Precarious Provenance: Legitimacy, Surrogacy and Betrayal in the Value of Art and Family in Honoré de Balzac's Le Cousin Pons and Donna Tartt's The Goldfinch

Ryan Coburn

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/masters_theses_2

Part of the French and Francophone Literature Commons

Recommended Citation


This Open Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations and Theses at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.
PRECARIOUS PROVENANCE: LEGITIMACY, SURROGACY AND BETRAYAL IN
THE VALUE OF ART AND FAMILY IN HONORÉ DE BALZAC’S LE COUSIN
PONS AND DONNA TARTT’S THE GOLDFINCH

A Thesis Presented

By

RYAN PAUL COBURN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
Of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

February 2017

French and Francophone Studies
PRECARIOUS PROVENANCE: LEGITIMACY, SURROGACY AND BETRAYAL IN
THE VALUE OF ART AND FAMILY IN HONORÉ DE BALZAC’S LE COUSIN
PONS AND DONNA TARTT’S THE GOLDFINCH

A Thesis Presented

By

RYAN PAUL COBURN

Approved as to style and content by:

__________________________________________________
Luke Bouvier, Chairperson

__________________________________________________
Philippe Baillargeon, Member

__________________________________________________
Luke Bouvier
Graduate Program Director
French and Francophone Studies, LLC Department

__________________________________________________
William Moebius
Chair, Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my eternal gratitude to Luke Bouvier for his unwavering support, patience and guidance throughout this whole process. His keen insight, steady voice of reason and invaluable edits are what got me through even the toughest of times and helped remind me that there was a light at the end of the tunnel. (Even if that light wasn’t always bright [AC].) Six years ago Luke was just another one of my teachers. Since then I have had the pleasure of working with him in several other capacities: while he remained one of my teachers, he also transitioned into my Graduate Program Director, my advisor and mentor and ultimately ended up being a true friend. Luke, I can’t thank you enough.

I would also like to extend a special thanks to Philippe Baillargeon, who like Luke, helped make my UMass experience one best chapters of my life thus far. It was Philippe who encouraged me to pursue a Master’s degree in the first place and who was always there to pick me up when I was down and to point me down the right path. A true shoulder to cry on and a professor in every sense of the word, your warmth and generosity will never be forgotten.

Finally, I would like to thank Nathalie from the bottom of my heart. You’ve stood by me through it all and haven’t stopped encouraging me since day one. You believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself and for that I can’t thank you enough. You’re my rock (the smartest rock that I’ve ever known!) and I would be nowhere without you.
ABSTRACT

PRECARIOUS PROVENANCE: LEGITIMACY, SURROGACY AND BETRAYAL IN
THE VALUE OF ART AND FAMILY IN HONORÉ DE BALZAC’S LE COUSIN
PONS AND DONNA TARTT’S THE GOLDFINCH

February 2017

RYAN PAUL COBURN, B.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST
M.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST
Directed by: Luke Bouvier

This thesis focuses on the problematic nature of art valuation, more specifically concerning the ideas of use-value and exchange-value in Honoré de Balzac’s Le Cousin Pons and Donna Tartt’s The Goldfinch. Written in nineteenth-century France, Balzac’s novel paints a bleak portrait of what he believes to be a morally corrupt society obsessed with the lesser things in life such as money and status rather than what is truly important: culture and art. In her novel, which bears a striking resemblance to Balzac’s, Tartt presents her perception of present-day United States, also plagued with moral corruption and disregard for the cultural significance of art, but ultimately attempts to convey the message that art will prevail and transcend not only time but human weakness as well.

This analysis will attempt to trace the evolution of the value of the collections of art in these two novels. Through the examination of the themes of legitimacy, surrogacy and betrayal, I will analyze the paradoxes of value of both art and family structure.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. ARTWORK, FAMILY STRUCTURE AND THE PARADOXES OF VALUE</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Real and Surrogate Families</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Sylvain Pons</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Theodore Decker</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Art Collections</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Le Musée Pons</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <em>The Goldfinch</em></td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Hobie’s Changelings</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THE ELUSIVE VALUE OF ART, FAMILY AND SELF-WORTH</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Betrayal of Family and Art</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Theodore Decker</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Sylvain Pons</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Art and Self-Worth: Crises of Value</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. <em>The Goldfinch</em></td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Hobie’s Changelings</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Le Musée Pons

CONCLUSION

APPENDIX : A SAMPLING OF WORKS REFERENCED

BIBLIOGRAPHY
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. <em>Peter and Paul</em>, della Porta (1513) Pinacoteca Vaticana</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <em>Portrait of a Young Venetian Woman</em>, Durer (1507) Dahlem Museum</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <em>Wooded Landscape with Travellers and Beggars on a Road</em>, Hobbema (1668) Windsor Castle</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

“En effet, tout s’enchaîne dans le monde réel. Tout mouvement y correspond à une cause, toute cause se rattache à l’ensemble; et, conséquemment, l’ensemble se représente dans le moindre mouvement.”

This Master’s thesis will discuss the problematic nature of art valuation, centered on the ideas of use-value and exchange-value in Honoré de Balzac’s *Le Cousin Pons* and Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch*. The task of art valuation is multi-layered and complex. First, an object must be recognized as art and deemed to embody some sort of value, by someone other than the producer. In this initial phase, the work must be made public to some degree and then accepted as art by the audience to whom it is presented. Pierre Bourdieu describes this process of art becoming cultural objects valued by society in his work, *The Field of Cultural Production*: “The work of art is an object which exists as such only by virtue of the (collective) belief which knows and acknowledges it as a work of art.”

This process, however, is not limited to recognizing objects as art, since it can be seen, for example, as mirroring the process that a private company goes through to become public during an initial public offering (IPO), in hopes of having its value recognized as a monetary value on the entity itself. Such a parallel leaves the reader no choice but to begin thinking about art not only in cultural terms, but in economic terms as well. Bourdieu goes on to describe just how instrumental this recognition by the collective is, solidifying the link between perception and acceptance, both crucial elements involved in the valuation of

2 *The Field of Cultural Production*, 35.
Given that works of art exist as symbolic objects only if they are known and recognized, that is, socially instituted as works of art and received by spectators capable of knowing and recognizing them as such, the sociology of art and literature has to take as its object not only the material production but also the symbolic production of the work, i.e. the production of the value of the work or, which amounts to the same thing, of beliefs in the value of the work.\textsuperscript{3}

* * *

Once established as legitimate, art functions in a multitude of capacities depending on whose possession it is in and the audience that is viewing it. For those driven by economic motivation, the primary function of a piece of art necessarily has to do with money. In such an instance, any given work of art can serve as an investment to be shared, offered as a gift, enjoyed, critiqued, or used to demonstrate greatness, talent and skill. Thus, we have the ability to trade, collect and sell such works.

For some, the value of art is purely aesthetic. William Grampp illustrates how the price of a work is linked to the value of the pleasure that one derives from it:

\begin{quote}
A consequence of the relation of the values is that the price of a work of art is proportional to its aesthetic utility. That, in turn, means the price of work A is to its aesthetic utility as the price of B is to its aesthetic. This is another way of saying the prices of things are proportional to their [marginal] utilities. In ordinary language that means when we buy something we believe it is worth its price; otherwise we would not buy it.\textsuperscript{4}
\end{quote}

This is to say that the more an object of art is enjoyed or appreciated, the more it will be worth and valued by the person or people who admire it. This type of assessment is

\textsuperscript{3} \textit{The Field of Cultural Production}, 37.
extremely personal and subjective and it does not exactly help when trying to concretely quantify such value. In order to be able to do that and to continue further in discussing and assessing how much an artist’s product is actually worth, we must familiarize ourselves with the well-known distinction between “use-value” and “exchange-value,” such as Jean-Joseph Goux defines it:

Use-value is the physical, incarnated, perceptible aspect of the commodity, while exchange-value is a supernatural abstraction, invisible and supersensible. No biologist’s scalpel has ever found a person’s soul or anima, just as “hitherto, no chemist has been able to discover exchange-value in a pearl or a diamond”.

The use-value of artwork tends to be the easier of the two to describe and verbalize. One can express like or dislike for an art object, and from that description, others can gather how much the object in question is worth to them in terms of aesthetic pleasure, without needing a dollar amount. It is the exchange-value that causes more of a problem because of the seemingly sheer arbitrariness of placing a dollar value on an artwork. However, one would still need to know such an exchange-value, for example, if an object no longer has any use-value to its owner and thus needs to be sold or exchanged for something else.

As concerns exchange-value, the value of the piece in question must be quantified and linked to a common unit of measurement, a substance such as currency, that is internationally recognized and whose legitimacy and value are undoubted and backed by a

---

universal standard. Prices must be assigned to objects that might otherwise be considered priceless in terms of their aesthetic value. Such monetary values are necessary in order to know how much to pay to buy, sell or insure a work of art. Necessarily, the art must be evaluated, and its worth must be given a value in terms of dollars or another generally accepted currency. However, this process is no straightforward matter, and assigning prices to any type of art is easier said than done. To achieve this goal of putting a price on art, the artists as well as the audience for the art must engage in conversation, to establish a common ground and a baseline guide for the works concerned, as Bourdieu suggests: “In short, they take part in a struggle for the monopoly of legitimate discourse about the work of art, and consequently in the production of the value of the work of art.” As complicated as this process may be, it is not a new one, which is to say that the struggle has existed since art was considered as more than just an instructional tool or a luxury item, custom ordered and made: “The art business, a trade in things that have no price, belongs to the class of practices in which the logic of the pre-capitalist economy lives on (as it does, in another sphere, in the economy of exchanges between the generations).”

---

6 As Goux makes clear, gold is the traditional “universal standard”: “Contained in the opposition between the commodity itself is not only the spiritualist opposition between soul and body but also the idealist opposition between the ideal and the real. The commodity’s value “is made ideally perceptible through [its] equivalence with gold, through a relation to gold which, so to say, exists only as a phantom in the other things’ heads.” If the value of the commodity is its ideal expression, as well as (simultaneously, in the same act) its ideal. For if “to fix its price, the equating of it with imaginary gold suffices, its equation with gold is merely anticipated, not a fait accompli” in Symbolic Economies, 19.

7 The Field of Cultural Production, 36.

8 The Field of Cultural Production, 74.
These concepts are crucial; when it comes to understanding what motivates the main characters analyzed in this thesis, Sylvain Pons and Theo Decker, it is necessary to remember that for both of them, the value of “their” artwork is primarily of an aesthetic nature and that for them, the use-value of the pieces is paramount. It is thus implicit that those surrounding the art have arrived at the point of participating in the discussion of determining the valuation of the paintings, in monetary terms, not by choice but out of an obligation that has arisen because of unfortunate and unjust circumstances. The main characters focused on in this analysis are not explicitly considered or consulted during the process and yet, as Grampp explains: “The price itself would be determined by bargaining and would be somewhere between the least the seller would accept and the most the buyer would pay,”9 which necessarily involves them in the equation. As ridiculous as it sounds, the use-value experienced by the main characters is disregarded in this process, and the exchange-value is assigned based on other external factors, perverting the sanctity of the aesthetic relationship between artwork and audience.

The traditional and perhaps initial instinct followed when attempting to assign value to art begins with evaluating the labor that was put into its production, as Goux explains: “Thus, in the economic sphere, there is concrete productive labor, employing labor power and technology, and there is a law of the exchange of products, as a function of the labor time required to produce them.”10 However, as Goux goes on to explain, we can see that it

9 Pricing the Priceless, 139.
10 Symbolic Economies, 57.
is not only the individual artist’s labor that is taken into account: “In sum, only the alienation of individual labors makes it possible to establish a common value and the regulation of exchange.” As Goux makes clear, it is not just the labor that is put into the works of art, but also the pain and suffering surrounding the pieces, experienced by not only the artists, but the owners of the pieces later on as well: “value thus resembles compensation for pain: the cost of a commodity is the pains taken for it; its value is fundamentally defined as the equivalent of something suffered.”

Suffering is a constant for the characters in both novels examined in this analysis, yet one cannot forget that value assigned to art, both use and exchange, is never permanently set and is anything but constant:

The meaning of a work (artistic, literary, philosophical, etc.) changes automatically with each change in the field within which it is situated for the spectator or reader. This effect is most immediate in the case of so-called classic works, which change constantly as the universe of coexistent works changes.

While this sense of impermanence and mobility may be perceived as unsettling and destabilizing, it is also relevant when thinking about the physical exchanges and transactions that artwork may experience, all of which rely on some sort of currency of exchange.

Another major factor that must be taken into account when trying to understand and assign value to art, and which will be considered under many different circumstances in

11 Symbolic Economies, 55.
12 Symbolic Economies, 59.
13 The Field of Cultural Production, 31.
this analysis, is time. Time plays a role in regulating the circulation of these “commodities,” which inarguably affects their value: “As the circulation of commodities develops, there arise conditions thanks to which the alienation of commodities and the realization of their prices become separated by an interval of time.”14 Not only does time affect the artwork being studied, but it also affects the main characters of the novels and the readers as well. By giving such an important function or power to time, both authors make it clear that in each case it is time that acts as an enemy or as a prevailing force that must be overcome. The two following quotations demonstrate, if only briefly, the characters’ relationships with time which consequently resemble obsessions:

Depuis que les deux amis vivaient ensemble, Schmucke avait vu Pons changeant sept fois d’horloge en en troquant toujours une inférieure contre une plus belle. Pons possédait alors la plus magnifique horloge de Boulle, une horloge en ébène incrustée de cuivre et garnie de sculptures, de la première manière de Boulle.15

…every clock in the house said something different and time didn’t actually correspond to the standard measure but instead meandered along at its own sedate tick-tock, obeying the pace of his antique-crowded back-water, far from the factory-built, epoxy-glued version of the world.16

Another element aside from time that is inseparable from value and art itself, is the location in which the art is stored and displayed. How art is stored and consequently displayed depends entirely on the intended function, audience and owner of the art. Some believe that art is meant to be enjoyed by all and that everyone should have equal access to

14 Symbolic Economies, 37.
15 Le Cousin Pons, 52.
16 The Goldfinch, 395.
it, regardless of their social standing or level of wealth. When this is the case, art is considered to be a public good:

Art is a public good. In its pure form, a public good has three properties: one person can use more of it without there being less of it available to everyone else; no one can be denied access to it; and everyone must use it or be affected by it whether one wants to be or not.¹⁷

When this proves true, art will be stored and displayed in museums, allowing not only for the safe keeping and maintaining of the works, but also granting equal access to all those interested in partaking. Museums will thus generally either be privately funded, still with the mission of being accessible to the public, or they will be state-run: funded and supported by the government. Others however, view art as an instrument of private pleasure and as something to be enjoyed intimately, regardless of the cost to them or the general public. In terms of experiencing pleasure and aesthetic value, the intensity of feelings may vary, but eventually it boils down to the same thing: “To state the point simply, a painting has aesthetic value to a person if it gives him the satisfaction he calls aesthetic.”¹⁸ For some, it is the quick shiver of the spine accompanied by barely perceptible and microscopic beads of transpiration gathered in an elegant arch at the top of the forehead waiting to fall or to be swept away. For others, it is the silent wave that washes over them from the inside out, leaving them paralyzed and numb to everything else around them. For Theo’s mother in *The Goldfinch*, it is “pure bliss, perfect heaven,… ‘It’s crazy,’ she’d said, ‘but I’d be

¹⁷ *Pricing the Priceless*, 240.
¹⁸ *Pricing the Priceless*, 20.
perfectly happy if I could sit looking at the same half dozen paintings for the rest of my life. I can’t think of a better way to go insane.'

On the other hand, other owners of art view their possessions simply as items that serve as financial instruments rather than as objects of beauty, and they thus label them as investments or commodities. This attitude tends to ignore all other possibilities and sees no other value for art beyond its monetary worth: “The economic side of art is said to be necessary or inescapable. What is denied is that it has anything to do with art itself—the goal, purpose, objective, or end sought by people who provide it.” When this is the case, the works will be kept in a private collection or storage, and the privilege of visiting them will be restricted and restrained according to the owners’ desires and preferences, if they are interested in displaying it and allowing visitors at all.

In a way, this determination of value concerning art could be seen as being a judgment call, an examination of the art’s various qualities that constitute its identity. As previously mentioned, value and identity cannot be assessed without considering the owner or audience as well, thus this analysis must consider the characters possessing the collections analyzed, in order to paint a complete and detailed picture of what is going on in the novels concerning the process of valuation, in order to fully grasp the inextricably connected nature of the relationship that exists between observer and object being observed.

20 *Pricing the Priceless*, 16.
Thus, the goal of this Master’s thesis is to analyze the evolution of the value of the artwork around which Honoré de Balzac’s *Le Cousin Pons* and Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch* are structured, as well as the identities of the two main characters, Sylvain Pons and Theodore Decker, in terms of legitimacy, surrogacy and betrayal. Both of these novels focus on this vexed question of art valuation, and they are both structured by the tension between use- and exchange-value. Ultimately, they both function as critiques of the exchange-value of art, but in somewhat different ways.

Balzac is more straightforward in this regard, since he notoriously disliked the idea of art as subject to the ruthless nature of commodity circulation and thinks that the reigning monetary values of nineteenth-century France are inimical to authentic aesthetic values and art production. Thus the bleak outcome of the novel, where Pons and Schmucke are basically destroyed and the collection is pillaged by the Camusots (their inauthenticity as a dubious, recently ennobled family is obviously related to their lack of authentic aesthetic sensibility -- thus it is no surprise that the pillaging of the art collection ends up serving the social ambitions of the family -- helping them "circulate" as dubious social "commodities," while their "real" family relation -- Pons -- is sacrificed).

