

# Notes & Essays

## UNPACKING: WALTER BENJAMIN AND HIS LIBRARY

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It is widely acknowledged that Walter Benjamin was not only a singular philosopher but also the most important and innovative literary critic and essayist in twentieth-century Germany. What is perhaps less well-known is that Benjamin was an accomplished and passionate bibliophile, collecting everything from German literature (especially Baroque), theology, fairy tales, and antiquarian children's books. Such a collection: the magic of children's books alongside the mosaic occultism of those Baroque texts and the metaphysics of the theological ones! Benjamin himself was wont to describe his book acquisitions in unabashedly enthusiastic and historical terms, as in his 1925 letter to Gershom Scholem, where he describes his "epochal" purchase of Von dem Werder's 1624 text, *Der deutsche Tasso von Paris*. In the course of Walter Benjamin's short and wandering life, books were, along with his Paul Klee painting *Angelus Novus*, his most beloved possessions. Benjamin referred to his love of books as his "bibliomania." Even when broke, virtually homeless, and in poor health, he spent what money he had on books.

Thus it is not surprising that, in late 1931, Benjamin took the occasion to write a brief and wonderful essay entitled "Unpacking My Library—A Talk on Collecting." At that time Benjamin, having nearly two years earlier concluded his separation from his wife, Dora, with a divorce, and having left his Berlin-Grunewald residence, was in fact moving into his own partially furnished apartment. Around him stood—in crates, piles and stacks—roughly 2,000 books! One can only imagine such a sight: the melancholy dialectician and author painstakingly unpacking crate after crate, sorting through book after book, long into the night. Why was Benjamin, who seems to have had, at best, only strained and awkward personal relationships, so enamored of his books? And why record the experience of "unpacking" them? Theodor Adorno and Gershom Scholem, two of those few people who knew Benjamin, though in very different registers, suggest that one of the peculiar things about this man was that his existence and his work were inextricably entwined. In his

essay, "Benjamin the Letter Writer," Adorno opens with the suggestion that "Walter Benjamin the person was from the very beginning so completely the medium of his work . . . that anything one might call 'immediacy of life' was refracted" (1994, xvii). And Scholem says that,

Behind many of Benjamin's writings stand personal, indeed most personal, experiences which by projection into the objects of his works disappeared or were put into code, so that the outsider could not recognize them or at least could do no more than suspect their presence. (1976, 202)

Hence on the one hand, *Benjamin the person as medium of his work*; on the other hand, *Benjamin's work as encrypted medium of his person*. Such is the dialectical process at work, I want to suggest, in "Unpacking My Library"; so much so, in fact, that as Benjamin "unpacks" his library we see, encoded, Benjamin unpacking himself and his work.

## II

"I am unpacking my library. Yes, I am" (Benjamin 1968, 59). The declarative and satisfactory tone is simple and unmistakable here—*this* is what I am doing, yes, indeed. And there is a pleasure and immediate presence in such a simple saying and doing. "After two years of darkness," Benjamin and his books are reunited in this rather impoverished and strange apartment—the one he will inhabit, alone—with its "air saturated with the dust of wood, the floor covered with torn paper" (1968, 59). But such an immediately satisfying and careful account of this reunion is not really to the author's point; instead, these descriptions are the ornaments of something more interesting and profound. For what we in fact have here is an "invitation," an invitation to glimpse and perhaps understand, not what books are here or how much they are worth, nor how they shall be arranged, but rather the genuine collector, Walter Benjamin, who now lives here, among these books. Indeed, Benjamin says that when this genuine collector speaks to us about unpacking his library we discover that "on closer scrutiny he proves to be speaking only about himself" (1968, 59).

What, then, does he say? At least three interconnected responses emerge. First, Benjamin's "Unpacking My Library" tells us about the dialectical tension of the life of the collector that he in fact was. The poles of such a dialectic are disorder and order (1968, 60). In the latter lies the mild boredom of bourgeois existence—shelved books, standing at attention like soldiers of knowledge as the collector marches "up and down their ranks to pass them in review" (1968, 59). Thus subjectified,

the ordered world of the collector locks individual units into discrete rows, catalogued and numbered and periodized. But a genuine collector knows that there is a strange disorder, even magic, here as well. These books are not yet shelved—this is not really, at least not yet, as Benjamin relates to us in this text's immediately present tense, a library. And books are, after all, the repositories of language—that special medium Benjamin, some fifteen years earlier in his essay “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” characterized as a magical “symbol of the non-communicable” (1978, 331). Thus in the former lies enchantment. Benjamin says very clearly that such a magical disorder is dialectically involved with order:

