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Jean-Michel Ganteau

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## Re-vision as Zapping:

### Tibor Fischer's *The Collector Collector*

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Tibor Fischer is certainly not the best known of contemporary British novelists. His first two novels, *Under the Frog* (1993) and *The Thought Gang* (1996), earned him some success (his first novel was short-listed for the Booker Prize), and he has just published a collection of short stories, *Don't Read this Book if You're Stupid* (2000). *The Collector Collector* (1997), his third novel, was published in 1997. Fischer's fiction is characterised by a taste for loosely strung plots, a ceaseless resort to hyperbole verging on saturation (endless lists, antithetical structures and zeugmas, daring coinages, the juxtaposition of colloquialisms and a formal register, etc.). In other words, Fischer's style is explicitly inventive and idiosyncratic, which are fundamental ingredients of the success that his production has recently met with. Among the traits emerging from the reading of Fischer's fiction, one may also list the permanent use of irony mingled with humour, and a special relish for the polytonal, as his texts tend to blend gravity and lightness, jubilation and despair. Fischer is in fact a hopeless and ruthless observer of contemporary society and, in true postmodernist fashion, he eschews the idiom of traditional realism to espouse that of historiographic metafiction. For his novels teem with references to the act of narration, to the art of telling stories, to the way in which texts are created and processed. In other words, hybridisation and excess could qualify as the hallmarks of Fischer's brand of writing.

Now, this may not sound absolutely revolutionary, in the context of the contemporary practice and theory of fiction. In fact,

as has been tirelessly underlined by critics like Linda Hutcheon, what seems to characterise contemporary narrative is its resort to the (implicit) conventions and fashion of what the Canadian critic has termed "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon: 1988 and 1989), *i.e.* a genre or mode of fiction obsessed with the cultural and literary past and concerned with reproducing the rules and conventions of former texts—through parody according to Hutcheon, through pastiche in Fredric Jameson's analysis (Hutcheon: 1988 4-5 and Jameson 16, 132-3)—the better to subvert them from within.

Now, the postmodern trend for historiographic metafiction appeared in a period that witnessed the development of a new conception of history or, at least, of historiography. In that area, the contemporary *doxa*, as expounded by a certain number of theorists or philosophers, on both sides of the Atlantic (among whom Hayden White, Michel de Certeau or Paul Veyne) has it that the original Aristotelian distinction between the historian and the poet—*i.e.* between historiographic and fictional discourse—is no longer valid. In other words, according to new historicists, access to the past is only made possible through the means of texts (various types of archives), which implies the impossibility of getting directly in touch with past events and leads in turn to what might be called the "waning of reference," in so far as the historical referent is caught in the subjective and warping nets of discourse. This leads to a paradox formulated by Hutcheon (among others) when she comments on "[h]istoriographic metafiction acknowledg[ing] the paradox of the *reality* of the past but its (only) *textualized* accessibility to us today" (Hutcheon in Perloff ed. 64). Fredric Jameson similarly insists on the notion of inescapable textualization (and consequent reification) inherent in the last phase of capitalism (late capitalism) which has become a *sine qua non* of postmodern culture. The intimation is that one can only get "signs and traces" of the past and that one is denied access to "features or elements of a form" (Jameson 83, 100-01). This leads in turn to the conclusion that period concepts correspond to no reality at all (Jameson 282) and, one step further, that signs have jettisoned all connection to reference since, in Jean Baudrillard's

famous terms, we have entered the area of the "precession of simulacra" (My translation).<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary artists react differently to this vision: postmodern culture is often characterised by a compulsion to return to past texts and artefacts through the means of allusions and quotations, the re-writing or re-visiting or re-viewing of past texts (a tendency of which A. S. Byatt's *Possession* may be held up as the paragon). This return may be dominantly ironical and subversive, as is the case with such texts as John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* or Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*. Conversely, the re-visiting may be essentially referential, as is more obvious in Byatt's above-mentioned novel or in Peter Ackroyd's nostalgic allegories of permanence (most obviously *English Music*).<sup>2</sup> Other novelists like Graham Swift (*Waterland*) or Salman Rushdie (*Midnight's Children*) lay the stress on the problematical access to historical reference, on the fragmentation and atomisation of narratives, stories and history, in other words on the irreducible variety, plurality and openness of narratives as emblematic of the fragmentation of the formerly totalising and closed vision of History. In other terms, according to Jean-François Lyotard's famous proclamations, grand- or meta-narratives seem to have lost their legitimating power: only micro-systems and micro-narratives may become self-legitimating in a culture characterised by the heterogeneity of discursive regimes (Lyotard: 1979, 1983).