*The Goldfinch*, though, reaches more nuanced conclusions. For one thing, even when the painting is out of Theo's possession, it does not really function properly as a commodity, since it is paradoxically too valuable, too well known to be openly bought and sold on a market, even a black market. Its only real value in the end is in the one exchange that can return it to the realm of aesthetic appreciation -- the one where it is virtually sold back to the authorities (in exchange for a reward) and returned to the museum. More subtly,
though, the novel makes an argument for the paradoxically authentic aesthetic appreciation (use-value) of art objects that have no legitimate (or rather a greatly reduced) exchange-value -- those would be Hobie’s “changelings”, or heavily reworked antique furniture pieces, and the novel at the end makes a clear argument that the beauty of those pieces is real and that they have a legitimate use-value in this sense. So one could say that the novel is critiquing at some level the fetishism of "originals" (whether it be one's original, authentic family, or original, authentic pieces of art), since the surrogate family/art works turn out to be just as valuable in their own way, and maybe even more so.
A. Real and Surrogate Families

1. Sylvain Pons

The protagonist in Balzac’s *Le Cousin Pons* is an unfortunate art collector and failed musician of the loneliest kind. Stuck in the past, Sylvain Pons desperately tries to hold on to the remnants of the Empire. Everything from his old-fashioned outlook on life to his outdated wardrobe solidifies and justifies the fact that he is an outlier in the society in which he finds himself, a society that he does not want to be a part of and that likewise does not want him:

> Tout concordait si bien à ce spencer, que vous n’eussiez pas hésité à nommer ce passant un homme-Empire, comme on dit un meuble-Empire; mais il ne symbolisait l’Empire que pour ceux à qui cette magnifique et grandiose époque est connue, au moins *de visu*; car il exigeait une certaine fidélité de souvenirs quant aux modes. L’Empire est déjà si loin de nous, que tout le monde ne peut pas se le figurer dans sa réalité gallo-grecque.  

Over the course of the novel, Pons makes several half-hearted attempts at justifying or explaining his trouble adjusting and fitting in. One explanation that he offers is that his parents decided to have him late in life, which put him at a natural disadvantage, and

---

21 *Le Cousin Pons*, 2.
another is that he was simply born in the wrong century, “Les vieillards sont susceptibles, 
répondit le bonhomme, ils ont le tort d’être d’un siècle en retard.”22

Orphaned and solitary apart from his sole friend Schmucke, Pons spends the 
majority of his earnings on art and food, satisfying his need for both beauty and sustenance, 
his two obsessions or vices: “Pons était gourmand. Son peu de fortune et sa passion pour 
le bric-à-brac lui commandaient un régime diététique tellement en horreur avec sa gueule 
fine, que le célibataire avait tout d’abord tranché la question en allant dîner tous les jours 
en ville.”23 If he isn’t spending money on food, he is dining at the homes of his various 
relatives in order to satisfy his cravings. Although he is technically, yet distantly, related 
to some well-connected members of the new post-Empire society, Pons is often overlooked 
and forgotten. His greedy and status-driven family takes an interest in him only when they 
need something from him or when they think he can enhance their social reputation in some 
way.

Despite being Pons’s only surviving original family members, the people who make 
up this extended family do not even consider themselves to be his actual family, but rather 
continue to invite him to dine with them out of a perceived obligation. Furthermore, these 
continued invitations might even be considered cruel, since they are largely born from 
almost purely selfish motives and are more about the family’s desire to keep up their 
perceived appearances in the eyes of their social peers. For all that these cousins do not

22 Le Cousin Pons, 74.
23 Le Cousin Pons, 11.
lack in money or status, they lack in tact, and they often make their sentiments clear to Pons, not hiding the fact that they begin to regard his visits as inconvenient and unwelcome, and do not reciprocate the familial sentiments that Pons seems to feel towards them, “Le pauvre chef d’orchestre, réduit à parcourir le cercle de la famille, avait, comme on va le voir, beaucoup trop étendu la signification du mot famille.”

It is through statements like this one made early on in the novel that one understands that original does not necessarily mean legitimate and that being related by blood doesn’t necessarily add value to someone looking to belong in an “authentic” family unit.

Not only is our poor musician lonely and without a “real family,” but he is extremely ugly in terms of physical characteristics as well:

Cette face grotesque, écrasée en forme de potiron, attristée par des yeux gris surmontés de deux lignes rouges au lieu de sourcils, était commandée par un nez à la don Quichotte, comme une plaine est dominée par un bloc erratique. Ce nez exprime, ainsi que Cervantes avait dû le remarquer, une disposition native à ce dévouement aux grandes choses qui dégénère en duperie.

This physical unattractiveness certainly factored into Pons's lack of success in finding love in his younger days, but more importantly, it carries symbolic value with respect to his failure as a producer of art. Despite his intense love for art and objects of beauty, Pons never creates any physical piece of art himself, and he is often referred to as an “artiste raté.” Lacking motivation and skill, this man from another time ends up earning his living as the conductor of a small local orchestra. His appointment to this position was

---

24 Le Cousin Pons, 24.
25 Le Cousin Pons, 3.
given to him as a favor by one of his relations, perhaps demonstrating a sole instance of kindness put forth by them: “Pons, parasite de l’hôtel Popinot, fut un appoint du privilège,” becoming the musical director of “un opéra pour le peuple.”

Ironically however, at the end of his life, when the economic value of his art collection is established, all doubt seems to vanish and the familial bonds that seemed tenuous at best earlier in the novel are renewed and appear to be stronger than ever. Pons’s relatives suddenly recognize their poor, hungry cousin as a legitimate member of their family, once they discover his large collection of valuable art: “M. le président est le seul et unique héritier au troisième degré de M. Pons. M. Pons est très malade, il va tester, s’il ne l’a déjà fait, en faveur d’un Allemand son ami, nommé Schmucke, et l’importance de sa succession sera de plus de sept cent mille francs.” Once this large inheritance is at stake, the family members are quick to make it clear that they are indeed related after all and that they are aware of potential problems that may arise while asserting their rights as sole beneficiaries of his fortune, after having distanced themselves from Pons and after having all but disowned him. One can even go as far as to say that it is their actions that lead to the death of their cousin, in order to obtain what they want and what they believe to be rightfully theirs. In his study of art in French Romantic literature, Henry Majewski emphasizes the selfish and greedy nature of the “family” surrounding Pons, and he further suggests that Pons himself inadvertently assists them in their project, aimed at lining their

---

26 Le Cousin Pons, 21.
27 Le Cousin Pons, 211.
own pockets and leaving Schmucke without anything intended to be passed on to him from his dear friend Pons: “[…]. Pons, on the other hand, is finally driven to his death by his wealthy bourgeois relatives and their avaricious allies. His awkward and harmful efforts to help his family realize an advantageous marriage seal his fate”\(^{28}\) – especially after his family experiences what they believe to be a betrayal on the part of Pons.

Like most of the bourgeois members of society at the time, Pons’s family members, save for one or two, are ignorant when it comes to the appreciation of art and culture, and thus they are simply incapable of comprehending that to their unfortunate cousin, his collection represents more than a room full of pointless, seemingly insignificant objects. Luckily for Pons, the political instability in France in the wake of the French Revolution facilitated his obsession and made his acquisitions easier than they might have proven to be otherwise. Grampp points out that “the French Revolution changed both the demand and the supply of art, the immediate being more important than the lasting effects. The expropriation of the upper classes and confiscation of their art made it available to others in France and to foreign collectors.”\(^{29}\)

Because of his lack of immediate family and the strained relationship that exists between him and his extended family, Pons finds his only true friend in Schmucke, a naive German immigrant, who appears in effect as a substitute or “counterfeit” family member, but one whose authenticity and value are never put into question. Despite his good


\(^{29}\) Pricing the Priceless, 122.
intentions and his unwavering devotion to his friend Pons, Schmucke’s lack of understanding of the world eventually ends up hurting the two men and negatively affecting the value of Pons’s art. As Pons and Schmucke’s concierge, Madame Cibot, points out, Schmucke is particularly naïve concerning precisely the value of art: “Vous devriez avertir M. Schmucke de la valeur de toutes ces choses-là, car c’est un homme qu’on tromperait comme un enfant; il n’a pas la moindre idée de ce que valent les belles choses que vous avez!” 30

Likewise, Schmucke’s financial ignorance and vulnerability are even more evident when the rapacious Madame Cibot details his debts and liabilities: “Schmucke écoutait ce compte dans une stupéfaction très concevable, car il était financier comme les chats sont musiciens.” 31

As innocent as he may be, Schmucke has a passion for music and beautiful things, just as Pons does. The novel portrays him as particularly sensitive, and despite his minor character flaws and his somewhat reclusive tendencies, he finds in Pons his other half, and vice versa. The narrator evokes the depth of the relationship by investing it with clear homoerotic overtones, which simultaneously suggest its status as an alternate family structure based on shared aesthetic values: “Ce vieillard de naissance trouva dans l’amitié un soutien pour sa vie, il contracta le seul mariage que la société lui permît de faire, il épousa un homme, un vieillard, un musicien comme lui.” 32

For the well-being of Pons, he would sacrifice anything and everything, including his own happiness. Throughout the

---

30 Le Cousin Pons, 147.
31 Le Cousin Pons, 225.
32 Le Cousin Pons, 16.
course of their friendship, Schmucke is the only person who truly looks out for Pons and does what he can to keep his best friend’s interests first and foremost, as Pons himself eventually realizes: “J’aurais bien mieux fait, mon bon Schmucke, de suivre tes conseils! de dîner ici tous les jours depuis notre réunion! de renoncer à cette société, qui roule sur moi comme un tombereau sur un oeuf, et pourquoi?…”

Noting that it is primarily art that links the two together, Majewski points out that “the relationship between Pons and Schmucke is elevated to a quasi-religious level through art. Idealized in suffering, they are compared to a Renaissance Pietà in which Schmucke, like a mother, breathes life into his dying friend.”

The homoerotic overtones of the relationship between Pons and Schmucke are frequently evident throughout the novel, as are the allusions to their relationship as a marriage of sorts. After they first meet, the two men quickly develop a kind of codependency, which eventually becomes evident in all aspects of their lives, from their daily routines to their work at the opera:

Jamais peut-être deux âmes ne se trouvèrent si pareilles dans l’océan humain qui prit sa source au paradis terrestre, contre la volonté de Dieu. Ces deux musiciens devinrent en peu de temps l’un pour autre une nécessité. Réciproquement confidents l’un de l’autre, ils furent en huit jours comme deux frères. Enfin Schmucke ne croyait pas plus qu’il pût exister un Pons, que Pons ne se doutait qu’il existât un Schmucke.

Though the narrator refers to them as “two brothers,” the description suggests the incredulity of two lovers who are amazed to have found their ideal partners. They

---

33 Le Cousin Pons, 113.
34 Transposing Art into Texts in French Romantic Literature, 100.
35 Le Cousin Pons, 16.
eventually decide to share an apartment, “marrying” their finances and their misfortunes, and leaving their concierge Madame Cibot to manage the household and their money:

Schmucke et Pons, en mariant leurs richesses et leurs misères, avaient eu l’idée économique de loger ensemble, et ils supportaient également le loyer d’un appartement fort inégalement partagé, situé dans une tranquille maison de la tranquille rue de Normandie, au Marais.36

Likewise, the narrator specifically compares the two men to lovers, “des amants,” lost in their own world of private, intimate communication:

Pons pris la main de Schmucke, la mit entre ses mains, il la serra par un mouvement où l’âme se communiquait tout entière, et tous deux ils restèrent ainsi pensant quelques minutes, comme des amants qui se revoient après une longue absence.37

As suggested above, the novel situates this homoerotic “marriage of like minds” as an idealized alternate family structure based on shared aesthetic values – that is, on the use-value of art, or the aesthetic pleasure that the two men derive from it. At the same time, though, in a time period that viewed homosexual relationships as unnatural and homosexual marriage as an impossibility, the homoerotic nature of the relationship suggests to what extent this idealized structure will ultimately prove untenable as a force that can resist the prevailing monetary values of the society around them – that is, the destructive greed elicited by the exchange-value, or market value, of Pons’s art collection.

Madame Cibot, Pons and Schmucke’s concierge, is another character who might be considered, at least in her own mind, to be a kind of surrogate family member for Pons

---

36 Le Cousin Pons, 19.
37 Le Cousin Pons, 51.
who plays a huge role in sealing the fate of Pons and his collection. Unlike Schmucke, though, her interests are purely selfish and driven by her desire to become rich, even if she claims the opposite:

Mme Cibot aimait mille fois mieux être appréciée à sa valeur que payée; sentiment qui, bien connu, bonifie toujours les gages.\textsuperscript{38}

Also a bit like Pons in terms of being stuck in a past that was more interesting and enjoyable, Madame Cibot often reflects on her youth, a time when she was beautiful, well known in her society and apparently worth more than she feels she is now, which is not much—older and unattractive:

Madame Cibot atteignait à l'âge où ces sortes de femmes sont obligées de se faire la barbe. N’est-ce pas dire qu’elle avait quarante-huit ans? Une portière à moustaches est une des plus grandes garanties d’ordre et de sécurité pour un propriétaire. Si Delacroix avait pu voir Mme Cibot posée fièrement sur son balai, certes il en eût fait une Bellone!\textsuperscript{39}

As the novel progresses, the true character of Madame Cibot, “La Cibot, cette atroce comedienne,”\textsuperscript{40} becomes more and more evident, as the truth becomes rare and lies become commonplace. As such, there is even a verbal tick that emerges, revealing the instances of when she is about to lie: it becomes clear that whenever she says “parole d’honneur,” a lie will follow. Eventually, perhaps even more than the members of Pons’s original family, she can be considered ultimately responsible for the slow but sure death of Pons, as the lawyer Fraisier explains:

[...] mais il y a là, près du malade, une portière qui, pour avoir trente mille francs, le pousserait dans la fosse...Elle ne le tuerait pas, elle ne lui

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Le Cousin Pons}, 48.
\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Le Cousin Pons}, 45.
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Le Cousin Pons}, 221.
donnera pas d’arsenic, elle ne sera pas si charitable, elle fera pis, elle l’assassinera moralement, elle lui donnera mille impatiences par jour.\textsuperscript{41}

Other than Madame Cibot, there are also Pons’s neighbors who attempt to work their way into his life, solely for the purpose of getting close to his collection of art. Rémonencq figures prominently in this group: “En outre, un ferrailleur nommé Rémonencq occupait une boutique sur la rue. Ce Rémonencq, passé depuis quelques mois à l’état de marchand de curiosités, connaissait si bien la valeur bricabracoise de Pons, qu’il le saluait du fond de sa boutique, quand le musicien entrait ou sortait.”\textsuperscript{42} Although his intentions are not known to Pons, Rémonencq makes his dreams very clear to Madame Cibot, with whom he plots, and he also lets his amorous feelings for her be known as well. For Rémonencq, the only obstacles that stand in his way are two people whom he would desperately like to get rid of: Monsieur Cibot and Sylvain Pons. Along with Rémonencq, we find Élie Magus, a devoted art collector as well, who is not willing to let anyone or anything come between him and the pieces of art that he wants for his collection. Magus is an opportunist who, though not bold or evil enough to go after Pons’s artwork openly or on his own, does not hesitate in taking advantage of the opportunity, once it presents itself, to take possession of the pieces in Pons’s collection that he has been longing for, to add to his own.

\textsuperscript{41} Le Cousin Pons, 213.
\textsuperscript{42} Le Cousin Pons, 45.
2. Theodore Decker

Like Sylvain Pons, the protagonist of *The Goldfinch*, Theodore Decker, is also orphaned at a young age. Spending most of his young life in New York City with his nurturing and loving mother as well as a workaholic and abusive father, Theo learns early on what true loss is and that nothing is ever as everlasting as it seems. Even his apartment, which he thought was a permanent home and shelter, does not remain his or as it was before everything changes, “How could the apartment have seemed so permanent and solid-looking when it was only a stage set, waiting to be struck and carried away by movers in uniform?”

First shaken by his father’s abandonment of him and his mother and then traumatized by the tragic death of his mother in a terrorist bombing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (from which he himself manages to escape with relatively minor injuries), Theo eventually moves through life in a foggy haze caused by a constant feeling of emptiness and guilt, combined with a nasty mix of painkillers and other drugs. Once he loses his mother, Theo stays in New York for a bit, later moves to Las Vegas, then eventually returns to New York again, after his father’s fatal car accident. At this point, despite its familiarity, the city he likes to call home often causes him pain and has an adverse effect on his morale and well-being:

In New York, everything reminded me of my mother—every taxi, every street corner, every cloud that passed over the sun....

---

43 *The Goldfinch*, 193.
44 *The Goldfinch*, 221.
After the death of his mother and just before his father resurfaces to reclaim him in a half-hearted attempt to rebuild their original family unit, Theo just barely escapes the dreaded tentacles of Child Protective Services and a foster family by taking refuge in the home of wealthy family “friends,” the Barbours. It is within the walls of their apartment on the Upper East Side that Theo not only finds more pain, but also eventual solace and his first taste of a world made up of antique furniture and priceless pieces of art. Although Theo will come to recognize and appreciate the value of the pieces found in the apartment, upon his arrival here, it is the furthest thing from his mind and just adds to his feeling of being out of place in a sea of foreign faces and things:

Everything was lost, I had fallen off the map: the disorientation of being in the wrong apartment, with the wrong family, was wearing me down, so I felt groggy and punch-drunk, weepy almost, like an interrogated prisoner prevented from sleeping for days. Over and over, I kept thinking I’ve got to go home and then, for the millionth time, I can’t.45

To make it all worse, despite his longing for the return of normalcy and for his old home and his old life, neither of those exist any longer. He thus finds himself stuck in a semi-permanent state of transition, stripped of his closest family relations and left to fend for himself in a world where he doesn’t belong, much like Pons in post-Empire Paris.

