loss, and danger.

Utz is bold and confident in his desire for Meissen, and aggressive in pursuing it. He is equally aggressive in his pursuit of his singers. But when, as at the spa, he must deal with a real woman rather than a persona or a statue, he is capable only of timid and awkward approaches that end repeatedly in failure and rejection. He can love only an idealized or an idealizing woman; once he beds her, desire is transformed into hatred and disgust: As Utz says cruelly of one of his discarded lovers: "She's mad. She was a famous soprano, but a crazy person."

In his need for a magical talisman that will protect and enliven him, Utz searches compulsively for yet another figurine, yet another diva. Werner Muensterberger (1994), a psychoanalyst who has made an extensive study of collecting and collectors, has observed that obsessive collecting can be enlisted in the ser-

vice of binding anxiety and tolerating affect. In his words, “Favoring things instead of people may be one of several solutions for dealing with emotions that echo old traumata and uncertainties. . . . Affection becomes attached to things, which in the eyes of the beholder can become animatized like the amulets and fetishes of preliterate humankind or the holy relics of the religionist” (p. 9).<sup>10</sup> This view helps us to understand the role that Utz’s collection plays in his psychology; so, perhaps, does Freud’s comment that “every collector is a substitute for a Don Juan Tenorio, and so too is the mountaineer, the sportsman, and such people. These are erotic equivalents.” (Freud, 1886–1889, p. 209).<sup>11</sup>

#### THE DISAPPEARANCE

We can speculate that Utz has found both an evocative substitute for the absent loving securities of his childhood, and an outlet for the healthy aggressiveness that frightening personal and political circumstances required him to displace. To explain the mystery of the collection’s disappearance, we can return to Payne’s (1939) hypothesis that fetishistic eroticism contains and defends against terrifying sadistic fantasies.

When Utz tells Fisher that porcelain “dies by fire and comes to life by fire,” we wonder whether this is not his own experience in the furnaces of Eros—the fire that brings us to life, but at the same time awakens the burning disappointments and rages that threaten to destroy the self or the beloved other. Erotic passions also threaten to enslave and take over the loving, dependent self, leaving it open to rejection and abandonment. Underneath his melancholy, Utz is an angry and vulnerable man, and afraid to get too close to the fire for which he longs.

In his comment to Fisher about his collecting (“It’s sinful. It’s dangerous.”), he acknowledges his view of passion as dangerous, and once again (as in the restaurant) we see the aggressive pride that drives him, and the anger and defiance that make him fear his own destructiveness—the Rabbi Loew, the *golem*, in himself. He is engaged in a personal war with God, but he fears God’s retaliation, and so resorts to indirect means of waging war, as he resorts to indirect means of making love.

Much as the beginning of an analytic session may clue us

into the themes that will develop within it, the opening images of this movie—the auction, the tadpoles, the harlequin—subtly show us the themes and underlying issues in the protagonist's life. He was a child of a passionate and determined nature living in conditions certainly of great danger and probably of real deprivation. His home was a place of beauty but also emptiness, peopled only by himself and a reserved and worried grandmother who rarely touches him physically, but whom we see deeply engaged with him when she gives him the harlequin, and later when she instructs him on the wonders of porcelain. It is in the world of this beautiful and magical substance, which has come to him through his father and through his inheritance from his father's mother, that he longs to live.

Utz's collection is the organizing principle in his life. It keeps him vital and alive, powerful and creative, purposeful and envied. It gives his life color and power in the bureaucratic grayness of Prague, and a venue in the wider world where he can admire and be admired. It allows him aggressive release—for example, in the foiling of Fisher at the auction and again upon his death. The contrast between Utz's oppressed life in communist Czechoslovakia and the magical world of his Meissen figurines—between his painful awareness of alienation and his omnipotent fantasy of pleasure and delight—are brilliantly portrayed in back-and-forth sequences in this film.