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<sup>1</sup> For a clear summary of the postmodern position about what is generally considered the bane of historiography, see "Re-presenting the Past," Chapter 3 in Linda Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism* (62-70). This is of course an interest shared by contemporary critics and many novelists, like Jeanette Winterson, who, as early as her first novel, *Oranges Are not the Only Fruit*, devotes a whole chapter to the notions of the irrecoverableness of the past and of the betraying nature of all history: "Very often history is a means of denying the past. Denying the past is to refuse to recognise its integrity. To fit it, force it, function it, to suck out the spirit until it looks the way you think it should" (93-94). This comment makes it clear that any attempt at recapturing the past is inseparable from a betrayal of the Procustean type inherent in the very nature of archive, hence of textualisation.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on postmodern nostalgia, see Jean-Michel Ganteau, "La nostalgie postmoderne: à propos de quelques romanciers britanniques contemporains," to be published in *Les Cahiers du CERCA-GRAAT* (2001).



This is—roughly sketched—the context in which Tibor Fischer's literary production manifests itself. This is also the context in which *The Collector Collector* was published. It is not surprising, thus, that Fischer's third novel should vibrate with all those ideas. In fact, it is obsessed with the idea of itself, with the idea of history being transformed into stories, with the idea that no historical reference is accessible any longer. Besides, even if it evinces a certain degree of fascination with the past (the narrator being the eponymous antique vase whose experience goes beyond that of the best-documented historian since it witnessed the history of the world), this novel also ironises the possibility of being given access to the discourses of the past. This implies in turn a departure from the canon of postmodern historiographic metafiction. *The Collector Collector* does not use the conventions of the realistic and/or historical novel the better to abuse/undermine them from within. It simply goes on to make something different and quite subversive, in that it seems to use the norms of historiographic metafiction the better to subvert them. This seems to be done by rejecting the literary canon (whether it be postmodern or anterior)<sup>3</sup> as its ground of reference so as to supersede it with an imitation of or iconic relation with an altogether different medium, *i.e.* that of video or television. In fact, *The Collector Collector* is not a novel characterised by the traditionally consistent repetition of peripeteia, but one which takes as its structural model what has been termed the "TV or video flow," and gives us a reading posture that could be well compared to that of "zapping" or "channel hopping."<sup>4</sup> This

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<sup>3</sup> Incidentally, there is no need look for any allusion (whether thematic, structural, ideological or aesthetic) between Fischer's novel and John Fowles's *The Collector* (1963). The typically "Angry" ingredients that characterise the earlier novel (first person narration, prominent social dimension) and its strong reliance on the hermeneutic code, together with its probing at the unfathomable depths of the self are totally absent from the more recent text. The entomological/classification metaphor is present in both narratives, but it is used to completely different effect in each text.

<sup>4</sup> For more detail concerning this technique or aesthetic preference, see Brian McHale, "Zapping, the Art of Switching Channels: on *Vineland*," *Constructing Postmodernism* (114-41) and Frédéric Regard, "Faut-il tuer cet auteur? Les *Satanic Verses* de Rushdie et la condition de l'auteur postmoderne," *Études britanniques contemporaines* (12-14).

is what we shall strive to demonstrate by first focusing on the novel's subversion of realist conventions. The second part will be devoted to an analysis of the structural and temporal fragmentation of the narrative and we shall end on the notion of infinite egress and dispersal of meaning at work in the text.

Perhaps one of the most directly accessible postmodern aspects of *The Collector Collector* is its play with the conventions of traditional narratives in general and of realistic texts in particular. In other words, the novel promotes a parody or deconstruction—in the widest meaning of the term—of the realist canon. This is done, as is often the case with contemporary narratives, through the means of metafiction. In fact, as suggested above, the novel is saturated with the idea of itself, and more particularly of the act of narration. This means that it is pervaded with defamiliarising/alienating devices that are designed to make the reader suspend his/her belief so as to promote a constant consciousness of the text's artificiality. This is made obvious from the title whose tautological formulation is quite arresting and creates an impression of bewilderment, since the reader is bound to stumble on a grammatical and semantic riddle from the outset. Unlike what happens in a more traditional type of fiction, the reader's hermeneutic appetite is not merely whetted by the paratextual enigma: the grammatical asperity sets the reader wondering about the structure of the phrase—the unexpected genitive collocation—, thus prompting him/her to consider the text as a construct—and certainly not as a given piece of reality—from the beginning.

Besides, the title also gives one of the most fundamental keys to the novel, in that it suggests that the narrative—together with historiography in general—is nothing but a collection.<sup>5</sup> As indicated above, the plot hinges on the fact that the narrator is a

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<sup>5</sup> For an insight into the analogy between history-writing and collecting, see Jeanette Winterson's commentary in *Oranges Are not the Only Fruit*: "There is a certain seductiveness about what is dead. . . . You can auction it, museum it, collect it. It's much safer to be a collector of curios, because if you are curious, you have to sit and sit and see what happens. . . . The curios are always in some danger" (94).