Mrs. Barbour, a fervent art collector herself, becomes a sort of substitute mother for a time, almost like Madame Cibot is for Pons, but she is virtually incapable of letting her guard down and showing a soft maternal side to Theo, even when he needs it most. Mr. Barbour, on the other hand, despite being a workaholic who is obsessed with sailing, carries

45 *The Goldfinch*, 88.
out his role of substitute father with compassion and good intentions, though awkward and sometimes misplaced. Thanks to their opposing natures, the two surrogate parents provide a balance for Theo when equilibrium is just what he is searching for.

The Barbour children who act as surrogate siblings, with perhaps one exception, end up causing as much harm as good for Theo. The oldest of the four is Platt, a bully at school who thinks of himself as too important to pay attention to Theo, let alone be nice to him. In the early days of Theo’s adolescence, soon after his arrival at the Barbour’s in the wake of his mother’s death, the two youngest children, Kitsey and Toddy, come to resent Theo out of jealousy and envy, and so they do whatever they can to make him feel uncomfortable and even more out of place. They cannot understand why he is given special treatment, such as permission to drink coffee or to have extra servings of their favorite foods at breakfast. Eventually though, they will both come to love Theo in their own special ways; Kitsey becomes Theo’s fiancée and Toddy ends up choosing a career path in social services, thanks to the inspiration that Theo and the events that he undergoes provide.

Finally, there is Andy Barbour, one of Theo’s earliest and best friends. Although Theo himself is quite smart and shows the potential for a bright academic future, Andy is on a whole different level in terms of intelligence. He spends most of his time studying and partaking in academic extracurricular activities, and he is often bullied for his nerd-like qualities. Despite being slightly “cooler” than his friend Andy, Theo truly benefits and appreciates the time that they spend together in the early days right after the loss of his mother, and even into adulthood he remains recognizant of all of the time that Andy spent
with him while he was grieving, whether that meant awkward adolescent yet heart-felt conversations or long moments of supportive silence.

During the time of his stay at the Barbour’s, Theo also grows closer and closer to Hobie, the business partner of Welty, the man that he meets right after the explosion at the museum and who unknowingly changes his life forever. Theo describes his encounter with Welty in ethereal terms and so vividly that the spiritual connection between the two is evident: “But I mean—it’s like Welty’s energy, or force field—God that sounds so corny but I don’t know what else you’d call it—it’s been with me from that hour on. I was there for him and he was there for me. It’s sort of permanent.”

46 From this moment, Theo has the constant sense that Welty’s identity is fused with his own, and he is often as comforted as he is disturbed by the uncanny feeling that although he is often lonely, he never feels completely alone.

It is this deep connection with Welty that brings Theo in the first place to his and Hobie’s house, which doubles as a workshop. Resembling the scene depicting Theo’s dramatic escape from the museum after the attack, when he has trouble locating an exit, the first time he shows up to Hobie’s house is similarly significant, although this time it is thanks to Theo’s search for an entrance: “There was a stoop, going up to the first floor, but this time, I saw something I hadn’t seen before: a narrow doorwell, tucked halfway between number 8 and number 10, half-hidden by a rack of old-fashioned tin garbage cans.”

47

__________________________

46 The Goldfinch, 617.
47 The Goldfinch, 120.
as the entrance to the workshop is unassuming, so is the friendship that develops behind
the door, which seems to be protected and shielded from the harsh New York City reality
that surrounds it.

Despite the significant age difference between Theo and Hobie, it is in his kitchen
and over the first real meals he has eaten in weeks that Theo begins to feel safe again and
as if someone finally understands him. It is important to note that it is as much the
atmosphere of the place as it is the character of the man that fosters this sense of security
in Theo: “…I was soothed by the house, its sense of safety and enclosure: old portraits and
poorly lit hallways, loudly ticking clocks.”

Thanks to the sacred and almost unexplainable bond that exists between them,
reinforced by the therapeutic setting of Hobie’s workshop for restoring antique furniture,
Theo comes to realize that all hope is not lost and that although the person he most loved
in the world is gone, it would be possible to someday love again. It is also Hobie who in a
way heals Theo by providing him with the distraction of learning how to repair and restore
antique furniture. This is fortunate, since despite Theo’s academic promise, he will end up
putting these skills, along with his business prowess, to use later on to earn his living by
selling Hobie’s restored furniture and other antique curiosities.

Not only does he benefit from Hobie’s presence in his life as a surrogate father or
uncle – “It thrilled me, deplorably, when people mistook Hobie for my parent” – but he

48 The Goldfinch, 394.
49 The Goldfinch, 400.
also discovers that Pippa lives in the house with Hobie, Welty’s niece who also survived the bombing and with whom Theo instantly fell in love that fateful morning at the museum. Perhaps in part because they went through the same experience and perhaps partly because she is unlike any other girl he has ever met before, Theo instantly becomes obsessed with this young redheaded violinist, and although he will spend all of his time loving her and a good amount of time chasing after her, she manages to remain just outside of his grasp, as his ultimate object of unrequited love. It is not because he is unattractive like Pons, but rather because Pippa believes that they are both too damaged and too similar to create any sort of healthy relationship. This doesn’t mean, however, that there are not moments where the glimmer of possibility shimmers before the two young almost-lovers, both of whom are victims of tragedy and feel the weight of the world pushing against them:

But then finally we had to go inside and almost the instant we did the spell was broken, and in the brightness of the hallway we were embarrassed and stiff with each other, almost as if the house lights had been turned up at the end of a play, and all our closeness exposed for what it was: make-believe. For months I had been desperate to recapture that moment; and—in the bar, for an hour or two—I had. But it was all unreal again, we were back right where we started, and I tried to tell myself it was enough, just to have had her all to myself for a few hours. Only it wasn’t.\(^50\)

Ultimately, the unfulfilled relationship of Theo and Pippa strangely resembles the impossible "marriage" of Pons and Schmucke. In both cases, the relationship figures an idealized alternate family structure that stands in for a real family that is absent. And like Pons and Schmucke, the idealized pairing of Theo and Pippa is based on shared aesthetic

\(^{50}\) The Goldfinch, 619.
values (Pippa is a musician, and she and Theo first meet at the museum) that would function as a refuge against a hostile world where art is subjected to the most ruthless of monetary values, as will soon become evident in *The Goldfinch*. Though the relationship of Theo and Pippa proves just as untenable as such a refuge as Pons and Schmucke's partnership, *The Goldfinch* will ultimately reach much more nuanced and ambivalent conclusions about the possible survival of aesthetic values in the modern world than the bleak conclusions of *Le Cousin Pons*, as we will later see.

Just when Theo begins to settle in and manages to create a surrogate family around him in New York, his "real" family reemerges in the guise of his father, who shows up to take him away to live in Las Vegas with him. We soon learn, however, that this "real" family proves to be ironically inauthentic, as Theo's father is only interested in the money that Theo's mother put away for his education. Once he arrives in the barren, sterile desert of a half-empty Las Vegas housing development, Theo is thus once again left to fend for himself and must set about rebuilding a surrogate family, given the dysfunctionality and long absences of his gambling, alcohol, and drug-addicted father. Theo becomes aware of an otherness or of the existence of things that are both real and original and of other things that only appear to be, which begins in earnest when he becomes acquainted with Hobie’s changelings in New York City and continues here, with his new life in Las Vegas.

Once with his dad in Las Vegas, Theo struggles to find comfort in the vast desert land of artificial happiness and prosperity, while attempting to reconnect with a man that he never truly connected with in the first place. In contrast with the cramped gray hustle and bustle of New York, Theo does not know what to do with himself in the bright spread-
out land of opportunity, since everything seems so foreign and inaccessible. Even his bedroom, which is supposed to be an escape or a sort of sanctuary, has a hospital-like sense of sterility to it, from the icy cold air blasting from the vents to the rough new bedsheets still in the package. Everything is almost too clean and too new, not matching this experienced boy who has been around the city block a few times more than the average Las Vegas resident or tourist, there to tempt fate and to try their luck at the imaginary and other-worldly casinos.

As Schmucke is there for Pons, there is one person that Theo meets who becomes closer to him and gets to know him more than anyone else: Boris. Although Theo fails in creating a true surrogate family structure with Pippa back in New York, he succeeds in doing so, at least for a fair amount of time, in Las Vegas with Boris, who becomes the brother that he never had. This Eastern European-born citizen of the world is both the best and worst thing to happen to Theo. With his mysterious and alluring nature, Boris is nothing short of intriguing: “Though he spoke English fluently enough, with a strong Australian accent, there was also a dark, slurry undercurrent of something else: a whiff of Count Dracula, or maybe it was KGB agent.” The son of a successful but abusive alcoholic businessman, Boris has pretty much seen and done it all. He has been all over the world, is well versed in classic literature and knows how to have a good time. Having lost his mother at a young age too, Boris also understands what Theo is going through and in a sense takes him under his wing to guide him through the craziness that is life in the middle

\[51\] \textit{The Goldfinch}, 237.
of nowhere, with no one else around to give him the love and support that he needs. It does not take very long for the two boys to become dependent on each other, and they eventually end up spending almost all of their time together, even if their dynamic is not always the healthiest thing for Theo:

His bad tempers and black moods, which were frequent, alternated with unsound bursts of hilarity; he was wild and gloomy, he could make me laugh and sometimes until my sides ached, and we always had so much to say that we often lost track of time and stayed outside talking until well past dark.\(^{52}\)

It is also interesting to note that like Sylvain Pons, Theo views Boris as being a little bit behind the times and not always fitting in with the society around them, “Though he knew a lot about movies and music, he was decades behind the times.”\(^{53}\) This, along with other factors, solidifies the impression that these two, like Pons and Schmucke, are a part of a society in which they do not belong.

Although the relationship that they create often veers towards the line separating right from wrong, Boris imparts his own moral code to Theo, blurring the actual difference between what would typically be unacceptable and acceptable, with the unspoken justification that desperate times call for desperate measures. Although it is not as dramatically evident in the case of \textit{Le Cousin Pons}, the structure that we see here between Theo and Boris does resemble the structure that we find between Pons and Schmucke, in the sense that Schmucke is an altruist who is constantly trying to do good in the eyes of

\(^{52}\) \textit{The Goldfinch}, 245. \\
\(^{53}\) \textit{The Goldfinch}, 248.
others, especially his beloved Pons, and tries to look out for him and advise him along the way.

It does not take long for Theo to adapt and to master the useful yet illegal skills that Boris teaches him. However, when Boris later finds out that the art theft that Theo committed in the wake of the bombing tops anything that the two of them have ever done together, he comments on the fact that Theo probably did not even need any lessons to begin with: “Here am I, so proudly teaching you to steal apples and candy from the magazine, while you have stolen world masterpiece of art.” Nevertheless, Theo ends up finding himself stealing food to survive, skipping class because he is hung-over and having drunk so much that he loses track of time and the world around him. Boris and Theo confide in each other as if they were the oldest of friends, and as in the case of Pons and Schmucke, the boundaries of their relationship are often unclear as homoerotic overtones begin to emerge in their feelings toward each other.

As in the case of Le Cousin Pons, the indications of this in the text become progressively more explicit after starting out subtly, in the context of what at first appears to be a very close and perhaps brotherly friendship. Since the two boys end up in each other’s company almost every day, they often end up spending the night together at one or the other’s house. Naturally, they sleep in the same bed which leads to potential confusion for the characters as well as for the readers: “The first time he’d turned in bed and draped an arm over my waist, I lay there half-asleep for a moment, not knowing what to do…” ...

---

54 The Goldfinch, 556.
“Ssh, Potter, he whispered, into the back of my neck. *Is only me*.”55 Here we can see that the contact that is exchanged between the two is portrayed as a comfort mechanism and seemingly has nothing further behind it. However, Theo himself goes on to recognize that other nights, involving drugs and alcohol, may not have been as innocent or without more intense feelings lurking under the surface:

And yet (this was the murky part, this was what bothered me) there had also been other, way more confusing and fucked-up nights, grappling around half-dressed, weak light sliding in from the bathroom and everything haloed and unstable without my glasses: hands on each other, rough and fast…56

Much later in the novel, Boris refers back to this episode and unmistakably reveals that some kind of physical intimacy took place between the two of them:

Not *that*. Although I will say, you are the only boy I have ever been in bed with!” […] “I think it happens at that age sometimes. We were young, and needed girls. I think maybe you thought it was something else. But, no, wait,” he said quickly, his expression changing—I’d scraped back my chair to go—“wait,” he said again, catching my sleeve, “don’t, please, listen to what I’m trying to tell you, you don’t at all remember the night when we were watching *Dr. No*?57

By the end of the novel, it becomes clear to the reader that there were definitely some stronger feelings, at least on the part of Theo, that were never vocalized but definitely present. While it could be argued that the sentiment of love that Theo mentions is more than anything fraternal and platonic, one cannot deny the physical aspect or the tension that comes to exist between the two before they end up separating for a period of time that

55 *The Goldfinch*, 300.
56 *The Goldfinch*, 300.
57 *The Goldfinch*, 555.
neither of them knows how long will be. In the wake of his father’s death, as Theo frantically prepares to leave Las Vegas to once again escape the Child Protection Services, the homoerotic tension between the two culminates in a final kiss as they part: “I was still babbling when Boris said: ‘Potter.’ Before I could answer him he put both hands on my face and kissed me on the mouth.”58 Theo soon confirms that that the bond between the two is truly one of love:

[… ] I was relieved that in my unfamiliar babbling-and-wanting-to-talk state I’d stopped myself from blurting the thing on the edge of my tongue, the thing I’d never said, even though it was something that we both knew well enough without me saying it out loud to him in the street—which was, of course, I love you.59

As the final scene of the Las Vegas period of Theo’s life, this moment marks both the final disappearance of Theo’s “real” (but hardly authentic) family in the death of his father as well as the culmination of his relationship with Boris in another idealized, but impossible (and later disavowed) “marriage” of sorts, similar to the relationship between Pons and Schmucke, and with unmistakable parallels to the foreclosed relationship between Theo and Pippa, as well. Though the relationship with Boris likewise functions as a refuge against the values of a hostile world, it hardly serves as a haven for shared aesthetic values, at least not in the same sense as the other two relationships, as it is precisely because of Boris that Theo’s cherished stolen painting will slip out of his possession and into circulation as a commodity on the black market.

58 *The Goldfinch*, 352.
59 *The Goldfinch*, 353.
B. Art Collections

In both novels, artwork figures prominently as the central preoccupation of virtually all the principal characters and of the novels themselves. The works of art in question play major roles and appear as essential characters as important as the two male protagonists, Pons and Theo, having lived complicated lives of their own. Their personal histories are as tangled as those of their owners, yet the damage they have suffered, paradoxically, enhances their value for those who can discern it. As Hobie explains in referring to the resemblance of Proust’s Odette to “a Botticelli girl in a slightly damaged fresco,” “the damage is part of the attraction.”60 For those who appreciate the use-value of art in these two novels, the aesthetic experience depends on the ethereal, arbitrary, evanescent qualities of the light in which a work of art is observed. Thus, for the zealous collector Elie Magus in *Le Cousin Pons*:

_Selon lui, les chefs-d’oeuvre avaient une vie qui leur était propre, ils étaient journaliers, leur beauté dépendait de la lumière qui venait les colorer; il en parlait comme les Hollandais parlaient jadis de leurs tulipes, et venait voir tel tableau à l’heure où le chef-d’oeuvre resplendissait dans toute sa gloire, quand le temps était clair et pur._61

For Theo in *The Goldfinch*, his perception of Fabritius’s “The Goldfinch” is likewise subject to the vagaries of light, as the painting is practically light itself:

_It was one thing to see a painting in a museum but to see it in all those lights and moods and seasons was to see it a thousand different ways and to keep it shut in the dark—a thing made of light, that only lived in light—was wrong in more ways than I knew how to explain. More than wrong: it was crazy._62

---

60 *The Goldfinch*, 754.
61 *Le Cousin Pons*, 135.
Though the collections of art in these two novels for the most part comprise famous works by well-known masters, each collection also includes several pieces that their owners value just as much if not more than the great masterpieces and their seemingly magical qualities of light. Hobie captures this sentiment, shared by Pons and Theo as well, when discussing a minor piece of folk art he owns, a hand-carved Noah’s Ark with a full set of animal pairs: “—this piece, not of the first quality, doesn’t fit with anything else I own, and yet isn’t it always the inappropriate thing, the thing that doesn’t quite work, that’s oddly the dearest?”63 In this case, as an art object that “doesn’t quite work,” the set seems to refer to the problematic family relations and impossible pairings discussed in the previous section.

Such objects, though, more than unique pieces that their owners end up treasuring, function practically as fetish objects, surpassing any commonly recognized standards of aesthetic value and rising to a level of “private” valuation bordering on involuntary obsession that is difficult for others to understand. As Goux observes in his study of the relationship between economic and psychoanalytic concepts, the fetish is “a privileged bearer of value,” an object that is “overvalued” and “artificial,” in part “because its reputation is overestimated.”64 The next section will take up this complicated relationship between owners and their art collections with respect to the question of value.