The most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magic circle in which they are fixed as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them . . . The period, the region, the craftsmanship, the former ownership—for a true collector the whole background of an item adds up to a *magic encyclopedia*. (1978, 60)

What better dialectical image of order and disorder than a magic encyclopedia: the rational bourgeois order of things known and knowable as form; the magical and stubborn resistance of those things in language—their “non-communicability”—as content. A “real library,” Benjamin argues a few pages later, “is always somewhat impenetrable” (1978, 63). Magic fills and overflows the space of encyclopedic order. But only a “true collector” sees this. Such a collector was Walter Benjamin. One can even picture Benjamin, as he himself described the collector, handling his books: “As he holds them in his hands, he seems to be seeing through them into their distant past as though inspired. So much for the magical side of the collector—his old-age image,” (1968, 61) says Benjamin, and in so doing discloses that peculiar experience he must have undergone as an “inspired” metaphysical seer trapped in the body and life of a damaged bourgeois existence.

Second, this “old-age” image of the seer is shot through with a “child-like element” (1968, 61). What the collector—what Benjamin, what his work—sees in old books, tattered bindings, and frayed pages is not use value or commodities but the old and the new. Benjamin writes, “I am not exaggerating when I say that to a true collector the acquisition of an old book is its rebirth. This is the childlike element which in a collector mingles with the element of old age” (1968, 61). Benjamin, of course, had a special intellectual affinity for children and child's play. Mimesis, for example, is characterized in “On the Mimetic Faculty” (1933) as moments of unfettered child's play: when children “play” train, they

don't simply imitate a train, they become one. Children and their behavior were for Benjamin the repositories of an alternative relation to the world—they become trains and windmills, they collect forgotten and ignored phenomena, they name “dead” objects. According to Benjamin, such an alternative world-view accomplishes a kind of renewal and rescue—children retrieve objects and stimulate life in a frozen cultural modernity; they re-enchant, albeit momentarily, a disenchanted world. Benjamin suggests as much when he says:

For children can accomplish the renewal of existence in a hundred unflinching ways. Among children, collecting is only one process of renewal; other processes are the painting of objects, the cutting out of figures, the application of decals—the whole range of child-like modes of acquisition, from touching things to giving them names. (1968, 61)

And it is precisely in collecting as a child-like “mode of acquisition” that a genuine collector emerges: “To renew the old world—that is the collector’s deepest desire when he is driven to acquire new things” (1968, 61). Thus collecting demands an orientation to the world of things that is always threatened: ensnared in the body and life of the bourgeois, trapped in the “old,” mature world of adulthood, the “child-like element” that leads the collector to rescue dead objects is akin to a rather bad category mistake. In a disenchanted world, books are to be sold, counted, divided, known; not phenomenally experienced, seen, related to via mimicry, intimately undergone. Genuine collecting for Benjamin, we might say, is a kind of acquisition that is motivated by “immaturity.”

Yet there is still more here, for Benjamin’s reflections on collecting are not reducible to a child-like naiveté or acritical faith in the non-theorizable purity of child’s play. Personal libraries are, after all, enabled and limited by economic principles of market value, strategies of exchange and commodification of private property. The collector of books in Benjamin’s sense, however, is not the holder of commodities so much as he is the custodian of the historical reservoirs of memories. The third encryption, then, is a very different account of ownership. The collector’s ownership of books is not, for Benjamin, a manifestation of alienated nature or reification but “the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects” (1968, 67). “Collectors are the physiognomists of the world of objects,” Benjamin maintains (1968, 60). What makes book ownership an intimate relation to the world of things is that peculiar anamnestic dimension to collecting that outstrips any notion of a library as the bourgeois ownership of commodities in a world of getting and spending. Though, to be sure, Benjamin knew his library contained commodities.

He was in fact not averse to selling his books when he needed money or to make a profit; he had valuable first edition texts. Anamnesis is a solidaristic form of historical remembrance or mindfulness. When individuals collect old and outworn phenomena they actualize an anamnestic possibility because they rescue devalued objects from one historical fate—a consignment to the trash heap of historical progress—and offer them another historical fate; they allow the natural history of estranged and decayed books to show itself in new ways and become recognizable anamnestically. In books the owner of commodities redeems the remembrances of things half-forgotten. In fact, these books are themselves objective constellations of a dynamic past—“not thoughts but images, memories” (1968, 67). Such images disclose themselves precisely not as dead objects or antiquated historical truths but as *memories that escape involuntarily*: “Once you have approached the mountains of cases in order to mine the books from them . . . what memories crowd in upon you! Nothing highlights the fascination of unpacking more clearly than the difficulty of stopping this activity” (1968, 66). The collector who unpacks his old books and restores his library does not simply “own” or memorialize the past but also disrupts the present: his collecting and re-collecting make immediately visible and relevant, against his will, what was forgotten, past, or dead.