very antique vase, of a unique and invaluable nature. This infinitely world-wise artefact, as shown by its very form and literal purpose, is a receptacle, *i.e.* the depository of experience and stories, numberless narratives which seem as inexhaustible as the welter of historical data. The plot thus assumes a largely picaresque nature (the eponymous collector having outlived an almost infinite number of collectors, this essentially because of its exchange value which has steadily increased through the times). One of the consequences is that the vase may be considered omniscient, and this is one of the most explicit ways in which the novel plays with the conventions of traditional narrative. The narrator's infinite wisdom is flaunted from the beginning through its ability to interpret other characters' thoughts (Fischer: 1997 2), through its boasting about being the inventor of beauty (Fischer: 1997 33), through its intimate knowledge of forgotten episodes of world history, and through its typological—even nosographic—proclivities. In fact, the narrator's experience has made it possible for it to compile a database of human characteristics, whether they concern physical appearance, behaviour or feeling. When Rosa, "The Vase Tickler" and female protagonist, first meets the narrator and establishes that it is not a fake, the latter reacts in a most characteristic way: "To the ninety-one types of surprise I have identified, I now have to add a new branch, that of the thinking ceramic caught naked for the first time in millions of years, in a two-bedroomed flat in an expensive part of South London" (Fischer: 1997 10). Apart from the fact that this provides a neat summary of the original crisis in which the narrative is supposed to originate, the preceding lines exemplify the excessively entomological, parodically encyclopaedic vein which runs through the text. Such occurrences, characterised by the piling up of determiners, crop up at an inordinately high rate, every time a new character or situation is introduced. This repetitive compulsion becomes a textual gimmick, an unmistakable idiosyncrasy, some sort of a structural rhyme whose functions are multiple, yet whose main effect is one of humorous distance. The implicitly encyclopaedic nature of knowledge that is the hallmark of realistic aesthetics is thus parodied throughout the novel which picks up a convention, singles it out, and then proceeds to magnify it *ad*

*libitum* (but never *ad nauseam*). What appears from the beginning is that *The Collector Collector* has something to say about realistic discourse, and more particularly about the historical novel.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, this text is designed to cast light on both the provisionality and precariousness of historical discourse, on the impossibility of being granted access to the past, on the subjective and deceptive nature of historiography as a species of discourse. This is made clear through the resort to innumerable, atomised episodes which are left largely unconnected and which point to the absence of any large-scale consistency: the novel and the myriad stories it tells are neither legitimated by the metanarrative of historiography, nor self-legitimated, and they could be aptly described by the archipelago metaphor used by Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze: 1993 110).

Additionally—as often the case with postmodern novels—the stress is relentlessly laid on what might be called anti-history, or counter-history, in other words, what is highlighted is the novel's tendency to highlight dark, minor, even trivial episodes of the unofficial past, which is tantamount to writing a historical novel while emptying it of its official, historical content. Unlike what happens in realistic fiction, history is never conjured up to lend accuracy or verisimilitude to fictional episodes. There is not the slightest attempt at realism in *The Collector Collector*, and everything is meant as if the parameters of the historical novel (a genre that notably mixes the historiographic and fictional idioms), *i.e.* a wide time-span, an omniscient narrator, *etc.* were used the better not to be used, the better to show their uselessness and obsolescence. For the episodes narrated in this pseudo- or freak

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<sup>6</sup> The excessively nosographic and the hyperbolically detailed also converge in many descriptive fragments that are devoted to the evocation of earrings. Each time such an item is alluded to, this is done with a wealth of explicitly incongruous details, which creates a levelling or waning of meaning through the creation of a referent that comes in excess of any plausible representation. This constitutes a way of playing with the conventions of the realistic text, and more specifically with its metonymic/descriptive propensities: "She picked up the earrings with the spirals that represent learning with great difficulty and humiliation over several months the rudiments of a foreign language in anticipation of someone attractive you met abroad coming to visit but then never hearing again from that attractive person" (Fischer: 1997 88).



historical novel—each one of them being devoted a narrative section that might be considered a chapter—all bear titles evocative of vacuity, historiographically-wise: “The Best Rainmaker,” “My Favourite Shipwreck,” “The Mummy That Cried For Earth,” etc. Unlike what is to be found in Barnes’s *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* for instance, where famous episodes belonging to world or Western history are revisited through the prism of debunking details or perspectives, the historical flesh or referent is altogether absent from what might be considered the skeleton of historical fiction, which is a way of pushing the decrowning impulse one step further, through the narrative feat of a parody made *in absentia*.

The parody of realist conventions—hence of historical fiction and historiography—is taken even further through the means of all and sundry rhetorical and/or prosodic devices which emerge as constant textual asperities and foreground what is known as the spatial order of the text. As suggested above, *The Collector Collector* is characterised by a constant resort to hyperbole. One instance of this may be found in the entomological/encyclopaedic tendency already alluded to which finds one of its most constant—though euphemised—expressions in the recurrence of various types of lists. Thus, thematic lists playing on the notion of maximum exoticism and incongruity crop up throughout the text, stretching the conventions of realistic description to breaking point (Fischer: 1997 22-23). Yet, this is not the only instance of hyperbole to be found in a text which teems with antitheses, syllepses and oxymora. More especially, the novel privileges figures of sound and rhythm over figures of speech, as is made obvious through the recurrence of favourite devices. Among those, the polyptoton occupies a central position since it promotes some sort of micro stuttering (as in the sentence “She presses a bell marked Mark” [Fischer: 1997 97]), which echoes the stammering structure of the novel, based on the mere juxtaposition of episodes, on the basic repetition of story after story. Another favourite device consists in the resort to disturbing coinages, most often under the shape of endless portmanteau-words that stretch the laws of composition and derivation to an exceptional degree and foreground the excessively creative nature of the text, thereby