But as we move through the film, Sluizer makes clear that Utz's delicate balance is threatened. First he learns that the figurines are not his to keep; upon his death they will become the property of the state. This violates his omnipotence and his identity, and for the first time we see him openly enraged. The meaning of the collection continues to evolve even while Utz is on his deathbed, as Sluizer focuses increasingly less on its beauty and more on its threatening potential. The intimations of destruction in the scene in the cemetery become reality.

Indeed, even the look of the figurines evolves. Utz once tells Fisher that Kendler, the maker of his harlequin, was not only the finest of the Meissen sculptors, but also a great satirist. But the ironic quality that he once prized as a delightful manifestation of an artist's skill loses its charm. The director's portrayal of the collection takes on a shockingly different cast, corresponding to

the interior change in Utz as death approaches. The lovely little figures now look ugly and menacing, similar to how we saw them previously through the eyes of Marta in her jealous rage. They have not, after all, been able to protect Utz from loss and fear. Their paralysis now mocks his own. Undying themselves, they derisively taunt his ephemeral humanity. As Utz's thoughts turn darkly toward his end, their magic becomes black magic; now when he looks at them, he grimaces and moans. He and Marta are alone now, and he himself is a figurine, a helpless object dependent on her manipulations.

Klein (1946) might suggest that Utz's preoccupation with perfect porcelain and his serial idealizations and devaluations of opera goddesses are a defensive form of psychological splitting that is now beginning to break down. Keeping love and rage separate has protected his freedom to desire by containing fears that the imminence of death is finally making irrelevant. Payne would argue that now that Utz is totally paralyzed he is finally free to acknowledge and honor his *wish* to destroy what he loves, that he no longer needs a fetish to contain and control the terrifying conjunction of loving and sadistic impulses that he has repressed for so long. Kohut (1984) might think that the pain of the sudden failure of this heretofore reliable self-object—which in fact can ensure neither potency nor immortality—evokes in Utz an uncontrollable outburst of narcissistic rage.

In any case, Utz's final desire is for an act of impassioned destruction. His fury, long repressed and turned inward into melancholy, is finally given its due in full and explosive expression. In dying, Utz can finally unleash the power that might, if he had feared it less, have allowed him fuller and more vibrant relationships in life.

Utz's final act of will is carried out by Marta, who joins in it readily. His impending death has released her as well from Ruskalka's fate—the risk of destroying the beloved object. Free now to live their rage, he and she achieve a new merger in their triumphant joy in destruction, an ecstatic *petite mort* in the face of the Grim Reaper himself, a shattering of Marta's long-sequestered virginity. As the small porcelain figures crash and splinter on a glass table, Utz and Marta become one at last in orgasmic consummation.

This final cataclysm gives Utz intense pleasure and a final surge of vitality. We hear for the last time the theme that accompanied the child's declaration of desire for his father's harlequin as Marta smashes the priceless collection piece by piece, beginning with the harlequin itself. But now the noise of the porcelain breaking makes a visceral counterpoint to the delicate melody, a percussive background that gives substance and vigor to the wistful music of his life. His passions, freed, can blossom in the warmth of his fury. Eros and Thanatos have found each other at last.

In summary, Utz and Marta are living intrapsychic lives in which love, rage, and sexuality are rigorously compartmentalized, in which there has been a failure to achieve, the union of tenderness and lust (Richards, 2003, p. 1200). Yet these passions remain available to them in forms that can be called fetishistic and perverse, as their established rituals both defend against the dangers of overwhelming wishes for loving or sadistic merger, and provide opportunities for gratifying them safely.

This movie illustrates, intimately and vividly, how the perverse compromise can protect and enable passion when the powerful ambivalences of erotic love are too overwhelming to be risked, and when fear of engaging them might otherwise result in the psychic death of depression or schizoid withdrawal. *Utz* portrays the use of the perverse compromise as a comfort and a connection in the lives of two people who have not been fortunate enough to develop a robust and unfettered capacity to tolerate the simultaneous fires of love and rage. It reminds us that like any other compromise formation, perversion may be a creative response (unconsciously devised) to the complexities of psychological life and relationship.