63 The Goldfinch, 141.
64 Symbolic Economies, 32.
1. Le Musée Pons

As Éric Bordas observes in « Le Role de la peinture dans Le Cousin Pons », Pons’s collection is truly at the center of the novel’s structure:

Placée au centre des intrigues romanesques, la collection est à la fois point de départ et point d’arrivée du récit. Tout commence en effet avec le cadeau fait par Pons à la présidente Camusot d’un éventail peint par Watteau, et qui avait appartenu à la marquise de Pompadour. Tout se termine, à la dernière page, par la possession directe de l’ensemble de la collection, rachetée aux Camusot par le comte Popinot, exception faite des tableaux volés par Élie Magus, avec une allusion ultime à l’éventail emblématique.⁶⁵

Here Bordas indicates that the novel not only begins with the collection, but ends with it as well, as the collection serves throughout the novel as a major source of contention between Pons and almost all of the people that surround him in his final days. The art collection found in the “Musée Pons” is an extensive and varied assortment comprising over 1,700 pieces. When Mme Cibot consults the lawyer Fraisier about Pons’s succession, we get some idea about the potential value of his collection, as well as of the difficulty of assigning a monetary value to art in general, “Un tableau, c’est quarante sous de toile ou cent mille francs de peinture! Or, les peintures de cent mille francs sont bien connues, et quelles erreurs dans toutes ces valeurs-là, même les plus célèbres!”⁶⁶ The private space housing Pons’s collection, which ranges from small but expensive trinkets, to masterpieces coveted by amateurs and collectors alike, is the one place where he feels at home and finds a desperately needed sense of belonging.

---

⁶⁶ Le Cousin Pons, 180.
Although all of his pieces are noteworthy, there are a select few that are generally considered to hold the most monetary potential (exchange-value) and perhaps the most aesthetic significance (use-value) as well, as they are the envy of all that come into contact with them and get the chance to lay eyes on them: “Le premier tableau était de Sébastien del Piombo, le second de Fra Bartolomeo della Porta, le troisième un paysage d’Hobbéma, et le dernier un portrait de femme par Albert Durer, quatre diamants!”67 These paintings done by the Old Masters are not just significant because of the artists who painted them, but in the context of the time period in which Pons collects them, they speak to more than just a refined appreciation for art; they represent original prestige and the recognition of a high level of competence that transcends a single place in time. While one cannot find fault in Pons for his taste in old and superior pieces of art, as Bordas suggests, Pons’s exclusive interest in works from the distant past does however allude to his inability to change and adapt to modern life: “Pons, en ne s’intéressant qu’aux œuvres du passé, fût-ce avec goût et pertinence, signale ainsi son refus d’évoluer et de vivre dans une perspective de devenir.”68 Like Pons himself, these pieces have seen the times change in a radical way, and they can almost be considered relics of L’Empire, to which Pons so desperately clings. For him, they embody aesthetic beauty that is not only to be appreciated visually, but also to be savored spiritually and in a more holistic way.

67 Le Cousin Pons, 151.
68 « Le Role de la peinture dans Le Cousin Pons », 24.
Balzac’s narrator, describing Élie Magus’s inspection of these four masterpieces, indicates their transcendent aesthetic value: “Ces quatre perles offrent la même eau, le même orient, la même rondeur, le même éclat, la même valeur. L’art humain ne peut aller au delà. C’est supérieur à la nature, qui n’a fait vivre l’original que pendant un moment.” The paintings’ ability to transcend time makes them superior to nature, works of enduring value that surpass the fleeting existence of the represented scene. While Pons’s artwork undoubtedly elicits a level of envy that is all but palpable among his greedy neighbors and family members, the following assessment of the value of the collection as a whole, given by Élie Magus, illustrates that there are also certain issues and inconveniences that come with holding and selling such highly valued pieces of art: “Je ne donnerais pas plus de huit cent mille francs; car on ne sait pas combien de temps on gardera ça dans un magasin…Il y a des chefs-d’oeuvre qui ne se vendent pas avant dix ans, et le prix d’acquisition est doublé par les intérêts composés; mais je payerais la somme comptant;” “Et quelles richesses! les souverains n’ont rien de plus beau dans leurs trésors.” Although Pons does not carry himself like a king with such treasures, he certainly is aware that in his possession are items worth more than any friends or high social status. For Pons, though, the use-value of his collection is immeasurable and its exchange-value is of no importance, which is why such high carrying costs, as described by Magus, are a non-issue in his eyes.

---

69 Le Cousin Pons, 151.
70 Le Cousin Pons, 230.
71 Le Cousin Pons, 231.
Pons’s frugality and the true depth of his connection with his collection because of the way in which he came into possession of it are no secret to anyone that knows him and that is familiar with his collection. Pons is an avid participant in auctions and sales, but he is also very self-controlled in terms of spending money, in order to maintain the lifestyle to which he has grown accustomed. However, the fact that Pons isn’t willing to pay over a certain amount for no matter what piece also does not call into question his knowledge of the exchange-value of the pieces, since the prices of the artwork are indeed heavily considered and factored into not only the exchange-value but also the use-value as well. And because of his thriftiness and unwillingness to spend great sums of money on art, it has literally taken him years to accumulate the treasures that find themselves in his “museum”:

Pons n’admettait pas d’acquisition au-dessus de cent francs; et, pour qu’il payât un objet cinquante francs, cet objet devait en valoir trois mille. La plus belle chose du monde qui coûtait trois cents francs, n’existait plus pour lui. Rares avaient été les occasions, mais il possédait les trois éléments du succès: les jambes du cerf, le temps des flâneurs et la patience de l’israélite.72

As this passage would suggest, one could argue that it is because of all of this effort that Pons has poured into collecting these pieces that his collection is worth even more and appears even more precious in his eyes. One could even say that he is a small-scale art arbitrager, since he has profited from (or at least built his collection on) market misvaluation, or the market's failure to correctly assign exchange-value to his pieces

72 Le Cousin Pons, 9.
because the people who sold him those pieces could not accurately discern the aesthetic or use-value of the pieces. Further displaying the high value that Pons places on his pieces of art, Bordas goes as far as asserting that Pons exists only through and/or for his collection: “Pons en est d’abord le détenteur, le protecteur. Il n’existe que par rapport à elle, lui dont la vie entière s’est déroulée en fonction d’elle, objet d’un objet, conscience diffractée qui n’a plus conscience d’elle-même.”

Pons’s treasures are also often described as being the female figure in his life, almost tantamount to a lover or a mistress, since Pons lends all of his time, attention and devotion to this imposing collection, found under the protection of his own roof and never far from his sight or thoughts. Pons also feels a deep attraction to the pieces that he possesses because he himself did not succeed as an artist, a failure that he openly recognizes and assumes. He thus feels the need to appreciate the products of those who are considered to be successful artists: “Pons est l’homme pour qui la valeur suprême est ce que l’homme est capable de faire.” Although it may not be as satisfying as if he had created the pieces himself, the collection still fulfills a deep need, which to Pons is as important as basic necessities are for others.

As for storing his artwork in a private display or museum, there is no question that Pons’s motives are selfish. Pons elevates the level of intimacy between him and his possessions and increases the satisfaction he derives from them by keeping his art so well

73 « Le Role de la peinture dans Le Cousin Pons », 22.
74 « Le Role de la peinture dans Le Cousin Pons », 28.
guarded and by not allowing anyone to see it (at least not without him present). Grampp discusses this complex relationship between the value of a work of art and the location in which it is stored in his study of art valuation:

The market value depends on whether the painting is hung in the Louvre or in a lesser museum, where it is hung and how often, what is its condition, if it has been repainted or otherwise restored or has been altered, where it was before it came into its present ownership, how certain the attribution is and if it ever has been changed, whether the painter is, whether other works of his have been at auction and what price they brought, in whose private collections the painter is represented, whether he is being spoken of in the popular as distinct from the professional art journals (ARTnews as distinct from The Burlington), and if dealers are promoting or disregarding him.\(^{75}\)

Although Pons’s pieces do not hang in the Louvre, they are well-known pieces by famous artists, and despite Pons keeping them hidden away from the public (and from circulation on the market), once those who are aware of their importance learn of their existence in Pons’s collection, their potential exchange-value becomes their overriding characteristic. Pons’s over-protectiveness and over-possessiveness are not surprising, given the novel’s allusions to the erotic nature of the collection as a surrogate female partner for him. Later in the novel when Madame Cibot introduces Magus into the Musée Pons without his permission, Pons views this not only as a violation of his trust, but as an invasion into his personal and sacred space:

C’était amener l’ennemi dans le coeur de la place, plonger un poignard au coeur de Pons, qui, depuis dix ans, interdisait à la Cibot de laisser pénétrer qui que ce fût chez lui, qui prenait toujours sur lui ses clefs,

\(^{75}\) Pricing the Priceless, 27.
et à qui la Cibot avait obéi, tant qu’elle avait partagé les opinions de Schmucke en fait de bric-à-brac.76

Given her sneaky and conniving nature, it comes as no surprise that la Cibot downplays what happened and attempts to make Pons believe that he was dreaming, going crazy and just suffering the effects of sickness and fever. Only partially convinced that she is telling the truth, Pons remains skeptical of what truly took place and becomes ever more weary of his concierge who has complete control and influence over everything in the Pons/Schmucke household.

However, if we continue (like the novel) to refer to the gallery in which he stores his collection as a musée, or museum, and take into account all that this implies, another layer of the complex question of ownership is uncovered. The question of public versus private collection arises, and one must consider the purpose of a true museum versus the restraints and function of a private collection. As previously discussed, a museum is meant to provide a space for the display of public goods, a venue where the enjoyment of a good meant to be shared by all can take place. By referring to Pons’s collection as the Musée Pons, the novel forces the reader to at least pause to consider this distinction. Pons does not refer to his own collection as the Musée Pons, but if he were to actually call his space a museum, this would be inaccurate, since he is the only one capable of deriving pleasure from the works.

76 _Le Cousin Pons_, 137.
A private collection, however, does not operate on the premise of a public mission statement, and since we consider (as he does) his collection to be private, one cannot blame Pons for trying to protect it. This makes the concept of private collections relevant and important when analyzing this novel:

The concept of the museum itself as a public space for storing national treasures and displaying art is firmly established with the creation of the Louvre in Paris during the Revolutionary period. A case can even be made for *Le Cousin Pons* as the first major French novel to problematize the theme of the individual art collector.77

Unlike Theo and the painting in question in *The Goldfinch*, Pons owns the artwork in his gallery, not a museum, and although the public is missing out on what may be considered national and international treasures, Pons is free to do with them what he wishes. They are his and his alone to contemplate, whenever he chooses to do so:

Il possédait son musée pour en jouir à toute heure, car les âmes créées pour admirer les grandes oeuvres ont la faculté sublime des vrais amants; ils éprouvent autant de plaisir aujourd’hui qu’hier, ils ne se lassent jamais, et les chefs-d’oeuvre sont, heureusement, toujours jeunes. Aussi l’objet tenu si paternellement devait-il être une de ces trouvailles que l’on emporte, avec quel amour! amateurs, vous le savez!78

Unfortunately the various people in Pons’s life do not or choose not to believe this, and while Pons is alive, it is only Schmucke who understands the strong pull that this artwork has over Pons and the level of intensity by which his friend and his friend’s collection are bound together.

77 *Transposing Art into Texts in French Romantic Literature*, 93.
78 *Le Cousin Pons*, 10.
The novel makes it clear that Schmucke does not realize the value of these pieces in the monetary terms that the art market would assign to them, which ultimately leads to trouble, but there are several individuals surrounding Pons who do indeed recognize the value of his collection, which in combination with Schmucke’s cluelessness leads to even more negative consequences. For instance, we have Élie Magus, the art dealer, and the only other character in the novel with a collection comparable to that of Pons. Magus eventually ends up betraying Pons and stealing from him, and in the build-up to that moment, he is nothing but envious and mean-spirited. Yet, one cannot deny that his feelings toward the collection do not match his generally cold and stoic behavior, and Bordas even argues that Magus shows, at least physically and outwardly, more emotion towards the collection than Pons: “De même, c’est à lui, et à lui seul, que le narrateur accordera les seules émotions véritables artistiques du récit: ‘Élie Magus eut des larmes dans les yeux en regardant tour à tour ces quatre chefs-d’œuvre.’”79 There is also Rémonencq, who spends his days in his curiosity shop dreaming of amassing a collection to match that of Pons and with it opening an even bigger shop than the one he already runs.

The actual monetary value of Pons’s collection is unknown until the family gets involved once Pons becomes ill, at which point appraisals are paramount and the value of the art is all that anyone, especially the members of his “original family,” can talk about. In this regard, Bordas describes the attitude of la présidente towards the collection as exemplary:

79 *Le Role De La Peinture Dans Le Cousin Pons*, 29.
La collection quant à elle, du moins quand elle n’est plus qu’une valeur d’héritage, peut être lue comme la métonymie bourgeoise par excellence à laquelle se réduit un ensemble d’œuvres d’art. Tableaux, bibelots et autres bijoux, dont le pris tenait à la rareté et à l’individualité, ne forment plus qu’une globalité, commerciale et juridique.\(^{80}\)

Furthermore, it doesn’t take long for everyone involved to realize that Pons has been sitting on quite the treasure chest and that everything, from the frames to the paintings within them, is worth a fortune:

Chaque carreau des deux fenêtres de la chambre du bonhomme était un vitrail suisse colorié, dont le moindre valait mille francs, et il comptait seize de ces chefs-d’œuvre, à la recherche desquels voyagent aujourd’hui les amateurs. En 1815, ces vitraux se vendaient entre six et dix francs. Le prix des soixante tableaux qui composaient cette divine collection, chefs-d’œuvre purs, sans un repeint, authentiques, ne pouvait être connu qu’à la chaleur des enchères.\(^{81}\)

Élie Magus who recognizes the value of the collection before Pons’s family, makes it very clear that he would pay any price if given the opportunity to buy the paintings from Pons because he knows that they would sell for even higher prices in another environment, such as a public auction:

Eh! mademoiselle, si monsieur votre cousin voulait me vendre sa collection, j’en donnerais ce soir huit cent mille francs, et je ne ferais pas une mauvaise affaire. Les soixante tableaux monteraient seuls à une somme plus forte en vente publique.\(^{82}\)

Through the eyes of these characters surrounding Pons, we see a general shift of perspective, a transition from looking at the art with a focus purely on its use-value to assessing its potential exchange-value on the open market.

\(^{80}\) Le Role De La Peinture Dans Le Cousin Pons, 22.
\(^{81}\) Le Cousin Pons, 84.
\(^{82}\) Le Cousin Pons, 85.
Aside from the illegal nature of the plan that Pons’s neighbors and “friends” come up with, everything concerning the actual valuation of the artwork is handled with such care. If other outsiders became aware of the true extent of the worth of Pons’s raison d’être, the affair could not be kept quiet, and surely many more people would be interested in the goings-on in this private museum, including Pons himself. Pons would never dream of selling his collection because for him, its value derives from his ability to enjoy the art while it is there, not from the money that he knows that he could earn by selling it to someone else: “Ah! s’écria le bonhomme, qui ne se savait pas si riche; mais je ne pourrais pas me séparer de ce qui fait mon bonheur…Je ne vendrais ma collection que livrable après ma mort.”83

Pons’s art collecting activities have not only created a lifetime of happiness for him, but have also deprived him of things, such as the ability to connect with other members of society. Luckily though, his paintings bring him back to another time and to a certain extent, another society, the one that he so longs to be a part of and misses so much. A bit like Theo, he also becomes paranoid over the years and lives in a constant state of fear, worrying about people gaining access to his art and stealing it from him. Because of this, he keeps his collection under lock and key makes him the envy of some, and eccentric and miserly to others.

Although Pons is frugal and does not spend an inordinate amount of money on the pieces that he purchases, his need or compulsion to amass beautiful things is constant,

83 Le Cousin Pons, 85.
which leaves him somewhat at a loss when it comes to satisfying his other addiction, good food. Grampp points out that art can constitute a lasting store of capital as far as use-value is concerned: “A work of art is capital if it yields utility as long as it endures physically, that is, until it deteriorates if it ever does,” but no matter how much “aesthetic utility” this capital has produced for Pons, one can see that it has not allowed him a life of excess, and even comfortable living becomes an issue at times. It is because of this that he ends up becoming a burden on his family members, at whose homes he often imposes himself so that he can take advantage of their hospitality in order to eat a good meal.

However, despite Pons’s intense longing to keep the collection for what we have called aesthetic purposes, the way in which the art objects in the collection are assigned value does eventually change, as Bordas points out: “Le rapport de contiguïté s’est donc déplacé d’une valeur intrinsèque vers une valeur marchande, témoignant ainsi d’une impossibilité pour l’objet d’art de perdurer en tant que tel, du moins dans les structures visibles de fonctionnement et de circulation de la société.” It is here that readers of this analysis will perhaps begin to understand that art and its aesthetic value are not as invincible as a figure like Pons might hope them to be.

The situation is somewhat more complicated when it comes to describing the art found in The Goldfinch because in fact there are two collections of art that have a huge impact on Theo’s life, each of which must be treated and analyzed in a different manner.

---

84 Pricing the Priceless, 38.
85 Le Role De La Peinture Dans Le Cousin Pons, 22.
2. *The Goldfinch*

The first “collection” that serves as a central figure in Theo’s life is in fact a single piece of art, from which the title of the novel is taken. Created in 1654 by Carel Fabritius, *The Goldfinch*, a small yet emotionally charged painting, depicts a small bird, held prisoner to a perch by a thin yet restrictive chain suggesting tragedy and solitude. At first glance, the painting is seemingly straightforward and reminiscent of Theo’s mother:

It was a direct and matter-of-fact little creature, with nothing sentimental about it; and something about the neat, compact way it tucked down inside itself—its brightness, its alert watchful expression—made me think of pictures I’d seen of my mother when she was small: a dark-capped finch with steady eyes.86

One could easily forget or overlook the painting’s true subject matter; however, upon further examination, the deeper, darker significance of the painting becomes apparent, though not insistently so. As Theo mentions, “Only occasionally did I notice the chain on the finch’s ankle, or think what a cruel life for a living creature—fluttering briefly, forced always to land in the same hopeless place.”87 While this small and helpless creature is kept as a household pet and is consequently chained down to keep it from escaping or getting lost, one cannot ignore the bird’s poor quality of life despite its beauty, and the painting often elicits empathetic sorrow in the viewer, especially since the scene is so realistically

86 *The Goldfinch*, 27.
87 *The Goldfinch*, 306.
portrayed.