jettisoning any attempt at verisimilitude, hence any token of faith in the accessibility of reference.<sup>7</sup> Other passages are characterised by the prevalence of consonance or assonance (as in “the clouds bunched like fuds above the suds” [Fischer: 1997 185]), whose parodic, alienating effect does not call for comment. Assonance may even verge on rhyme in certain cases (“nothing like getting flash for getting cash” [Fischer: 1997 31]), which is a traditional way of flaunting the constructed status of the text, hence its artificiality. Many other examples might be given here (drawn from the overwhelming use of rhetorical figures or narrative incongruities like the presence of didascalia), should there be room to do so, but suffice it to be said that this poetical, spatial obsession culminates in the use of typographical curiosities in which the letter “o” is used iconically to convey the rotundity of the vase (as in “Oooooorotund”), or any emphasis (“Rooooosa”), both evoking the structural principle of juxtaposition and providing an iconic illustration of the mere stringing of stories on which the primitive plot of the novel is based.

Those are but ways to promote a reflection on the essence of *mimesis*, on the nature of realism, and thus on the status of belief. Even if, in true metafictional fashion, the novel proposes many comments on the nature of belief (“A strand that appears often, the unbelievable. The unbelievable occurs a lot” [Fischer: 1997 41]), this does not in the least reinforce realistic illusion, as might be the case if this device were used as some trace of narrative scruple. The point that the novel manages to make is that neither verisimilitude nor truth belongs to the province of fiction, of historiographic metafiction or of historiography. In *The Collector Collector*, convention is systematically abused. A general suspicion is cast as to both the form and content of all type of discourse. This is suggested through the transformation of the founding parameter of traditional narrative and of historical fiction essentially, time, into something radically different, *i.e.* space, in conformity with what Fredric Jameson has defined as one of the

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<sup>7</sup> “The unbelievable does not just come in frozen-iguana flavour, it comes in never-loved furniture flavour too, never-left-home flavour, still-not-met-anyone-interesting flavour, can’t-get-a-job flavour” (Fischer: 1977 42).

hallmarks of postmodern culture (56, 155). The spatial order that has invested the texture of the novel, through its rhetorical overkill and through its peripatetic structure, among other criteria, and which is given a good airing in the very first words ("I've had a planetful.") is doing something to the temporal organisation of the narrative, as well as to the very nature of the medium, as we shall try to show in the following lines.

In structural terms, the novel is based on what looks like a double plot. On the one hand, the reader is presented with the story of the narrator—the immemorial vase—who/which remembers past episodes of his/its life and narrates them. This strand is mixed with another one, that concerning the life of Rosa, the female protagonist, a specialist in antiquities who has discovered the real value of the vase and whose main purpose in life is trying to find Mr Right. As may be inferred at first sight, *The Collector Collector* boasts a plot structure meant to allow for the mixing of history with story, the former providing a wider context for the latter, the individual being embedded within the historical. However, things do not work in this way, quite. In fact, the two plots are used as mere pretexts for the telling of stories of the most futile, ludic and irrelevant type, in which the historical is never promoted, but where the individual, the domestic, the intimate and very often the trivial are given pride of place. Thus, Rosa's story provides the basis for the grafting of multiple irrelevant outgrowths, since she generously accepts to let Nikki—a real *picara* dropping out of the blue—share her flat for some time. Now, it so happens that, within the economy of the narrative, the latter may be considered as a human hypostasis or correlative of the vase, since Nikki is the paragon of street-wisdom: though she is young, she has travelled widely, has met innumerable people, has tried her hand at a multitude of jobs, among which the oldest job in the world, since she used to be a prostitute.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the peripatetic element introduced through the use of the best-travelled of narrators—the

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<sup>8</sup> The functional analogy between the vase and Nikki is clinched in one of the concluding episodes (more especially, a crisis) in which Nikki is asked to stand on her head in imitation of a receptacle (Fischer: 1997 210).

vase—is enhanced through the consistent resort to a female protagonist very much aware of the wear and tear inherent in life in the wide wide world. Accordingly, Nikki is as good and inexhaustible a teller as the eponymous narrator and her gift of the gab is as much developed as that of her ancient counterpart.