I value this portrayal because it challenges our tendency to be too monolithic and negative in our view of perversion. There is no invariable association between perversion and crime or evil, and it is not necessarily true that the pleasures of perversion are so great that perverse people are not motivated to analyze or relinquish them. In my clinical experience, and contrary to much received wisdom, perversion is *not* always ego-syntonic (see Goldberg, 1975; Klein, 1927; Stein, 2003). That is, some people are inclined to analyze and relinquish it. *Utz* illustrates

perversion and fetish as an adaptive and sometimes oddly dignified defense of self and passion in the face of the human condition, which unfortunately is inseparable from fear, loss, and pain.

This capacity of the artist to expand a viewer's grasp of the human situation is one of the reasons that the arts are such a rich field for psychoanalytic study. Repeated viewings of this film have opened me to the reality of varying gradations and kinds of perversion, and to the value as well as the pain for the individual in this type of compromise formation. It has also enabled me to contemplate the perverse dilemma with less need for distance. I am grateful for this. None of us is so immune to tragedy that we can afford to disdain ways of keeping passion alive in the face of terror.

#### NOTES

1. I summarize the film not only for the sake of those readers who have not seen it, but also to circumvent some of the confusion inherent in its alternations between past and present. Like dreams or free associations, *Utz* has a primary-process quality in which present and past exist together, linked by their unconscious meaning. Moreover, in any naturalistic study, such as an analysis or a movie, the details—of dialogue, of background music, of camera angles, in short, all of the nuances of nonverbal communications, either between the characters or between the director and us, the viewers—are profoundly important.
2. Sluizer told the British Film Institute that Nicola Piovani's composition "expresses very profoundly both the tenderness of the Baron von Utz for his porcelain objects as well as his obsession for them" ([www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/2004\\_09/filmmusic](http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/2004_09/filmmusic)).
3. In fact, when a colleague tried to send an early version of this paper back to me, her e-mail program Eudora complained that the title would get her computer keyboard washed out with soap.
4. Klein (1927), in "Criminal Tendencies in Normal Children" (pp. 170–185), attributes to Sachs a similar conclusion: "The pervert does not simply permit himself, owing to lack of conscience, what the neurotic represses in consequence of his inhibitions. He found that the conscience of the pervert is not less strict but is simply working in a different way. It permits one part only of the forbidden tendencies to be retained in order to escape from other parts, which seem still more objectionable to the super-ego. What it rejects are desires belonging to the Oedipus complex. . . ." (p. 184). Therefore she was more optimistic than some about a good result in the analysis of people with perversions.
5. It is significant that it is opera singers who draw Utz. Porcelain is as smooth as skin, Utz's grandmother teaches him, and a glorious soprano, as I have indicated elsewhere (Katz, 1997), is soothing, comforting, enlivening, se-

ductive. Like the voice of a mother, it can fill the emptiness within. (As mentioned earlier, Stoller specifically mentions both voice and skin as likely objects of fetishistic attention.) In addition, it may be that music organizes Utz, temporarily quieting the chaos inside him (Winnicott, 1971, pp. 153–154), and as Congreve has famously put it, soothing his savage breast. In his seduction scenarios, Utz experiences himself as an uninhibited actor, in a magnificent and magisterial role. Here again, he establishes a combination of safety and potency that allows him to be passionate.