And what is made visible here, for Benjamin, as evening falls on this December night? A montage of the past contained in his mother’s childhood albums. The last two crates contain books that would not belong in most libraries—they are not really books but “book-like”; merely, as Benjamin says,

Two albums with stick-in pictures which my mother pasted in as a child and which I inherited. They are the seeds of a collection of children’s books which is growing steadily even today . . . There is no living library that does not harbor a number of booklike creations from fringe areas. (1968, 66)

Benjamin does not describe the contents of these pictures, for that would be to miss his central point, namely, that for the collector the past is living, discontinuous, and incomplete, and shows itself in fragmented, montage form in the oddities of personal libraries. These albums, for example, were never commodities—they had no market value—and yet they most certainly do belong here, and must be unpacked, even at this late hour. For this library is alive with remembrances, remembrances which are not tucked away but interrupt, and *transmit* themselves. A mother’s childhood album contains the fragmented dreams, hopes, and broken promises not merely of a personal history but of an epoch now

lost and redeemable only in her son's re-collection. Thus Benjamin turns an occasion for a critique of the commodity character of the object and private, bourgeois ownership into another account of objects and their owners. Genuine private collectors are re-collectors; in them ownership becomes historically concrete and *humane*, whereas public ownership destroys the intimacy and history Benjamin so carefully unpacked in his library. There may very well be a dialectic at work here, but it is not that of the historical materialist. It is, rather, the fusion of Benjamin the person (a collector of books) and the medium of his work (that anamnestic solidarity with objects that shows books to be the repositories of a *past worth rescuing*). Small wonder, then, that Benjamin was so happy to unpack his library, for, in so doing, this man retrieved an undamaged past and at the same time managed to turn his own damaged present into a book—unpacked, yes, but not read, not really decoded.

### III

Walter Benjamin was a traveler, oftentimes by personal choice, just as often out of necessity. He was at home nowhere and, like the worldly critic he was, equally at home everywhere. Such a transient life served a peculiar function: it inevitably detached him from the world of human relations and at the same time coupled him to the world of things, especially books, but also other odd materials, such as high quality paper and fine fountain pens, toys, puppets and gadgets of all kinds, and unique architectural structures, such as one-way streets or the nineteenth-century arcades of Paris. In some profound sense, Benjamin's unique connection to objects allowed him to see that his kind of intimate relation to things was already out of date and perishing in modernity. He admitted as much at the close of "Unpacking My Library," "I do know that the time is running out for the type that I am discussing here . . . Only in extinction is the collector comprehended" (1968, 67). How to read such a quintessential Benjaminian admission? Heroic melancholia. The owl of Minerva flies at dusk. We arrive too late. Or perhaps one needs here to recall the Klee painting Benjamin was so fond of: the catastrophic storm of progress catches the collector in its path and blasts him out of existence.

But on this particular night that was not what occurred. The collector does not succumb to the storm of progressive history; he does not die—though he may be dying. Nor does he succumb to the inertia of melancholia. Instead, something remarkable happens. In the course of this text, Benjamin has constructed a shelter, a home, for the collector—for himself—in a world that threatens him. The shelter is in fact the library of books. But the code is not thereby fully revealed. Listen to Benjamin

as he confronted his last half-emptied book crate long after midnight in that messy Berlin apartment:

Ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him [the collector]; it is he who lives in them. So I have erected one of his dwellings, with books as the building stones, before you, and now he is going to disappear inside, as is only fitting. (1968, 67)

There is simple, child-like magic here, in its purest Benjaminian form. A day and night's worth of unpacking is also a day and night's worth of montage-like assembling: "I have made a house right here, before your very eyes, for him—that genuine collector I have been telling you about" says Benjamin. Only the building blocks are books—and have been so from the very first satisfaction-filled line, "I am unpacking my library. Yes I am." The past has been collected and re-collected. Now, finally, it is time to rest, perhaps even sleep. But there is no longer a corporeal collector—a subject, a person—here to whom sleep beckons. There are only books. Walter Benjamin—the "genuine collector" and the man who has been telling us about collecting—has dissolved in his own work. Such a dissolution is not "only fitting," it was in Benjamin's case inexorable.

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