Seen from the perspective of narrative levels, what is remarkable is that the relatively strict alternation between the vase's stories and Nikki's (both narrating approximately the same number of episodes or crises) are organised according to the principle of narrative embeddings. The vase is the main narrator and characters appear within his stories, becoming narrators in their turn (as is the case with Nikky, the second main narrator in the novel). Furthermore, within those stories, some secondary characters may sporadically assume the status of narrators. As may be inferred from this short description, the novel is characterised by the stringing of autonomous stories, which make up independent narrative units, each one devoted to an episode more than a moment of being or a descriptive passage. Besides, the impression of inconsistency is further flouted through the resort to mere juxtaposition: concatenation and transition are reduced to their lowest possible level. Most often, at the end of a narrative block or chapter concerned with the contemporary Rosa plot, the vase decides on gratifying its despairing friend (Rosa systematically meets with failure in her quest for Mr Right, and her fortunes in various compartments of life steadily move from Charybdis into Scylla, throughout the novel) with a new story, the gist or title of which is abruptly and tersely announced before jumping to the title announcing the next narrative block. Similarly, Nikki's narrative inchoations or ignitions are of the sudden, irrelevant type. Besides, those narratives recur so frequently that they become highly predictable. Every time Nikki appears, the reader knows that yet another juicy episode is in store. Ditto as to the vase's appearances. The juxtaposition linked with the element of predictability are apt to create the impression of a mechanism, of a racing engine. This is a way of counterbalancing the originality and incongruity of the stories and episodes that constitute the fabric of the novel with the consistency of a formal and structural repetition. Now, the taste for the incongruous, associated with the

mechanical stringing of thematically disparate episodes, makes for the emergence of some sort of levelling, each story assuming, in its pointless specificity, as much—or as little—importance or meaning as the others. The impression that the reader is left with is that of an endless flux, not unlike the television flow alluded to above, which is a means of abolishing the requisites of traditional plot making (no climax or anticlimax, no rise in dramatic intensity ever takes place, there is no real beginning or middle or end).

Since this permanent flow is accompanied by minimal transition—in a narrative which relies on a structural device close to *asyndeton*—, the main impression is one of shifting from one story to the next without ever stopping for a long time over one and the same narrative strand, and without really linking any of two stories, which is tantamount to promoting an impression of “continuous transition” (Jencks in Cahoone ed. 475). This constant shifting from one thematic and diegetic world to another—the stories being generally linked by the most tenuous of threads or pretexts, as suggested above—is reminiscent of the zapping or channel-hopping technique. The impression is reinforced by the use of ellipsis or, more specifically, *aposiopesis*, at the end of narrative blocks (Fischer: 1997 22). The main consequence deriving from this textual strategy is a lack in depth and a promotion of surfaces. The reading that is privileged here is one very much akin to scanning (as opposed to skimming), since very little information is ultimately conveyed, and since a levelling of information is inherent in the scanning or browsing movement. Unlike what happens in the world of the eponymous collector, the reader is not enabled to—or at least given the necessary tools to—select, sort out and classify the stories/information units into a hierarchy. The narrator is thus allowed to flex its processing muscles by showing off its entomological/encyclopaedic knowledge, while the reader is ironically left to his own devices.<sup>9</sup>

One of the correlatives of this textual strategy is the creation of an impression of permanent deferral, of the containment of any

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<sup>9</sup> The promotion of a surface model as opposed to a depth model of reading is highly reminiscent of what Roland Barthes says, in *Essais critiques*, about the French Nouveau Roman which is no longer chthonian but strictly terrestrial, in which exteriority has superseded interiority, *etc.* (39-40).



closure in the meaning of the novel as a whole. In many passages, the dominant impression is one of recognition, that of the structure of *The Arabian Nights*, in which Scheherazade is compelled to keep telling stories to escape from death. This obstructive function of narration<sup>10</sup> is made all the more perceptible when Nikki, the postmodern *pícaro*, finds herself in a sorry plight. The past temporarily seems on the brink of catching up with her and she is confronted with a character sinisterly called "Mr Annihilator" who irrupts into the present with a retributive purpose. Being granted a few minutes' reprieve, Nikki is made to perform a few kinky stunts (she used to be an acrobat as well as a prostitute), and the only way to postpone what she seems to consider the last of curtain calls, cannot but keep spinning yarns to keep up her tormentor's interest (Fischer: 1997 201-13). However, no sense of suspense in the technical meaning of the term is allowed to arise here, in that by this time in his/her progress, the reader has come to realise that the point of the novel is precisely to defer resolution, to promote flux and endless hopping from one story to another, whether it belongs to the same narrative level or not, in this multi-storied—in more than one sense—narrative.<sup>11</sup> In other terms, the digressive impulse which is at work in the novel signposts one of its main messages, *i.e.* the problematical nature of narrative organisation, or narrative, and of the access to stable reference. *The Collector Collector* resorts to a series of digressions and resumptions whose sequencing introduces an element of randomness into the overall economy of a narrative characterised by a high degree of structural fraying (Fischer: 1997 131). Some consciousness of this effect is shared with the reader through a certain number of what might be called "distracters" (cumulative references to the highly improbable earrings, to a jar of pickled beetroot, and to a frozen iguana) which crop up in rhyme- or refrain-like fashion to

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<sup>10</sup> For more detail about the obstructive function—analysed in connection with what rhetoricians and narratologists call *metalepsis*—, see Gérard Genette, "Discours du récit," *Figures III* (243).