6. One such movie with a substantial cult following is *The Vanishing*, also directed by Sluizer. This film depicts Raymond, a seemingly ordinary man, a chemistry professor, whose middle-aged life is strictly ordered until passion erupts into it with the puberty of his seductive, engaging fourteen-year-old daughter. He defends against the sexual and murderous impulses (Katz, 1991) that she arouses by selecting a substitute—a young woman who looks like her—luring her into his car in an obsessively planned scenario, chloroforming her, and then burying her alive. In other words, he resorts to omnipotent control as a defense against overwhelming affect, and keeps himself safe by burying his own passions along with their (substitute) “cause.” Obviously Raymond’s psychopathology is far more severe than Utz’s, and his use of perversion and fetish far more disturbed.
7. In rescuing Marta from the horde of rageful men who were pursuing her, he not only saved her virtue (if not her life), but also acquired her.
8. In most of the legends of the Prague *Golem*, Rabbi Loew’s motives are good; his wish is to create a giant to *protect* the Jews of Prague from the pogroms that threaten them. At first the *golem* does this. But the more he exercises his powers, the less his controller can contain them. The *golem* becomes more violent and more destructive until the people he is protecting come to fear him more than the external enemy. In most versions the Rabbi has to unmake him; in some he escapes, and is still living in Prague. The message of the legends is that the power to give life belongs only to God, and that omnipotence is unattainable for humans.
9. The aria is a profound commentary on the relationship between Utz and Marta. *Rusalka* is based on Hans- Christian Andersen’s well-known story of the little mermaid who saves a mortal man from drowning, falls in love with him, and gives up her glorious voice and the chance for an immortal soul in exchange for a human form in which to woo him. If she wins him, she will survive; if not, she will die. But she can never explain herself to him. In the “Song to the Moon,” Rusalka begs the moon to tell the prince of her love. She acquires human form on agreement that she will give up her power of speech, and that if her loved one betrays her, both she and he will be eternally damned. But in the *Rusalka* story, human form is not the same as human flesh. The prince is bewitched by Rusalka’s beauty, but he craves a warmth that his sea-born bride cannot give—she is capable of love, but not of sexual passion. And she faces a harder choice than Andersen’s mermaid: She may kill the prince, and so return to her original form and fate. But if she does not, she will become a sea demon, a siren that lures humans to their destruction. Rusalka refuses the killing, wishing her beloved the happiness that will doom her. He belatedly recognizes the depth of their love and follows her, pleading for a kiss of forgiveness. Although her kiss now can bring him only death, he will not be moved. They

kiss, and as he dies in her arms, she thanks him for letting her experience love, and commends his soul to God. Then she sinks to the bottom of the water in obedience to her own terrible fate.

- It is easy to recognize in this story the love between the exquisite water nymph Marta, who can love but cannot tolerate the flames of human passion, and Utz, the prince who needs the flames of a passion that he cannot realize with his own beloved. Neither can survive the other's sexuality, nor can they ever discuss their impasse. Unlike Rusalka and her prince, however, they honor the prohibition until the nearness of Utz's death frees them from their fears of destroying each other.
10. For individuals in whom the disappointment in loved ones is very great, the inanimate object is substituted since it can be controlled. Leonardo was notorious for not being able to part with his paintings. Bergmann's (1987) understanding is that Leonardo fell in love with his paintings, not with the sitter, and he suggests that the reason he could not part with the paintings was because his capacity to love a person was blocked. I had a patient who, like Leonardo, for a long time felt safer loving her paintings than a flesh-and-blood beloved, and so could not let go of them. When she did sell one, she created so much chaos in her buyers that they ended up reacting to her with sadism and abandonment—exactly as her former husband had.
  11. William Wyler's (1965) film *The Collector* is a portrait of another alienated man, an obsessed collector of butterflies. When a huge win at the football pools allows him to buy a manor house with an extensive basement, he expands his impassioned collecting, chloroforms the beautiful woman he's been stalking and imprisons her underground as if she were one of his beautiful dead insects, to be displayed and admired. He loves her, but when she comes close enough to him to stimulate his erotic passions, his face changes visibly, displaying murderous hatred. She dies of a fever because he fears that he would lose her if he exposed the situation to the scrutiny of any doctor who might treat her. After burying her, he begins his search for another woman to collect.

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