Later in the novel, readers are introduced to a less-than-reputable and morally questionable character and acquaintance of Boris’s named Horst, who is a drug dealer and a black market art dealer. Horst is no stranger to Fabritius’s famous painting and describes it in emotional detail in the following passage:

I know the theory of *The Goldfinch*, I’m well familiar with it, people call it trompe l’oeil and indeed it can strike the eye that way from afar….True: there are passages worked like a trompe l’oeil…the wall and the perch, gleam of light on brass, and then…the feathered breast, most creaturely. Fluff and down…But Fabritius…he’s making a pun on the genre…a masterly riposte to the whole idea of trompe l’oeil…because in other passages of the work—the head? the wing?—not creaturely or literal in the slightest, he takes the image apart very deliberately to show us how he painted it…very abstract…There’s a doubleness. You see the mark, you see the paint for the paint, and also the living bird.  

Horst concedes that the painting is a masterpiece of trompe l’oeil realistic effects, but he also reads it as a strikingly modern, self-referential commentary on painting itself, which makes of Fabritius "a genius less of his time than our own"  

88 *The Goldfinch*, 578.  
89 *The Goldfinch*, 579.  

The Goldfinch, while significant for the aesthetic properties that it possesses, is also one of the artist’s only works that survived a tragic explosion and fire in Delft, which destroyed almost all other evidence of the artist’s genius and originality, thereby increasing the painting’s rarity and value as a coveted and precious object.

Horst’s assessment of the painting’s unusual brushwork and its ability to conjure a masterful trompe l’oeil effect is confirmed by the art historian Christopher Brown, who
wrote a *catalogue raisonné* of Fabritius’s complete works. Brown asserts that “this so-called *Puttertje*, or little *Goldfinch*, in the Mauritshuis is a remarkable and delicate example of *trompe-l’oeil* painting” (Col. Plate III; Plates 7, 25 and 26; Cat. no.7). He emphasizes in particular the striking originality of Fabritius’s technique:

The *Puttertje*, a pet goldfinch chained to its perch, does not belong to any tradition. It is painted not with the fine descriptive detail of Lelienbergh, but with broad strokes and dabs of a brush loaded with pure colour. The bird throws a shadow which is not hard-edged like Lelienbergh’s, but soft and diffused. In all, the *Puttertje* has none of the contrived, carefully composed air of the Lelienbergh still life; it is at the same time an accurately rendered study from nature and a virtuoso display of the painter’s ability both to conjure up a live creature with a few bold strokes of colour and to create the illusion that both bird and perch have a three-dimensional presence.

*The Goldfinch* focuses primarily on these aesthetic attributes of the painting, but other aspects of the painting are also significant to the novel, though not explicitly mentioned. In particular, the possible original function of the painting and the punning wordplay on the title of the painting are directly relevant to the novel's interpretation:

The function of this picture, painted on an unusually thick panel, has often been discussed, and two particularly important articles on the subject have been published in recent years. Once again, as with the *View in Delft*, the extent of the discussion is itself evidence of the originality of the image… Despite the ingenuity of Wurfbain’s idea that the picture served as a shopsign, it seems more likely to have been set into a piece of furniture. (Could such a piece of furniture have been intended for the de Potter family, whose name is often spelt ‘de Putter’, making the subject of a goldfinch a pun on their name?)

---

91 *Carel Fabritius*, 48.
92 *Carel Fabritius*, 47.
The echoes with the novel *The Goldfinch* are apparent here in multiple ways. That the painting may have originally served as a shop-sign is reflected in the shopkeeper Welty’s deep connection to the painting, and the possible pun between the title of the painting in Dutch and the name of the family for whom it may have been painted as part of a piece of furniture again links it to Welty and Hobie, who are antique furniture dealers. This family, the de Putter or Potter family, shares the name Potter with Theo, who receives this nickname from Boris early on in their relationship (because of his apparent resemblance to the fictional character Harry Potter). Likewise, there is a strong resemblance between this name and the nickname Boris gives Xandra’s dog, Popper, as well as the name of Welty’s niece Pippa. From these multiple echoes the reader may draw the conclusion that Tartt intended for Theo, and perhaps to a lesser extent Pippa and Popper as well, to serve as mirrors or doubles of the sad and vulnerable prisoner featured in Fabritius’s painting.

Regardless of what Tartt intended or not, there is no doubt that Theo comes into possession of the painting after a great tragedy and that the way in which it actually becomes his is questionable. Technically, he steals this masterpiece from a museum, thus making the acquisition of *The Goldfinch* less legitimate than the acquisition of Pons’s collection. During that same trip to the museum, Theo and his mother become victims of a terrorist’s bomb, a tragedy eerily similar to the explosion in Delft that killed Carel Fabritius and destroyed almost all of his paintings and which had been discussed by Theo’s mother just moments before her death. While Theo comes away from the bombing relatively unscathed physically, yet mentally shaken up, his mother perishes, along with many other innocent people, including Welty. Theo just barely escapes the same fate that his mother
suffers and his exit from the scene is as dramatic as it is lucky: “…I was close to tears when suddenly I saw an inconspicuous door in the side of the gallery wall. You had to look twice to see it, this door; it was painted the same color as the gallery walls, the kind of door which, in normal circumstances, looked like it would be kept locked.” This scene can be taken as an instance of foreshadowing, denoting the challenges and difficult-to-navigate circumstances to come, as well as a display of Theo’s impressive slyness and survival skills even at this young age. While surviving the blast could be considered more a stroke of good luck than anything, actually escaping the museum unnoticed, with The Goldfinch remaining unscathed, is remarkable.

Inspiring and validating the great theft is a brief, intense moment between Theo and Welty in the immediate aftermath of the blast. After a confused but vivid spiritual discussion, Theo understands Welty’s love for the painting and feels a sense of great urgency to take the painting in order to preserve it and protect it. Consequently, Theo follows Welty’s instructions and removes the painting from the scene of the blast, now a crime scene twice over. Although we do not find out until later in the novel, Welty’s deep love and appreciation of the painting stem from an artist’s copy of it that hung in his childhood home in Cairo and that he valued as “a huge part of his childhood, the happiest part, before he was ill.” Hobie’s discussion of Welty’s attachment to the painting reveals that his aesthetic appreciation of it paradoxically first emerged from the copy from his childhood (“nothing special”), not from the original: “…[Welty] used to speak of how

93 The Goldfinch, 46.
with the very great paintings it’s possible to know them deeply, inhabit them almost, even through copies.” As Hobie goes on to explain, aesthetic value is not necessarily limited to the fetishized “aura” of an original: “Because—the line of beauty is the line of beauty. It doesn’t matter if it’s been through the Xerox machine a hundred times.” Apparently what provided comfort to Welty after the paintings from his childhood were lost, was knowing that even when he was no longer able to enjoy the very copies that he had known for so long, the images were not actually lost: “…he got attached to objects, they had personalities and souls to him, and though he lost almost everything else from that life, he never lost those paintings because the originals were still out in the world.” Much like the surrogate families that turn out to be more “authentic” than the original ones in both *The Goldfinch* and *Le Cousin Pons*, for Welty, copies of great art can be a legitimate source of profound aesthetic appreciation. In a striking inversion of the normal order between original and copy, the original of *The Goldfinch* thus comes to stand in as a substitute that can preserve that aesthetic appreciation for Welty when the copy is irretrievably lost.

Whether or not Theo is even conscious of what he is doing when he takes the original painting from the museum is unclear, but we can interpret his actions in several ways. One could condemn his action as a simple theft, and at several points in the novel, Theo himself is nearly paralyzed by fear and guilt over what he has done, though not enough to give up the palpable pleasure of his private aesthetic enjoyment of the painting.

---

94 *The Goldfinch*, 754.
95 *The Goldfinch*, 754.
96 *The Goldfinch*, 755.
when he knows it belongs in a public museum. One might also view his act as noble: carrying out the wishes of a dying man in order to preserve the transcendent aesthetic experience that this painting had embodied for him for decades. In any event, Theo takes it, keeps it wrapped up and hides it from the world for years. Before moving it to a storage facility (or so he thinks), he keeps it at home, as one of the greatest secrets ever to be guarded.

Being in possession of this painting from an early age (as well as thinking that he is in possession of it for much longer than he actually is) is dramatically formative for Theo and in a sense helps him through many difficult moments, especially those when it would be helpful to have the support of a maternal figure, a position that the painting to a certain extent comes to assume. Simply having the painting nearby and knowing that it is accessible makes him feel safe. Beyond just creating a sense of security, though, *The Goldfinch* turns into an obsession for Theo, a fetishized object of sorts:

> The delight and terror of the fetishist. Fully conscious of my folly, I’d downloaded pictures of it to my computer and my phone so I could gloat upon the image in private, brushstrokes rendered digitally, a scrap of seventeenth-century sunlight compressed into dots and pixels, but the purer the color, the richer the sense of impasto, the more I hungered for the thing itself, the irreplaceable, glorious, light-rinsed object.\(^{97}\)

In light of Hobie’s comments about Welty’s relationship to the copy of *The Goldfinch* during his childhood, this passage is interesting to consider, because it shows that to a certain extent, for Theo too, it is not so much the original physical painting that is so

\(^{97}\) *The Goldfinch*, 520.
important, but rather the digital image, a copy of the original, the “sunlight compressed into dots and pixels.” The digital copy admittedly makes Theo “hunger” for the “irreplaceable” original, but at the same time, it is able to elicit the same sense of aesthetic appreciation as the original, right down to the details of the brushstrokes and the “sense of impasto.”

The actual original painting, however, provides a different and more physical comfort to Theo, like a security blanket would for a child. Given that it reminds him of his mother and represents a maternal figure in a way, he wraps it up like a mummy to preserve it:

The painting, inside the pillowcase, was wrapped in several layers of taped drawing paper—good paper, archival paper...” ... “Quickly I slid it out, and almost immediately its glow enveloped me, something almost musical, an internal sweetness that was inexplicable beyond a deep, blood-rocking harmony of rightness, the way your heart beat slow and sure when you were with a person you felt safe with and loved.98

On the one hand, it is as if Theo were burying his mother (and thus moving on) in the guise of this painting, which he keeps shrouded in multiple layers and hidden from view, but on the other hand, his actions signify his inability to move on and to let her go, since he tries to preserve the painting as one would a mummified body: “…it looked like it had been bound and wrapped by an insane and/or homeless person—mummified, practically: so much tape on it that it wasn’t even quite square any more; even the corners were round.”99

During this period of transition, having to keep the painting hidden and knowing that he is

---

98 The Goldfinch, 317.
99 The Goldfinch, 322.
constantly at risk of exposure also make Theo a bit paranoid at times. Not only does he have to keep this masterpiece out of the public eye, but he also has to keep it stored under the perfect conditions in what seems to be an alternate world, in order to protect it and keep it safe from deterioration in the “real” world: “…the bundled pillowcase, locked away in its steel coffin…Time had blurred it. It was part of a world that didn’t exist—or, rather, it was if I lived in two worlds, and the storage locker was part of the imaginary world rather than the real one.”¹⁰⁰

Theo does not return the painting to the proper authorities or to the museum, even when he has the chance to, for many reasons, all of which contextualize what is happening in the real world. One of these reasons is that he wants to keep it in order to try to maintain some control over his own future:

[…] and it was starting to occur to me that it might even be smart to keep the painting for a while, as a sort of insurance for the next three years, against having to go live with Grandpa Decker and Dorothy. It is a hallmark of my stunning naïveté that I thought I might even be able to sell it, if I had to.¹⁰¹

However, not returning it and keeping it when he knows that he shouldn’t also doubles his guilt, in both his own eyes and in the eyes of the law: “The shame that tormented me was all the more corrosive for having no very clear origin…Part of it had to do with the painting. I knew nothing good would come of keeping it.”¹⁰²

---

¹⁰⁰ The Goldfinch, 477.
¹⁰¹ The Goldfinch, 178.
¹⁰² The Goldfinch, 392.
Theo is not initially aware of the great monetary value embodied in the painting. For him, the painting’s value is intrinsically aesthetic and personal, and as such it is entirely in the domain of use-value. Later in life as he becomes more aware of it as an object of great monetary worth as well, it appears to take on another important function, giving him the sense of confidence to develop his ability to carry out less than legitimate dealings with Hobie’s “changelings,” the second collection of art objects that influences Theo and plays a huge part in his life. One can also argue that Theo’s struggle with this secret and his success in hiding *The Goldfinch* for so many years have prepared him for a life full of deceit and despair and actually normalized such a life for him.
3. Hobie’s Changelings

Hobie has spent the majority of his adult life down in his workshop, bringing tired and sick pieces of antique furniture back to life: “…takes time what he does, the restorations, working by hand like the Old Masters— I understand. He is artist—not businessman,” functioning more as an artist than anything else, as Boris points out. Hobie restores furniture that spans all centuries and styles, and he cares enormously for each piece, treating them as people rather than as objects. To amuse himself and to keep himself busy during slow days, Hobie also sometimes goes further than just restoring furniture by creating what he calls “changelings,” which are hybrid pieces built mostly of the original parts from several unsalvageable old pieces, but with some new and reworked parts incorporated as well. As Hobie remarks, “Well—I’m just an old copyist talking myself. You know what Picasso says. ‘Bad artists copy, good artists steal.’” This lightly made comment indicates that Hobie has never had any intention of passing the

103 The Goldfinch, 421.
104 However noble this venture of restoration may seem, it is important to note that not all experts believe in the art of restoration. Grampp discusses this problem and its relationship to the problem of art value in Pricing the Priceless: “What is available and is especially interesting is the classification of the works of an artist according to their authenticity: whether a given work was done entirely by him or very probably was done by him alone, whether it was partly done by him, whether by his students, by assistants in his workshop, or under his influence, or whether it is a work done in his style while he was living or later” (30); “While they agree restoration is not objectionable in principle and that conservation is in principle an obligation of museums and collectors, they may disagree about how these things should be done, and the disagreement can be intense” (51).
105 “Hobie had been making these cannibalized and heavily altered pieces (“changelings” as he called them) for virtually his whole working life,” in The Goldfinch, 452.
106 The Goldfinch, 755.
“changelings” off as his own (though that is exactly what Theo does with them) and has never considered himself to be producing “original” artwork.

Theo explains that they “were in some cases plainly fanciful but in others such faithful models of the period that they were all but indistinguishable from the real thing.”

Hobie teaches Theo the methods of furniture restoration, while at the same time creating new pieces, blurring the line between new and old and original and copy:

[…] he carved splats and turned new chair legs to match old…”With new wood, if you’re going for an effect of age, a gilded patina is always easiest to fudge”… “Heavily restored pieces—where there are no worn bits or honorable scars, you have to hand out a few ancients and honorables yourself. The trick of it,” he explained, wiping his forehead with the back of his wrist, “is never to be too nice about it."

Although the "nobility" of Hobie’s work helps redeem the legitimacy of copies, Theo takes advantage of the high quality of the pieces that Hobie produces and eventually carries out many outright illegal transactions involving these changelings, once he becomes a money-conscious adult and goes to work as Hobie’s salesman. This all happens, however, unbeknownst to Hobie, who is not much of a businessman to begin with and has never thought to sell his creations either as the knockoffs that they are or as originals, keeping his changelings off the market for the “private pleasure” that they provide him, much like Pons and his art collection. Furthermore, Hobie also feels that it is important to teach Theo how to identify pieces that are no longer original or that have been heavily altered, because it is necessary to know this when looking at the pieces in his workshop, and also because

107 The Goldfinch, 452.
108 The Goldfinch, 416.
it is important to be able to recognize such pieces in the antique furniture business in general:

[...] he’d taught me how to identify a reproduction: by wear that was too even (antiques were always worn asymmetrically); by edges that were machine-cut instead of hand-planed (a sensitive fingertip could feel a machine edge, even in poor light); but more than that by a flat, dead quality of wood, lacking a certain glow: the magic that came from centuries of being touched and used and passed through human hands.109

In the period following the traumatic event of the bombing, when Theo is still just a boy, Hobie’s workshop is like an alternate world filled with objects that, although foreign to him, seem familiar and welcoming. Hobie’s repairs to these pieces, which make them whole again, give Theo a sense of hope. He sees that these old and broken objects now have the chance to recover their sense of purpose as sources of aesthetic enjoyment, although they are no longer as they once were in their original state. He sees them as living creatures, almost as swapped children (“changelings”) in a reformulated family, and as such they rebuild the surrogate family dynamic between him and Hobie, with Hobie standing in as the paternal figure in Theo’s life. This renewal complements the sense of security that comes from Theo’s possession of the painting. However, the relationship that Theo develops with the pieces and with Hobie is not always smooth or untroubled, which becomes evident when Theo’s role in the workshop later changes and he takes over the sales end of the business.

109 The Goldfinch, 170.
A few years later, after having lived in Las Vegas, a bright and artificial world that is the complete opposite of Hobie’s workshop which is dark and old, Theo returns to New York, but he is no longer the same person. This period in Las Vegas is like a life outside of time, an endless present in a superficial, sterile environment where everything is perpetually new. Even the event of his father’s death, which prompts his return, is in keeping with what he perceives as the fraudulent quality of his life at this point in time:

[...] it was as if his death weren’t real but only a rehearsal, a trial run; the real death (the permanent one) was yet to happen and there was time to stop it if only I found him, if only he was answering his cell phone, if Xandra could reach him from work. *I have to get hold of him, I have to let him know.*

Yet, time has hardened Theo, and he is now even less connected to the reality that those around him are a part of; it is almost as if he is living in a world of his own, and the transition from spending long days self-medicating with Boris (a habit initiated by his father in response to his anxiety at getting *The Goldfinch* through airport security) to re-acclimating to city life is not an easy one.