<sup>11</sup> In this respect, one might see as one of the novel's most obvious hypotexts Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, in so far as *The Collector Collector* is basically a novel about the impossibility of writing a novel, a story about the failure to write a story (through excessive story-telling, ironically enough).



underscore the text's progression or lack thereof, precisely. Such rhythmical devices, based on the principle of—more or less—regular recurrence are quite evocative of the chaotic movement of a racing engine, as already mentioned. They are meant to promote the impression of a permanent slippage of meaning, of an infinite deferral of closure, stability and order. They implicitly betray the text's tendency to eschew reference and indicate that in the exhausted world of *The Collector Collector*, ironically, and despite the apparent plenitude of facts, stories and references, no overall, stable meaning may be achieved: the zapping movement of the text is emblematic of the fragmentation and openness characteristic of postmodern discourse (whether fictional or historiographic or both). Once again, what the reader is left with is the hectic, entrapped contemplation of a text which ironically uses the fundamental ingredients of historiographically-inclined discourse (omniscient narrator, potential access to the past and genealogies, etc.) the better to abuse them. What is at stake is the expression of the waning of causality, meaning and reference.

Despite its many protestations that it is governed by causality, discourse in *The Collector Collector* evinces a high degree of allusiveness and even randomness. This is perceptible in the elliptical tendency at work in the narrative syntax governed by strict juxtaposition. This is also made prominent through the recurrence of link-words denoting causality that may appear in the micro-narratives in an excessively high proportion. In fact, in one and the same paragraph meant to evoke the improbable reunion of two drug dealers, the above-mentioned frozen iguana and a half-doped cheetah meet. In this hallucinatory, potentially surrealistic and disbelief-inducing paragraph, the recurrence of the same basic marker of causality ("cause" is used four times) sounds as a vindication of consistency in a text whose characteristic is the illogical, the meaningless and the random (Fischer: 1997 130).

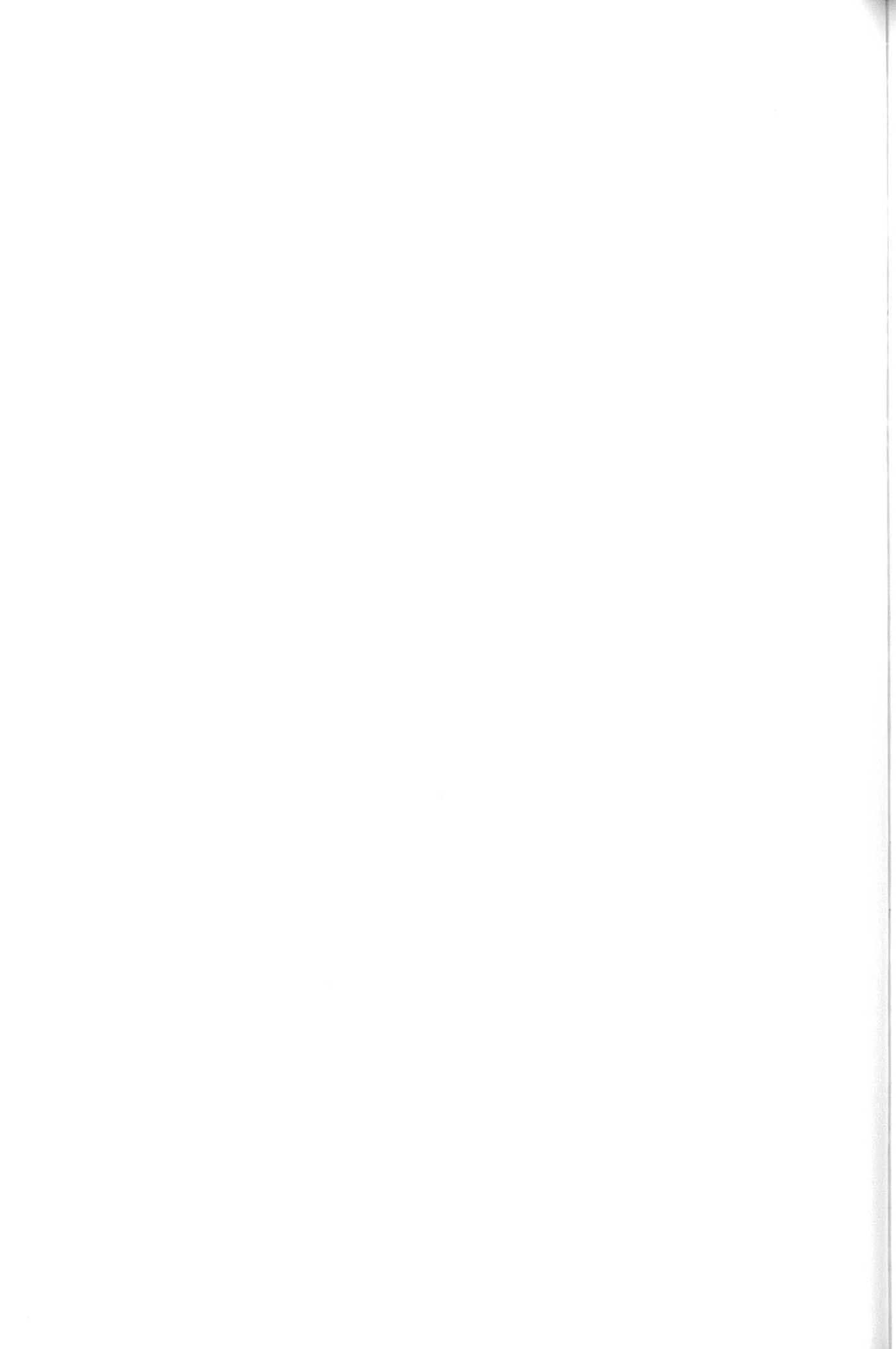
This tendency is exacerbated by the resort to what might be called pseudo-anaphora (a device akin to that known, in the study of narrative *incipits*, as "anaphorical petition"). In fact, one linguistic trait of the novel consists in taking for granted the fact that the reader is aware of the identity and existence of some of the

protagonists of the story. This is a way to play with the conventions of grammatical determination, since the pronouns which are used have no referent, the reader being at a loss to reconstruct the chain of events and envisage the consistency of the episodes. One notable instance of that randomness-generating device may be found in the above-mentioned chapter entitled "Mr Annihilator" in which the latter is tersely introduced, right in the middle of a narrative block, and without the least attempt at preparation, in the following way: "He comes in. The new door and the new locks just don't take their work seriously" (Fischer: 1997 201). The reader is certainly not surprised to witness yet another attempt at breaking into Rosa's house (the mechanical, predictable aspect of the situation generating humour). What is less expected (even though the technique recurs through the novel) is the fact that a new character drops out of the blue, thus inducing a breakdown in the chain of causality and stretching once again the ideal of consistency to breaking point.<sup>12</sup> Of course, the character called Mr Annihilator will disappear as suddenly as he was introduced (mainly thanks to the intervention of an equally improbable obese lesbian guardian angel who will sail in to Nikki's rescue), a way of underlining the autonomy of each narrative unit, of exploding narrative continuity, of flaunting the absence of concatenation and the tenuous nature of causality in a narrative rosary whose flux is reminiscent of what is described as "TV ephemera" (McHale 121).

The breaking off of causality is also suggested through the omnipresent vision of infinite circularity and self-reference, under the guise of linguistic games and puns. This tendency is perceptible from the title which iconically points to the workings of textual redoubling. In fact, many episodes are meant to suggest the idea that, in the text, most values or meanings are square meanings or meanings squared. This is what is suggested in a similar passage in which the ironic figure of what the French call *l'arroseur arrosé* is

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<sup>12</sup> When this technique is applied to the appearance and disappearance of objects, the effect is one of an ectoplasmic manifestation or—paradoxically—materialisation whose purpose, in toying with the notion of ontological plurality, is to emphasise the feeling of inconsistency while problematising the access to any sort of reference (Fischer: 1997 107).



and copy, in conformity with the contemporary analyses on the nature of simulacra. The question of originality and of the precedence of the model over the copy is thematically and explicitly inscribed in the text from the *incipit*, when the eponymous vase introduces itself in an assertively self-righteous way: "I'm the original, so genuine, the genuine ones look like copies, which, of course, is what they are" (Fischer: 1997 1). The collector collector is thus presented from the start as the paragon of genuineness, which allows for the voicing of a paradox: that of the identity between the genuine object and the copy. Appearances ("look like") and reality ("they are") are thus reconciled in an irrational, illogical way, which is a way of pointing to the shiftiness of the relationship between model and copy, reference and sign. This is taken one step further in a long chapter entitled "Moustache Chewers of the Past and Their Painters," which evokes the tribulations of a ship and the pirates manning her. The protagonist of the story is a painter, Lucas, obsessed with the idea of copying since he confines a member of the crew who slandered his paintings to the nether regions of the hold and punishes him by making him try to create perfect copies of his works. In a later stage of his travels, Lucas, bent on improving the sailors' spirits during an infinite and hazardous voyage, against all odds, sets about painting the seascape corresponding to the weather conditions of the following day: "He sat down and painted the sea for the next day: a grey sea and clouds in the shape of icy reptiles. Sure enough, the next day the painting was a perfect match for the weather" (Fischer: 1997 185). By moving from retrospection to projection, the passage formulates a radical comment on the model/copy, reference/*mimesis* relationship. What used to precede succeeds, and it is the copy that now assumes precedence over the original, the imitation that anticipates the model. In the context of a work conventionally expected to belong to the (sub-)genre or mode called historiographic metafiction, this comment sounds quite subversive in that what is generally considered the very stuff of narrative (*i.e.* the narration of past events using what is known as the aorist) is itself both imitated and undermined—in other words parodied—through the means of a text which produces a copy not of the past but of its conventional opposite, *i.e.* the future. The

subversive impulse thus reaches its apex in such passages where the encoding of the loss of reference prevails. In the same way as with simulacra (in Baudrillard's acceptance of the term), the sign has become nothing but a copy of other signs *ad infinitum*, without there being any possibility of ever achieving any connection with an original reference (Baudrillard 12-13).<sup>13</sup> What happens here is that, on top of the waning of causality, consistency and probability, on top of the precession of fragmentation, diffraction and randomness, the text inscribes the desire to strike at the roots of the tradition of representation in general, hence of the convention of realism, thus problematising the question of reference, hence of historical reference. *The Collector Collector* thus appears as a text to end all texts, as a (half-)jocular way of analysing and undermining the fundamentals of realism, historiographic metafiction and, further down, reference.