While the return to Hobie and the furniture is a welcoming one and reinserts Theo in time, reconnecting him to the past while giving him a future working in the shop, Theo realizes that his memory has not served him well, and he is disappointed with the shift in reality concerning *his* city, upon his return:

The streets were much louder than I remembered — smellier, too. Standing on the corner by A La Vieille Russie I found myself overpowerered with the familiar old Midtown stench: carriage horses, bus exhaust, perfume, and urine. For so long I’d thought of Vegas as

---

110 *The Goldfinch*, 386.
something temporary — my real life was New York — but was it? Not any more, I thought, dismally, surveying the thinned-out trickle of pedestrians hurrying past Bergdorf’s.\textsuperscript{111 }

Even Hobie’s workshop seems to have changed in his absence, which proves to be destabilizing and nerve-wracking at first:

The shop — I noticed, as the cabbie drove away — was closed-up and dark, as if it had never been opened again in all my time away from New York. The windows were furred with grime and — looking inside — I saw that some of the furniture was draped with sheets. Nothing else had changed at all, except that all the old books and bric-a-brac — the marble cockatoos, the obelisks — were covered with an additional layer of dust.\textsuperscript{112 }

Once he works his way back into Hobie’s world, though, everything starts falling back into place, and Theo comes into his own. “…I was soothed by the house, its sense of safety and enclosure: old portraits and poorly lit hallways, loudly ticking clocks.”\textsuperscript{113 }

Working on the furniture with Hobie grants him the ability to see that his life, like the pieces he’s working on, is on the road to recovery, “More than the workshop (or the “hospital,” as Hobie called it) I enjoyed Hobie.”\textsuperscript{114 }His relationship with Hobie becomes even stronger, and he learns a trade that he seems to be cut out for and skilled at and which some may even consider to be a form of art.

Slowly Theo’s position in the business evolves, and he develops other skillsets as well. He ends up becoming more of a businessman than an artist and eventually starts

\textsuperscript{111} The Goldfinch, 365.
\textsuperscript{112} The Goldfinch, 365
\textsuperscript{114} The Goldfinch, 170.
\textsuperscript{114} The Goldfinch, 170.
running the front of the shop, dealing more with the clients rather than the actual furniture restoration. He becomes a smooth talker, works on his people skills, and builds his self-confidence, which enables him to get into the minds of the buyers. He convinces them to buy things that they did not even know they were interested in, and at prices that they did not know they could afford. The key to Theo’s success comes as a piece of advice from a cab driver that he meets in Las Vegas, right before his departure: “Anyways, the secret is, always fix their attention away from where the slippery stuff’s going on. That’s the first law of magic, Specs. Misdirection. Never forget it.”

He carries out this mission so well that we once again encounter the notion that copies can have just as much legitimate aesthetic value as originals (and perhaps even more), bringing us back to the concept first introduced in the novel with Welty and the reproduction of *The Goldfinch* that hung on the wall of his childhood home:

> I had discovered that I possessed the opposite knack: of obfuscation and mystery, the ability to talk about inferior articles in ways that made people want them. When selling a piece, talking it up (as opposed to sitting back and permitting the unwary to wander into my trap) it was a game to size up a customer and figure out the image they wanted to project—not so much the people they were (know-it-all decorator? New Jersey housewife? self-conscious gay man?) as the people they wanted to be. Even on the highest levels, it was smoke and mirrors; everyone was furnishing a stage set. The trick was to address yourself to the projection, the fantasy self—the connoisseur, the discerning bon vivant—as opposed to the insecure person actually standing in front of you. It was better if you hung back a bit and weren’t too direct.

---

115 *The Goldfinch*, 356.  
In this passage, Theo provides a legitimizing rationale of sorts concerning the deceitful business deals that he carries out. By insisting that everyone is “furnishing a stage set” and thus implying that everything in “real life” is nothing more than artifice and theater, he validates the idea that the selling of copies or “fantasies” of authentic antique furniture (which he “stages” using various lighting and make-up techniques) is appropriate and legitimate. By doing this, Theo is able to create a convincing illusion that his clients, or audience, want to believe in.

As the novel progresses, the aesthetic appreciation that Theo previously felt towards these restored pieces and changelings quickly fades into the background, and all he concerns himself with now is their potential monetary value, once he realizes how easy it is to pass off Hobie’s expert work as originals, a shift in attitude reminiscent of the shift that we saw in the case of Pons and his collection. After pulling up the business from the red into the black, Theo clearly sees the earning potential in continuing his dubious practices, not only for Hobie but for himself as well. He pushes the limits (although the first time is by accident and he does not fully intend to cheat the customer in the way that he eventually does) to see what he can get away with and to see how much he can make during the process, experimenting with setting and resetting the prices of the pieces that Hobie has accumulated over the years.

Most of the time what he does goes unnoticed because of many factors, such as the manipulation of the shop’s lighting coupled with the customers’ willing suspension of disbelief: “I sold heavily altered or outright reconstructed pieces as original” and “…there’s
a reason so many antique shops are dark.”

Along with keeping the shop dark, Theo also subjects the objects themselves to small physical changes either to attract or to redirect the customer’s attention in a way that ends up favorable to the seller. Theo’s practices are no different from what art dealers have been doing for centuries, as Grampp explains in the following excerpt from his analysis concerning art valuation:

A common practice among dealers for long has been to give their acquisitions a coat of varnish before putting them on sale, often with a spotlight trained on them. That is why so many paintings known to the market (and at one time to the Customs Inspectors) as Old Masters were dark in color, so dark that darkness was believed to be a differentia of the class and that painters of the Renaissance used a dark palette. In this century the museums have begun to take off the varnish, and the palettes of the past are now seen to have been lighter. The practice is not universal, however.

Picking up on Theo’s observation that “everyone was furnishing a state set,” one could read such techniques as highly "theatrical" practices, since the varnish is like make-up and the spotlight a means of dramatic staging for effect. The end result is to invert the normal relationship between original and copy, reality and artifice, since the widespread practice of using varnish actually led experts to believe the "dark palette" was a defining characteristic (a "differentia") of Renaissance painting. In other words, the artifice eventually changed the perception of the real. After this realization, the reader may come to understand that it is only back in the museum, which the novel seems to define as a special non-theatrical public space of aesthetic legitimacy, that the make-up comes off and

---

117 The Goldfinch, 450.
118 Pricing the Priceless, 134.
the true nature of art is revealed. However, even the concept of the museum as a repository of true aesthetic value is significantly qualified by the novel, since Welty's story clearly situates the original of The Goldfinch (in the museum) as a paradoxical substitute for Welty's cherished copy.

Although Theo is successful at keeping up his act most of the time, he is eventually caught by several disbelieving customers who wouldn’t allow themselves to be fooled by Theo’s theatrics. Despite this, Theo is able to turn such situations to his advantage, since the process of repurchasing the items from the dissatisfied customers actually adds to the value of the pieces and paradoxically creates an unimpeachable provenance for them:

But on three or four occasions when distrustful collectors had taken me up on my offer: what the collector didn’t realize was that the fake—passing from his possession to mine, at a price indicative of its apparent worth—had overnight acquired a provenance. Once it was back in my hands, I had a paper trail to show it had been part of the illustrious So-and-So collection. Despite the mark-up I’d paid in repurchasing the fake from Mr. So-and-So (ideally an actor or a clothing designer who collected as a hobby, if not illustrious as a collector per se) I could then turn around and sell it again for sometimes twice what I’d bought it back for, to some Wall Street cheese fry who didn’t know Chippendale from Ethan Allen but was more than thrilled with “official documents.”

Through Theo's clever and dubious practices, the novel is playing with and subverting the notion of provenance. In this case, the very revelation of the illegitimate nature of a piece serves to create a guarantee of its legitimacy. In fact the provenance for these pieces is "real" in that the pieces really were (briefly) part of the famous collections that he cites and

once again, strangely enough, illegitimacy turns out to be at the basis of legitimacy, just as surrogate families turn out to be more legitimate than real ones, and copies/changelings turn out to be the source of legitimate aesthetic value.

Despite increasing the market value of Hobie’s changelings, after creating or enhancing their provenance, Theo undermines Hobie’s reputation in regards to the original pieces that he has restored and which for Hobie represent not only his livelihood, but also his true source of pleasure. By having customers call into question Hobie’s integrity, as well as the integrity of all of the non-changeling pieces that he restores, Theo betrays one of his closest friends, and in the same context of the subversion of legitimate and illegitimate, copy and original, Theo is able to take perfectly legitimate pieces and make them illegitimate: “—and, you see, thing is, if one of the pieces you’ve sold as genuine is wrong—they’re all wrong. Everything is called into question—every stick of furniture that’s ever gone out of this shop. I don’t know if you’ve thought about that.”

120 The Goldfinch, 495.
CHAPTER II

THE ELUSIVE VALUE OF ART, FAMILY AND SELF-WORTH

As we have begun to see, the opposition between original and reproduction not only recurs in the two novels but also is crucial to understanding what makes the characters who they are and act in the way that they do. Surrounding this opposition of original versus reproduction has been the notion of betrayal, which may not always seem present or relevant at certain times, but which haunts and eventually does real harm to the two characters nonetheless.

A. The Betrayal of Family and Art

1. Theodore Decker

As *The Goldfinch* progresses, the opposition between original and reproduction is progressively reflected in the theme of betrayal, which ultimately ends up triggering Theo’s final downward spiral as well as the ultimate perversion of *The Goldfinch*, forcing its transition from sacred stolen painting valued for its aesthetic qualities to stolen painting valued for its high monetary worth. Much of the betrayal that Theo encounters in his life concerns his relationship with his father, who does not waste any time in hurting his son or proving himself to be inauthentic and an illegitimate member of Theo’s family unit. When Theo is a child living in New York, it is only a matter of time before his alcoholic father, who spends more time at the office than with his family, turns his back on his son and on his wife. When he is home, he is moody and unstable and both mother and child constantly have to walk on eggshells to avoid upsetting him.
One day however, Theo’s father decides that he no longer wants to be a part of the family life that he has barely helped to create, and he leaves for Las Vegas, where he hopes to restart his life with the mistress that he has kept hidden from his wife and son. In doing this, Theo’s father delegitimizes himself as an authentic family member and breaks their legitimate family structure. This first betrayal experienced by Theo, although upsetting and confusing, comes almost as a blessing in disguise and returns to him and his mother the ability to breathe easily and to live without fear. In understanding the notion that Theo’s father is an illegitimate family member, the reader sees that Theo’s now incomplete family is more authentic than it previously was when it was complete.

However, when Theo’s mother is killed, his “original” family structure is again transformed, and the sense of legitimacy and authenticity that it takes on after his father’s departure vanishes with his mother. At this point, Theo is a minor, thus forcing the authorities to step in to find him a new home and to provide him with a replacement or a surrogate family for the one that he has lost. The notion of authenticity is again called into question here, at this early stage in the placement process, as this supposedly legitimate government body seems to act in a manner that works against Theo finding an alternative yet authentic family structure. The social workers get Theo’s name wrong and ignore his expressed needs and desires, first turning to his paternal grandparents who reject him, further reinforcing his father’s lack of family legitimacy. After that, he lives for months with the Barbours, who for a short period of time provide Theo with an alternative yet seemingly legitimate surrogate family of his own. Theo integrates himself into this family unit and finds himself occupying an authentic position within it, playing the role of a
supportive brother to Andy and that of a needy yet doted-upon son to Mr. and Mrs. Barbour. Towards the end of his stay with them, there is even talk of adoption until finally, Theo is reclaimed by his father and taken to Las Vegas to continue his life among the many mirages and false hopes that the desert (and his father) have to offer, once again shattering the albeit weak sense of authenticity that Theo had found and again betraying him.

Theo tries to view Las Vegas and his life with his father as authentic in his attempt to find commonalities with the old life that he had been used to, but the artificiality and superficiality of his new life flagrantly contradict that notion and mark the Las Vegas experience as inauthentic. Upon arriving in Las Vegas, far from the city that he knows and loves, Theo experiences a cultural shock that he finds overwhelming, “The airport was like a mall-sized version of Times Square: towering palms, movie screens with fireworks and gondolas and showgirls and singers and acrobats.”\(^{121}\) It does not take long for the differences between the two cities to become overwhelmingly apparent and crippling. The “eternal present” of Las Vegas is an important part of this inauthenticity, in comparison to Hobie’s reverence for the past through his work restoring antiques. Theo remains skeptical and bitter, and he does not know what to make of his new glittery life in Las Vegas with his father and his father’s girlfriend Xandra, who will never quite succeed in playing the role of Theo’s surrogate mother. Even though Theo’s father is now “sober” compared to before, the prescription drugs and light beers only keep him mellow to a point, and if he

\(^{121}\) The Goldfinch, 219.
has a bad day of gambling, it means bad news for everyone, since gambling is the source of most of his income, and the source of most of his stress as well.

While mildly impressed by the new Lexus that is waiting for them at the airport, introducing him to his new life of pseudo-luxury, Theo quickly sees through the vastness and empty grandeur of their cookie-cutter home in what was originally meant to be an exclusive housing development but ends up being a fake, failed attempt at creating an authentic community. Indeed, “The Ranches at Canyon Shadows” proves to be ultimately deceiving: “'Is there a canyon?' – 'No, that's just the name of it.'”\footnote{The Goldfinch, 222.} This vast, disorienting sense of foreignness applies not only to Theo’s perception of his artificial neighborhood, but to all aspects of his new life as well, continuing with his initial perception of his new school, “From a distance, the fenced complex of long, low, sand-colored buildings, connected by roofed walkways, made me think of a minimum security prison,”\footnote{The Goldfinch, 233.} and then on to the inauthentic appearance of Christmas in Las Vegas: “By then it was almost Christmas, though you wouldn’t have known it from the weather: cool at night and warm during the day.”\footnote{The Goldfinch, 285.} With all of the readjusting and acclimating that he needs to do, Theo barely knows what to do with himself out there and finds reprieve only after meeting Boris, the European wanderer, who is experiencing a childhood and adolescence similar to Theo’s, and whose authentic foreignness Theo embraces.
Like everything else at this stage of his life, the lines between fiction and reality, authentic and inauthentic, have become indistinguishably blurred—or more precisely, all sense of reality and authenticity has disappeared:

The filmic quality had become so stage-lit and stark that all semblance of real life had vanished; we’d been neutralized, fictionalized, flattened; my field of vision was bordered by a black rectangle; I could see the subtitles running at the bottom of what [Boris] was saying.¹²⁵

Much of this confusion in the latter part of Theo’s stay in Las Vegas arises from the excessive amount of drugs that he takes with Boris, which starts out as a recreational amount and then advances into dangerous and addictive proportions. On one occasion, Theo even ventures into what one could call artistic territory and describes an intense psychedelic trip during which the two create their own reality: “More than that: we were creating it. Whatever the drug was making us see, we were constructing it together.”¹²⁶ Paradoxically, in the midst of this fictional, imaginary drug-induced world, Theo is rebuilding something authentic with Boris: an authentic surrogate family structure, something that the “legitimate” Child Welfare agency failed to provide him with.

This sense of authenticity and stability is fleeting though, as Theo is faced with even more trauma and betrayal. Despite feeling at times that things have improved between Theo and his father, their relationship remains tenuous at best. However, with the death of Theo’s father comes the final demise of any illusions that Theo maintains about his father’s legitimacy. His final abandonment and betrayal of Theo sets the stage for the next and

¹²⁵ The Goldfinch, 333.
¹²⁶ The Goldfinch, 335.
ultimate betrayal, which comes at the hands of Boris, who surreptitiously takes away from Theo the very object that has given him his reason for existing since the explosion at the museum: *The Goldfinch* painting. The demise of his father’s legitimacy thus accompanies the collapse of Theo’s aesthetic delusion that he can protect and safeguard the painting’s aesthetic value from the hostile market values that surround him. It also triggers the collapse of any illusion that Theo may have had linking Las Vegas as a legitimate space to the reconstitution of his “real” family around his father, and it prompts him to flee and return to New York.

Through his betrayal, Boris allows the painting to slip into circulation as a black market commodity, a truth that Theo has difficulty comprehending. When he eventually finds out the details of this betrayal, Theo stops to reconsider everything that has taken place: “Because—” glancing between them—“when you think of what this picture has gone through—what it must have gone through—I don’t know if you understand, Boris, how much care has to be taken even to ship a painting? Just to pack it properly? Why take any chances?” After Theo has taken great pains to protect what he believes is the painting, the thought of it being exposed, mishandled and carelessly transported raises his anxiety level significantly, as he contemplates the possible damage or destruction of the art object itself. Aside from that, this betrayal shakes Theo practically as deeply as the explosion at the museum had and produces a multi-faceted crisis of value, concerning the

---

127 *The Goldfinch*, 650.
aesthetic value of the painting, the value of his relationship with Boris, and again the value
of his family structure with his father, together with the hollow value of Las Vegas itself.

Theo loses “his” painting unknowingly and only finds out about it later when Boris
tells him. Because he never actually checks the painting after he leaves Las Vegas, thinking
it is in his possession, he does not realize until Boris’s admission how long he actually has
been away from it, as he thinks it is waiting for him like a security blanket. Though at this
point in Theo’s mind, the painting has no defined monetary value attached to it, Theo
eventually comes to see how much the painting is actually worth as an aesthetic object to
the public at large, by reading the newspaper, overhearing people talk, etc.: “Priceless. I
rolled to face the wall. The recovered Rembrandt had been valued at forty million. But
forty million was still a price.”128 From this, he realizes that he is not alone in loving the
tiny bird, and that in fact many people from all over the world appreciate it for its non-
monetary aesthetic value as well. He becomes angry, sick and desperate enough to listen
to Boris, blindly following his lead into a world of deceit and illegal dealings when he
proposes a plan to try to recover the painting that has been pilfered from him without him
even knowing about it.