Diffraction, separation, the use of narrative parataxis, asyndeton and aposiopesis, associated with inordinately digressive proclivities, rhythmical and tonal variation, those seem to be the hallmarks of Tibor Fischer's third novel. They promote the sense of an informational and aesthetic levelling whose correlative is the impression of a slippery surface, the absence of any depth, hence the passage from a modernist poetics and aesthetics dominated by depth to a postmodernist one characterised by the slipperiness of surfaces. *The Collector Collector* is a novel which stages the waning of transcendent verticality in favour of the adoption of a rampant horizontality, all this being encapsulated in the image of the television or video flow. In fact, in Fischer's novel, peripeteia and crises are strung in such an elementary mechanical and

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<sup>13</sup> This is quite in keeping with Gilles Deleuze's demonstrations about the nature of simulacra in his *Différence et répétition*. What is stressed in his analyses is the connection between the nature of the simulacrum and the subversion of *mimesis* that can degenerate into chaos: "[P]ar simulacre, nous ne devons pas entendre une simple imitation, mais bien plutôt l'acte par lequel l'idée même d'un modèle ou d'une position privilégiée se trouve contestée, renversée. Le simulacre est l'instance qui comprend une différence en soi, comme (au moins) deux séries divergentes sur lesquelles il joue, toute ressemblance abolie, sans qu'on puisse dès lors indiquer l'existence d'un original et d'une copie" (95).



cumulative way that they simply cease to make sense, which is a means of causing the foundations of the plot to collapse, of erasing all opposition between dramatic intensification and slackening, of abolishing any attempt at difference, hence meaning. In other terms, fluency is used as a device to negate reference and history, and even as the very image of that negation. Through the means of zapping or channel hopping, what is expressed is the refusal of reminiscence, the rejection of debt, the eviction of reference. Furthermore, this informational levelling is associated with an emotional flattening down and benumbing: *The Collector Collector* appears as a textual machine eschewing emotion and epiphany, using a tongue-in-cheek tone verging on the ironic (but can irony survive in such an aseptic background?), using the interminably cumulative and infinitely distancing power of humour to pre-empt—at least apparently—any emotional involvement, so as to add to the waning of reference something sounding like a “waning of affect,” to borrow a phrase from Jameson.

In fact, the novel reacts to the contemporary *doxa* about representation and historiography by providing what might be called a “ludification” of that very *doxa* about *mimesis* and about time, about history and its dominating discourses, about the contemporary constructions grafted onto the notion of historiographic metafiction. What the stress on zapping and fluency is meant to convey is a narrative image of what Gilles Deleuze famously called *nomadisme*, or even *déterritorialisation*, the better to lay the stress on the notion of openness, of movement, of endless process. This, in turn, is a way of voicing the need or desire for an endless openness, the absence of any limits, the possibility of an infinite progression, the effacement of all textual boundaries—and most especially temporal boundaries. This is tantamount to rejecting the idea of both future and past while promoting the vision and power of an endless or “continuing present,” to borrow a phrase from Alison Lee (Lee in Duperray ed. 221). In other terms, this is a way of striking at the roots of what is known as temporal synthesis.

By focusing on fluency and zapping, what the novel does is register the paradigm shift which has come to characterise postmodern culture. This is done by indicating that the welter of

intertextual reference has shifted from one traditional set of media or idioms—literature, music, the graphic arts or film—to another, *i.e.* video. This is a way of suggesting the waning of both cultural and historical reference and, perhaps, one of the novel's main ironies lies in the fact that it insists on voicing the disappearance of a period, of a tradition, and of a worldview in a somehow dignified, anti-mawkish tone: it mourns under the guise of diverting. If some poignancy may be found in that text, it certainly lies in this apparently unbridgeable gap between mourning and celebration, laughter being used in order to exorcise loss (not unlike Yeats's tragic joy or Bakhtin's carnivalesque laughter, for that matter), which, in the narrator's terms, may also account for the novel's central metaphor and running zeugma: "People lose everything: their earrings, their teeth, their hopes, their outrage, their intimates, their memories and themselves; the only thing they can't lose is loss. The loss of loss. Ending ending. That's the big project. Ask a collector" (Fischer: 1997 121).

Jean-Michel GANTEAU<sup>14</sup>



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<sup>14</sup> Université de Montpellier III, B.P. 5043, 34032 Montpellier Cedex 3.

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