It is at this moment that one can see clearly the evolution of the value or at least of
the perceived value of The Goldfinch. Having gone from being housed in a museum with
nothing more than a name plate and description card on it, to being circulated on the black
market with two price tags on it (one issued by the authorities to make known its incredible

128 The Goldfinch, 405.
worth and the other attributed to it by the interested parties in this illegitimate setting), the painting no longer serves as just a vessel of beauty and pleasure; it now serves as a commodity, as something that has economic value determined by those willing to buy and those willing to sell. The body determining the value has shifted from the public who gave it legitimacy, to a private audience who may still value the art for beauty’s sake but who don’t have trouble casting aside these feelings in order to make a profit.
2. Sylvain Pons

The betrayal that Sylvain Pons suffers is nothing short of viciously tragic, which Balzac’s novel sums up as follows: “Tout le monde est contre vous.”¹²⁹ This betrayal is ultimately linked to the novel’s thesis that no authentic aesthetic value can seem to survive in the new ruthless market conditions of nineteenth-century France, whereas the more nuanced thesis in *The Goldfinch* suggests the ability of aesthetic value to survive in such conditions and to emerge in unexpectedly authentic ways with respect to copies and reproductions. This distinction is particularly evident in Theo’s ultimate ability to overcome the multiple betrayals that he experiences, unlike Pons who does not survive the betrayals that he encounters.

The first acts of betrayal against Pons, which call into question the elusive value of art, are carried out by the members of his so-called family and friends and continue right up to the people with whom he works. Concerning his family, at first they are only mildly offensive by not appreciating the Watteau fan that they had requested and that Pons had found for them after a painstaking search. This is not entirely surprising, given the superficial and most likely newfound appreciation for art, a phenomenon that Paul Mattick Jr. from McGill University explores in his article examining the dichotomy that exists between art and money: “The worship of art came to express the claim of capitalist society’s highest orders to transcend the confines of commerce as worth inheritors of the

¹²⁹ *Le Cousin Pons*, 101.
aristocratic culture of the past”. They ignore both its market value, which is extremely high, and its aesthetic value, which is even higher for Pons since he handpicked the item in hopes of proving his worth and pleasing his relatives. The strain on their relationship then escalates when Pons is rudely turned away from dinner and embarrassed in front of even his cousins’ hired help:

Pons descendit lentement l’escalier en retenant ses larmes: il se voyait chassé de cette maison, sans savoir pourquoi. – Je suis trop vieux maintenant, se disait-il, le monde a horreur de la vieillesse et de la pauvreté, deux laides choses. Je ne veux plus aller nulle part sans invitation.

The final straw for Pons comes when he attempts to help find his cousins’ daughter a husband. At first he seems to succeed, but when the potential fiancé in question changes his mind, the family views the rebuff as Pons’s fault. Consequently, all those whom he considers to be his friends and family violently shun him, in order to protect the reputation of his dear cousins:

Mme de Marville avait trouvé la seule manière de réparer cet échec en attribuant à Pons une vengeance préméditée. Cette conception, infernale par rapport à Pons, satisfaisait à l’honneur de la famille. Fidèle à sa haine contre Pons, elle avait fait d’un simple soupçon de femme, une vérité. En général, les femmes ont une foi particulière, une morale à elles, elles croient à la réalité de tout ce qui sert leurs intérêts et leurs passions.

Adding insult to injury, a city official further describes Pons as “[…] un monstre d’ingratitude…Le monde a bien raison de se défier des artistes, ils sont malins et méchants

131 Le Cousin Pons, 42.
132 Le Cousin Pons, 94.
comme des singes,” when Schmucke asks why he no longer speaks to Pons. Thanks to this embarrassing and hurtful public excommunication, Pons finds his character called into question, and his identity becomes distorted not only in the eyes of the ever-critical society that surrounds him, but in his own eyes as well.

Starting with the pain that Pons feels from his “real” family underappreciating him in conjunction with undervaluing the Watteau fan that he finds for them, and continuing when he is turned away from dinner, Pons not only feels the unfortunate burden of being old in a society that does not value him, but he feels ashamed as well, having lost his dignity as well as his pride. The fact that most people around him cannot or will not recognize what is for him the authentic and legitimate high value of art makes him distraught. The emotional turmoil that engulfs him pushes him so far that he no longer even feels hungry, something that he would have never previously believed possible: “…c’est un rat fini…Le pauvre homme, qui n’avait rien perdu des propos tenus à la cuisine, entendit encore ce dernier mot…il ne se sentit pas le moindre appétit.” The sequence of events causes him to slip into a great depression from which not even his best friend and surrogate family member Schmucke can pull him out, and he eventually gives himself up to his unhappiness, which manifests itself as physical sickness. He has no willpower to carry on, and while still protective of his collection from what ends up being his deathbed, Pons no longer even takes the time to enjoy the artwork hung on his walls, linking his ultimate renunciation of

133 Le Cousin Pons, 99.
134 Le Cousin Pons, 43.
aesthetic and gastronomic pleasure to the bleak fate of his collection and to aesthetic value in general in the novel.

Even at the height of his suffering, though, Pons understands that he is being deceived, which changes something in him forever: “Les maladies morales ont sur les maladies physiques un avantage immense, elles guérissent instantanément par l’accomplissement du désir qui les cause, comme elles naissent par la privation: Pons, dans cette matinée, ne fut plus le même homme.” As for Schmucke, he is beside himself with worry, and he continues to act in what he thinks is the best interest of his friend and his friend’s collection, before it becomes too late and the collection is taken away from him once and for all which results in the ultimate transformation of value: from a collection of art whose sole purpose was to provide happiness to a lonely man, to a collection of canvases whose new purpose is to provide wealth and status to a group of people who cannot possibly understand their true value as Bordas suggests:

Pons est détruit, mais ses toiles échappent à la destruction et rentrent dans l’histoire de leur modernité et de leur consécration en devenant des valeurs. Valeurs marchands, certes, pour les bourgeois philistins qui ne les désirent pas mais qui les reconnaissent en tant qu’objets de spéculation (les Camusot), valeurs de référence jouissive pour les amateurs éclairés que sont Popinot et Magus.

However, as time passes and Pons’s health continues to decline, Schmucke eventually becomes aware of the injustice of the society surrounding them and recognizes that the cruel eyes of others are always watching and judging, ready to take what they see as

---

135 Le Cousin Pons, 72.
136 Le Role De La Peinture Dans Le Cousin Pons, 31.
valuable and worth the taking, but never ready to give back or to help, as Schmucke remarks: “Paris était une tempête perpétuelle, les hommes et les femmes y étaient emportés par un mouvement de valse furieuse, et il ne fallait rien demander au monde, qui ne regarde qu’à l’extérieur, ed bas à l’indérieur.”

For Pons, and by extension for Schmucke as well, Cibot’s extreme betrayal in profiting from Pons’s and Schmucke’s financial ignorance and their dependence on her, and then in facilitating the sale of Pons’s precious pieces, is the ultimate beginning of the end:

En se voyant volé par la Cibot, Pons avait dit adieu chrétienmment aux pompes et aux vanités de l’art, à sa collection, à ses amitiés pour les créateurs de tant de belles choses, et il voulait uniquement penser à la mort, à la façon de nos ancêtres, qui la comptaient comme une des fêtes du chrétien.

After all that has transpired, Pons is able to see what his life has come down to and realizes that his sad and sick body has finally taken a turn for the worse. He knows that he has now reached the point of no return: “Malgré ce dernier mot si consolant, le docteur avait jeté sur le malade un de ces regards hippocratiques, où la sentence de mort, quoique cachée sous une commisération de coutume, est toujours devinée par des yeux intéressés à savoir la vérité.”

One could argue that Pons’s situation is perhaps worse than it could or would have been, had he belonged to a different social class and not been trapped by his low social status: “[…] car les gens du peuple sont habitués à subir passivement les plus grandes douleurs morales.”

---

137 Le Cousin Pons, 51.
138 Le Cousin Pons, 248.
139 Le Cousin Pons, 102.
140 Le Cousin Pons, 276.
just an “artiste raté,” he wouldn’t have been so dependent on others who do not care about his well-being or happiness to begin with. His collection would not have been put in jeopardy and usurped by the greedy and vicious people who weasel their way into his life. This, yet again, speaks to the grave injustice suffered by the man who tries to do good by all, enjoy his life, and benefit from his collection of artwork.

Pons receives numerous warnings and suggestions to turn his fate around and to prevent his illness from getting worse, such as his doctor’s observation: “[…] votre monsieur est un homme mort, non par suite de l’invasion de la bile dans le sang, mais à cause de sa faiblesses morale…il faudrait le sortir d’ici, l’emmener voyager…”141 It should strike readers as ironic that it is this morally corrupt man, aching to make a name for himself in the nineteenth-century France that is centered around social status and monetary values, who pronounces these words about Pons, a defender of the arts who has a much greater claim to moral standing than the doctor. This character, while he does provide a semblance of genuine medical advice to Pons, also stands to gain both financially and socially from his demise. Nevertheless, because of the greedy and despicable nature of those supposedly taking care of him – Madame Cibot in particular – the war fought by Pons is lost, and the only voyage that he is able to take is the long, dark road leading to his death, “On a souvent dit que la mort était la fin d’un voyage, mais on ne sait pas à quel point cette similitude est réelle à Paris.”142

141 *Le Cousin Pons*, 102.  
142 *Le Cousin Pons*, 282.
B. Art and Self-Worth: Crises of Value

1. *The Goldfinch*

Theo lets himself be dragged down by a debilitating sense of negativity, stemming from the crisis of value that begins before his departure from Las Vegas and carries over into his life in New York. Theo goes through traumatic episodes not only linked to *The Goldfinch*, but with Hobie’s changelings as well. After partially admitting to Hobie the mistakes that he has made in selling Hobie’s reworked pieces as originals at vastly inflated prices, he starts to do what damage control he can, which is not enough. He is unable to buy back all of the doctored pieces and to put an end to the crisis of value, and so he sinks further into a pathetic and unhealthy stupor and continues the drug use that began while he was in Las Vegas. Theo does try to give up drugs at one point to clean up his act, to set things right with the furniture sales, and to reestablish clear lines between real and fake. However, this half-hearted attempt does not go well, and eventually he relapses, resorting to taking drugs once again, as well as rekindling his friendship with Boris.

The multiple experiences of betrayal that Pons and Theo undergo are closely linked to the change in perception and value of their artwork, which increasingly comes to revolve around money. The value of the art changes when it no longer primarily serves its original aesthetic purpose, and both novels suggest that this change in value is linked to what becomes an eventual circulation of goods that were previously stationary, in permanent locations, to be enjoyed by a specific and pre-determined audience. One could argue, though, that there is a more significant form of betrayal woven into the plots of both novels, which runs even deeper and has even more serious implications than the betrayals already
discussed. In a sense, one could say that the protagonists themselves betray the very artwork that they hold most dear. Because of this, the characters confuse even further the purpose and value of the art. Over time, both novels show a decline in the aesthetic appreciation of the specific pieces of art in question, as the surrounding economic forces abstract their qualities and highlight their potential exchange-value, which will supposedly bring money to those involved. We can see that the art itself, as an aesthetic object, becomes almost unimportant. Because of Theo’s self-destructive behavior and carelessness, *The Goldfinch* ends up being used as collateral in international drug deals thanks to its high exchange-value, authenticity and portability, which is of course the last thing that he wanted to happen to the painting. As Tom Mueller of the New York Times points out, “[…] because fine art is safe to steal, easy to transport and extraordinarily valuable, it has become a useful tool in the hands of precisely those criminals whom the public fears most”\(^{143}\). Of course, the painting can circulate only as collateral on the black market and not openly in legitimate markets because it is an easily recognizable, high-profile stolen piece of art. In a sense, this shift in location for the potential sale of the painting further changes its value, since it can no longer be sold for top dollar on the open market and now must be traded in secret in the dark shadows of society. In a confrontation between Theo and Boris, Boris explains to Theo the complex nature of these types of transactions and the difficulties that the Goldfinch created for him over the years: “Can’t sell something like that. Although – must admit - one time I was in trouble, four-five years

ago, I almost sold it outright, low low price, giveaway almost, just to be rid of it."¹⁴⁴ The more familiar Theo becomes with the black market in his attempt at recovering *The Goldfinch*, the more he discovers that despite the risk involved in using art as collateral, this has been a well-known and proven method of conducting business on the black market for some time. Mueller also points out: “The stolen-art trade is now an international industry valued as high as $6 billion per year, the third-largest black market behind drugs and arms trafficking. Yet the solution rate in art crime is reported to be a startlingly low 10 percent"¹⁴⁵. Theo also comes to realize though, that this “industry” has been fine-tuned over time, by people accustomed to performing such tasks:

[...] trying to sell piece like that is the quickest way to get caught. You know that yourself. As negotiable instrument—different story! They hold it as collateral—they front you the goods. You sell the goods, whatever, return with the capital, give them their cut, picture is returned to you, game over.¹⁴⁶

Yet, while a stolen painting may be incalculably valuable, it must be used and traded in a particular way in order to be of any use at all as a financial instrument, as Boris continues to explain to Theo:

*No one is going to buy this painting.* Impossible to sell. But—black market, barter currency? Can be traded back and forth forever! Valuable, portable. Hotel rooms—going back and forth. Drugs, arms, girls, cash—whatever you like.¹⁴⁷

---

¹⁴⁴ *The Goldfinch*, 563.
¹⁴⁵ “To Sketch a Thief”, 1.
¹⁴⁶ *The Goldfinch*, 563.
¹⁴⁷ *The Goldfinch*, 584.
In fact, as Boris continues, sometimes when the stakes are too high, it is even better to have less-known paintings to use for these purposes because they are less ostentatious. This again calls into question *The Goldfinch*’s problem of value, as it shifts from being aesthetically invaluable, to having a high monetary price, to being too valuable, thus in sense, essentially worthless to some. Horst, the shady art connoisseur and junkie, explains to Boris and Theo, using his past experiences as a guide, that typically it is not always the most well-known or celebrity paintings that have the most value as collateral in illegal financial activities:

> And yet a mid-level painting like this, in poor condition—even an anonymous work—is worth more than a masterpiece, that’s the irony of it, worth more to *me*, anyway. Landscapes particularly. Very very easy to sell. Not too much attention from the authorities…difficult to recognize from a description…and still worth maybe a couple hundred thousand.\(^{148}\)

As Horst also explains, *The Goldfinch* ends up back on its home continent of Europe for simple financial expediency, “But my best guess is Belgium or Germany. Holland, maybe. They will be able to negotiate with it better because people are more impressed with it over there.”\(^{149}\) All of this information ends up leaving Theo unsure about how he should feel. On the one hand, one could deduce that the potential places to look for *The Goldfinch* are fewer thanks to its high-profile, high-risk nature, but on the other hand, this makes his mission even more dangerous and illegal, leaving him with fewer and more expensive options to recuperate his beloved merchandise.

\(^{148}\) *The Goldfinch*, 578.  
\(^{149}\) *The Goldfinch*, 564.
Racked with guilt and in a desperate attempt to recover the painting and put things back to the way that they were before, Theo is left with no choice but to go to Europe to chase down the painting with Boris, who tries to rectify the situation and to make things right once again. They do manage to get the painting back briefly, before dramatically losing it again in what ends up being an unexpected life-or-death situation. By the end of this encounter, Theo’s downward spiral culminates with him killing a man (in self-defense) and no longer recognizing the person that he has become – or perhaps he recognizes himself all too well and is too disgusted to cope with it anymore. In any case, the reader grasps Theo’s extreme desperation, such as in the following passage:

To understand the world at all, sometimes you could only focus on a tiny bit of it, look very hard at what was close to hand and make it stand in for the whole; but ever since the painting had vanished from under me I’d felt drowned and extinguished by vastness.¹⁵⁰

However, Boris reappears after having gone missing and silent for days, and explains that it is all over, and that everything is ok. By turning information over to the authorities about the whereabouts of the painting Boris enables the restoration of the aesthetic value and use value of the painting and by accepting the reward money that was offered, he also solidifies the fact that art does ultimately have a price and an exchange value as well. He tells Theo that the painting has been returned to the authorities and that justice has been carried out, but that doesn’t leave Theo feeling any better: he is still without his painting and he still feels as guilty as he did before.

¹⁵⁰ *The Goldfinch*, 603.
2. Hobie’s Changelings

As for Hobie’s changelings, the betrayal is clear and double: Theo sells the very items that have helped him through difficult times, all the while perverting their identities and passing them off for originals at values that do not properly reflect their hybrid, surrogate identities. In doing this, Theo has also betrayed Hobie, the friend who has stuck by him through it all, and who gave him his life back when it seemed like all hope had been lost. He betrays his trust, his reputation and his work, leaving him in a sad and precarious situation.

Although he still feels guilty for what he has done and is aware that things will never be the same between him and Hobie, by the end of the novel Theo sets himself on a path to redemption. He doubles down his efforts to make up for his selfishness in the eyes of his friend and decides to put the reward money that he received to good use by buying back Hobie’s changelings that he previously sold. While Tartt does not explore this particular issue any further in the novel, one must pause and question whether or not all of the changelings’ owners will want to give up, what to them had been valued as prized possession, by selling them back to Theo. Perhaps like Welty, these counterfeit pieces had come to embody objects that surpassed any dollar amount and brought them legitimate pleasure despite their authenticity. Can one say for certain that in this case any new knowledge informing them of their true origins and creator will make them any less valuable? Perhaps it might be just the contrary—maybe their uniqueness and unconventional history will only add value to them and will make them even more appreciated by their new owners.
3. **Le Musée Pons**

In the case of Pons’s relationship and betrayal of his collection, there is not as dramatic an example of betrayal as in Theo’s case. Here the “betrayal” mostly concerns Pons’s selfishness and his eventual inattention to his pieces. He forms the collection in the first place to create a safe and private space for the artwork, not allowing anyone to enjoy it unless they are accompanied by him or given specific permission. By allowing himself to wallow in such a deep state of self-pity and despair after his humiliation at the hands of his relatives and acquaintances, he eventually comes to neglect what he cares about most, inadvertently letting his aesthetic appreciation (or the use-value) of his art depreciate, and thus leaving the objects vulnerable to the naivety of Schmucke and the shameless selfishness of his ruthless neighbors who will stop at nothing to assess and take a piece of his fortune. Madame Cibot’s confident and calculating approach to the “process” of transforming Pons’s collection from objects of aesthetic pleasure to market commodities is emblematic of the forces arrayed against Pons: “—Soyez tranquille, papa Rémonencq, quand il faudra savoir ce que valent toutes les choses que le bonhomme a amassées, nous verrons…”

In his depiction of the indifference of Pon’s family to the aesthetic value of Pon’s collection and their callous treatment of Pons himself, Balzac draws attention to the significant shift in art valuation in nineteenth-century France, as Henry Majewski points out: “It is true that the devalorization of art in the new society dominated by the bourgeoisie

---

151 *Le Cousin Pons*, 118.
is, indeed, made abundantly clear. Everyone except Pons, Magus (the art dealer) and Popinot treat the art object as no more than a commodity to be exchanged on the market.”

However, despite the bleak foreboding that readers feel towards the end of the novel in being led to believe that all of Pons’s treasures will eventually be taken and sold for a profit, only some of them actually end up subject to monetary valuation in order for a sale to occur: the pieces that are stolen or “purchased” by Élie Magus in coordination with Madame Cibot and the unknowing help of Schmucke. Fortunately for the survival of true aesthetic appreciation, though, the other pieces of the collection remain just that, the components of a collection that are inherited by one of the only members of Pons’s family who cares anything about art. As Majewski concludes, “The authentic aesthetic values of art remain uncorrupted at the end of the novel, and the pieces of art are not transformed into commodities, since the essential collection (minus several stolen works) becomes the property of the Comte Popinot.” While this is comforting to a certain degree, one can be almost sure that despite this relative’s claim of appreciating art, the value of the collection will never be as high as it was when it belonged to Pons. This would however lead one to believe that while overall and in general, Balzac’s views about the relationship between the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie and art are accurate, there are certain conditions that would allow art to indeed transcend time and the prevailing attitude that promoted an ignorant lack of interest in it. Although the original owner Pons involuntarily passes his

152 Transposing Art into Texts in French Romantic Literature, 94.
153 Transposing Art into Texts in French Romantic Literature, 94.
collection on to a surrogate or replacement owner (through a process that, while seemingly inauthentic, is indeed sanctioned as a product of society’s laws and customs), it seems as though the pieces luckily find their way into the hands of someone who breaks the mold and cares about their aesthetic value and what they represent.
CONCLUSION

“How funny time is. How many tricks and surprises.”

The goal of this analysis was to answer fundamental questions raised concerning the elusive value of artwork in Honoré de Balzac’s *Le Cousin Pons* and Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch*, in conjunction with the many personal and societal pressures that Sylvain Pons and Theodore Decker, struggle to fight against. In the case of Pons, we were able to see that to him, the collection of artwork that he possesses represents more than just paintings and trinkets; it represents a companion, a treasure that no amount of money could replace. As the novel progresses, the immeasurable aesthetic value or use-value of the collection is transformed forcibly into a widely sought after commodity with a high exchange-value, contrary to the wishes of Pons, thus sending him into a downward spiral and causing him to lose the very treasures that made him who he was.

For Theo, the art in his life is completely transformative. Both *The Goldfinch* and Hobie’s changelings begin as a conduit for healing and recovery but, to an extent, end in deceit and suffering. *The Goldfinch* goes from a secret possession with a high aesthetic value that connects Theo to his mother and to Welty, to a source of despair, a lost treasure that is used instead as collateral in drug deals before being recovered by the authorities and returned to its rightful owners. Hobie’s changelings also go from representing therapeutic objects to sources of income that provide others a source of satisfaction and pleasure, all the while being passed off as something that they are not.

---

154 The Goldfinch, 753.
As this analysis has demonstrated, these acts of betrayal not only victimized the novels’ protagonists, leading to deep self-reflection and crises of self-worth, but also their treasured collections of art, calling into question their value and ultimately the true meaning of legitimacy as well. The perversion of value, the exploitation of the sanctity of the family unit and the confusion between what is real and what is not (and furthermore the question of whether or not it matters) demonstrates the vulgarity and greed that unavoidably plagues most societies, as witnessed both in nineteenth-century Paris and the contemporary United States.

In his novel, Balzac ultimately evokes a problem that is larger than his unfortunate Pons: the rise of a bourgeois society that is antithetical to artistic creation and aesthetic value and cares only about money and material possessions. As Bordas suggests, “La peinture dans Le Cousin Pons témoin de l’embourgeoisement d’une société qui se sclérose et qui préfère la possession à la création.”\textsuperscript{155} In Balzac’s Paris, as long as significant amounts of money are involved, beauty does not matter and the blatant disregard for aesthetic value is the prevailing sentiment of the times.

The death of Sylvain Pons publicly reveals both the aesthetic use-value and market or exchange-value of his art collection, as well as the true character of the vultures who have been circling around him in anticipation of his demise—two things that Pons did his best to ignore while he was alive. While most of the novel’s characters are solely concerned with becoming rich in the wake of Pons’s demise, Schmucke remains in tune with what the

\textsuperscript{155} Le Role De La Peinture Dans Le Cousin Pons, 28.

92
art really represented to Pons: “—Les foilà dous! s’écria Schmucke en montrant les tableaux et les curiosités. Chamaïs ceux-là n’ond vaid zouvrir mon pon Bons!...Foilà doud ce qu’il aimaïd afec moi!”156 Here we can clearly see that the collection’s use-value for Pons included a kind of friendship and love, since the collection is described almost anthropomorphically as all he ever loved, yet like so many other characters in the novel who victimize him, the collection also caused him great suffering. We also see that Pons’s real or original family behaves as anything but that, while Pons’s surrogate family, Schmucke dutifully remains faithful to him despite the strong opposition that he faced.

Tragically, the betrayal of Pons continues even after his death, and Schmucke continues to be taken advantage of until the final pages of the novel. The following passage describes his raw emotions and the depth of his sorrow:

Mais le silence qui suit le départ d’un ami, d’un père, d’un fils, d’une femme aimée, pour la tombe, le terne et froid silence du lendemain est terrible, il est glacial. Ramené par une force irrésistible dans la chambre de Pons, le pauvre homme ne put en soutenir l’aspect, il recula, revint s’asseoir dans la salle à manger, où Mme Sauvage servait le déjeuner. Schmucke s’assit et ne put rien manger.157

On the contrary, Pons’s “family” wastes no time grieving for this man towards whom they felt no affection, let alone love, and they quickly get down to the business at hand, making sure that Schmucke does not get any sort of inheritance and that any and all other final wishes expressed by Pons are completely disregarded. Still looking out for this shameful family’s interest, Frasier condescendingly explains to Schmucke:

156 Le Cousin Pons, 289.
157 Le Cousin Pons, 304.
Une famille ne se laisse pas dépouiller par un étranger sans combattre, et nous verrons, monsieur, qui l’emportera de la fraude, de la corruption ou de la famille!…Nous avons le droit, comme héritiers, de requérir l’apposition des scellés, les scellés seront mis, et je veux veiller à ce que cet acte conservatoire soit exercé avec la dernière rigueur, et il le sera.\textsuperscript{158}

It is here, that we see the novel finishing in a dirty and legal battle being fought by two parties both staking claims to Pons’s art collection and both claiming to be his real family. After discussing the art collection that the novel is centered around, John Patrick Greene finishes with, “To conclude, then, Balzac depicts the art collection as a metaphor referring to the state of French society. But it also represents other elements: it is a victim torn between the forces of aesthetic worth and financial value, a struggle in which the latter emerges victorious”.\textsuperscript{159}

While attempting to honor the memory of Pons, honorable but unfortunate protector of the arts, Balzac simultaneously attempts to show how the memory of the artiste raté is blemished in the eyes of the cruel society that did nothing to welcome him, by creating a funeral for Pons that is ridiculous and pathetic. Those involved with Pons’s funeral show no mercy in using this solemn occasion to make a profit and to further insult the artist, though he is no longer able to defend himself. While continuing to make a mockery of Schmucke and exploiting his ignorance of exchange value yet again. They convince him to buy things he does not need, cannot afford and should not have considered to begin with. Pons’s exit from society is a truly shameful spectacle: an unknown master of ceremonies

\textsuperscript{158} \textit{Le Cousin Pons}, 305.

presides over the proceedings and random strangers are hired to attend the service. As Henry Majewski remarks, “Balzac’s cruel satire of bourgeois customs is fully developed during the scenes of Pons’ funeral. The grieving and incompetent Schmucke is totally bewildered and marginalized again by the emphasis on money in all aspects of the degrading experience.” In excluding Schmucke from the planning of the event which is filled with customs that are foreign to him, Pons’s family further delegitimitizes Schmucke’s place within society and within Pons’s family unit.

Pons’s eternal resting place, along with the place of art in nineteenth-century Paris, is embodied in the three funerary statues that Schmucke is convinced to purchase for his grave. Majewski points out some positive aspects of the statues: “The mortuary sculpture of the torches surrounding the tomb illustrates for Balzac’s narrator the essentially revelatory function of art; it has the power to valorize life by discovering and uncovering its most profound spiritual and moral significance.” Ultimately, though, they appear as just empty and transferable objects, not really true art that can produce an authentic aesthetic experience, but rather adaptable place-holders that have become pure commodities that signal the death of art, as Majewski continues:

A statue designed to serve entirely different circumstances in time and space has indeed become a purely commercial commodity. This replaceable and reusable sculpture signifies the total devalorization and death of art in the dominant bourgeois view of society, in which it has no unique aesthetic value. It becomes a highly effective symbol also of the moral decadence of this class.

160 Transposing Art into Texts in French Romantic Literature, 97.
161 Transposing Art into Texts in French Romantic Literature, 97.
162 Transposing Art into Texts in French Romantic Literature, 98.
As Majewski concludes, these three statues, which originally represented the bourgeoisie’s heroic image of itself in the July Revolution, trace that class’s decline into pure monetary considerations devoid of any aesthetic value or idealism:

This vacant sign traces the decadence of the bourgeoisie from its heroic days of the July Revolution through its hardening into a conservative political hegemony, and finally into a society in which cultural products are only articles with exchange value to serve any profitable occasion. Balzac effectively uses sculpture here to deplore the declining values of the dominant class; the exchangeable mortuary statues symbolize the death of idealism and spirituality as well as the devalorization of art. \(^{163}\)

The only part of the whole thing that seems to honor the memory of Pons is the transformation of the three figures into statues representing the life of the man that was lost, “[…] mais en le calculant, Vitelot avait transformé les trois figures en celles des génies de la musique, de la sculpture et de la peinture.” \(^{164}\) By illustrating an elaborate funeral and describing in detail its materialistic and ceremonial aspects, one can see what Balzac believes Pons is worth, before his value is made ridiculous by his unrelenting relatives and acquaintances.

All of this however ends up meaning little for the heroine of the novel. The legal battle is won by Pons’s real family, carrying out justice in a manner that is aligned with the law but little else. In turn they inherited the collection that they found to be worth a fortune, but which they will surely not be able to appreciate in terms of its beauty and use value the

\(^{163}\) Transposing Art into Texts in French Romantic Literature, 98.

\(^{164}\) Le Cousin Pons, 297.
way that Pons did. Greene also notes: “The bourgeois characters in the novel cannot understand the language spoken by the collection; only lovers of art like Pons and Magus hear and comprehend the captivating call of works of art.” Schmucke, Pons’s counterfeit but true family loses not only his friend and surrogate brother, but any shred of fairness that French society might have had to offer him. And while he may not have gotten the same use value out of the art that Pons did, he definitely had a deeper understanding of its true value, the original value that his closest friend put on it, than the bourgeois winners in the novel. Sadly, as Greene puts it:

The art collection in Le Cousin Pons becomes a helpless victim, silent in a society where “money talks”. Its beauty is measured, for most of the characters in the novel, in monetary terms. In short, it becomes merely an object, or rather a commodity, to be bought and sold. In melodrama, the moral status of the heroine determines the health of the society (Métayer 39). With the collection being passed into the hands of the Camusots, one can argue that Balzac reinforces his critique of a morally bankrupt society.166

* * *

By the end of The Goldfinch, the painting’s use and exchange value are exposed as well. After having survived a major explosion in the seventeenth century, and now another major explosion and a lengthy stay in the underworld, The Goldfinch is returned to the museum to once again be enjoyed by all those who care about it, its use-value as an aesthetic object has been restored. Consequently, Theo and Boris are also able to cash in

166 “Balzac's Most Helpless Heroine: the Art Collection in Le Cousin Pons” 20.
on its exchange-value as well, revealing the ugly price that someone or a collection of people was willing to pay to get it back.

In his mind, Boris created a win-win situation: he turns over information about where the painting, as well as other stolen paintings, can be found, and in doing so any wrongs committed have been righted and on top of it all they receive a reward: “We get the ransom, museum gets the painting, cops get to close the case, insurance company gets its money back, public is edified, everyone wins.”\textsuperscript{167} For Theo however, the situation is a bit more complicated. Although the painting has been recuperated, it is not returned into Theo’s possession (which would have been the ideal situation for him), and the dollar amount, the monetary value assigned to the painting, “As I say—fraction of. Two million euro. In dollars much much more,\textsuperscript{168} only solidifies the idea that the painting is no longer his and its value has been converted from invaluable to an arbitrary number placed on it.

While it’s true that the painting is no longer in Theo’s possession, the connection he feels towards it is perhaps stronger than ever. Theo even admits that the painting ultimately is who he is, if not for the love that he feels towards it, then for the fact that it has become all-consuming and takes up such a huge part of his life:

Because: if our secrets define us, as opposed to the face we show the world: then the painting was the secret that raised me above the surface of life and enabled me to know who I am. And it’s there: in my notebooks, every page, even though it’s not…A secret about a secret.\textsuperscript{169}

\textsuperscript{167} The Goldfinch, 740.  
\textsuperscript{168} The Goldfinch, 736.  
\textsuperscript{169} The Goldfinch, 764.
Like the painting itself, Theo has been lost, found, taken and given, and by the end of the novel, Theo resembles *The Goldfinch* more than ever before. Throughout his life, he has been allowed fleeting moments of joy and the opportunity to stretch his wings to briefly take flight. By the end of the story, Theo survives by carrying on, attempting to right things with Hobie and with the customers that he has wronged. It is through this that Tartt reveals her sentiment that art, authentic or not, seems to have a sort of redemptive quality.

Certainly, the conclusions drawn about art and the complicated nature of assigning value to it heavily affect the lives of the protagonists in these two novels. However, based on what we have seen, we can also make observations about art that extend beyond the scope of these two works of fiction, observations that can be applied to society on a broad scale and across generations. The two novels have demonstrated that art has a unique quality, a value that surpasses its own use- and exchange-value: it possesses the ability to transcend time, in order to impose on people across generations the feelings of love, pain and suffering: “Art is seen to reveal and preserve the deepest meanings and values of life, and only friendship, in the order of human relationships, seems to escape the financial, material constraints of marriage and family in this patriarchal society portrayed as degraded by money and power.”

However great art’s ability to transcend time might be and despite the benefits that it may provide while considering his own reflection in the painting, Theo decides that if he could have gone back in time and freed the bird, he would have, despite having once loved

---

170 *Transposing Art into Texts in French Romantic Literature*, 102.
the painting more than anything and realizing the sacrifice that would have meant: “You know the painter saw him—he wasn’t painting that bird from his mind, you know? That’s a real little guy, chained up on the wall there”, 171 “And if I could go back in time I’d clip the chain in a heartbeat and never care a minute that the picture was never painted.” 172.

While Balzac doesn’t explicitly tell his readers, I don’t think that it would be a far stretch to say that if Sylvain Pons had to do it again, after reflecting upon his life and the impact that it had on those around him, he might have freed his collection as Theo would have freed his bird, and shared his treasures more openly. He might not have given them up or sold them, but to have shared the paintings with those around him might have done him and his families a world of good; culture and fine art would have been transmitted to a wider audience in his morally corrupt society and perhaps he would have felt the redemptive qualities of his art that he never even knew existed.

Through these two seminal works, Honoré de Balzac and Donna Tartt have provided readers with timeless and invaluable insight concerning not only the difficulties surrounding art valuation but the human condition as well. As long as there is art and until society resembles some sort of ideal utopia, these two novels will remain relevant and essential.

171 *The Goldfinch*, 764.
172 *The Goldfinch*, 765.
APPENDIX

A SAMPLING OF WORKS REFERENCED

Figure 1: *The Goldfinch*, Carel (1654) Mauritshuis

101
Figure 2: *The Madonna and Child with Saint Joseph, Saint John the Baptist and a Donor*, del Piombo (1517) The National
Figure 3: *Peter and Paul*, della Porta (1513) Pinacoteca Vaticana Gallery
Figure 4: Portrait of a Young Venetian Woman, Durer (1507) Dahlem Museum
Figure 5: *Wooded Landscape with Travellers and Beggars on a Road*, Hobbema
(1668) Windsor Castle Gallery
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Biasi, Pierre-Marc. La Collection Pons Comme Figure Du Problématique. Place of publication not identified: publisher not identified, 1900. Print.


De, Marchi N, and Craufurd D. W. Goodwin. Economic Engagements with Art. Durham,


