Unpacking Benjamin

A note on Walter Benjamin's "Unpacking my Library: A Talk about Book Collecting."

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"Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories" ("Unpacking My Library" 60). Benjamin does not collect books: he collects Proustian madeleines. His library is an analogic equivalent of Proust's single book: a space whose real value is the temporality which has congealed around it. Time arrested, solidified into an object and safely arranged on the shelves of memory. Benjamin is in fact collecting his past, his life, and giving himself an identity, a sense of unified being through the variegated collection of his life's moments.

Life as such is chaos: "what else is this collection but a disorder to which habit has accomodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order?" (60). Like Proust, Benjamin sees in the vicarious life of afterthought the only way in which the individual can obtain a sense of a purposeful existence. "And indeed, if there is a counterpart to the confusion of a library, it is the order of its catalogue" (60). Unpacking one's library is going through one's past, rethinking it in a more satisfactory way. But Proust collects his own life by means of the most praiseworthy method, writing it himself. Benjamin remakes his only through the commodities he has acquired. Books. Why books? There is something Benjamin does not say: a collector can collect anything. I have heard that the Prince of Wales collects bathroom stool seats; if that is true, the acquisition of a new one is its rebirth, just as if it were a book. But maybe a good collector is blind to whatever it is that he does not collect. I think that a collection of newspapers, for instance, would be particularly distasteful for Benjamin.

Now what is this idea that you need not read the books you collect? I miss in this essay the analysis of what is involved in a book becoming a collector's item. Or
rather, it is there, but enacted in Benjamin's reasoning, not analysed. Surely the
(proper) use value of a book is inescapably linked to its being read. What value do
Benjamin's books have for him, then? Not a mere exchange value, of course. A
collector can never part with his collection, and Benjamin sees himself rescuing old
books from the market, that is, from the place where they are seen as commodities
with a monetary equivalent, subject to the law of exchange value. In his library a book
becomes like the library itself, "somewhat impenetrable and at the same time unique
itself" (63). Each of the books is a work of art with an aura, with the human quality of
looking back at us (cf. "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" 188). He recognizes the books
as human beings, and he rescues them "the way the prince bought a beautiful slave
girl in The Arabian Nights. To a book collector, you see, the true freedom of all books
is somewhere on his shelves" (64). But he does not restore them to their use value,
which (as I believe) would be a true rescue.* The unread books in a collector's
shelves are a result of the fascination exerted by exchange value. They have not
become human: rather, their reification has solidified permanently.

I hope the beautiful slave girl met a better fate and did not end up in the prince's
collection of females. But the odds were against her if the prince also believed that
"ownership is the most intimate relationship one can have to objects" (67). Ownership,
it is clear from the essay itself, is only vicarious creation.

The epiphany of Proust or Baudelaire, the true experience as opposed to the
standardized one is found by Benjamin in the ecstasy of property, in ownership as a
fine art, in property for property's sake, collecting. The fragmented subject, real
experience, time, memory, possession. All these revolve in Benjamin's mind and
explain his fascination with Proust and Baudelaire, as well as with his library.

Baudelaire's sonnet "A une passante" is also significant in this respect (not least in
Benjamin's optimistic view of the role the crowd plays in it ; cf. "Motifs" 169). The
passante is the beautiful slave once again, only she cannot be purchased; she
belongs to the crowd of contemporary life. Only by writing a poem about her is she
collected in some way. Crossing her in the street was an epiphany; writing the poem
is its ideal complement. Instead of the frustrated subject's inability to affirm himself
through property we have now two points in a life's experience which precariously
hold the identity of the poet together, like Lacan's buttons of upholstery. The
bourgeois individual with an artist's longing attempts the same maneuver through his
collection. Acquiring one's identity by means of one's possessions is not a satisfactory
synthesis, though. The bourgeois is not an artist, and his possessions do not come
alive in him: "it is he who lives in them" ("Unpacking" 67).

Inheritance is the best way of acquiring a collection for Benjamin. I would add that is
also the safest, most expedient way of acquiring an identity. Only I tend to see the
inheritance of accumulated property and social respectability as the original sin. The
insights in this essay are profound, but what is their corresponding blindness? Is
Benjamin feigning his blindness? I think that the circumstances of his life point to a
division in Benjamin which goes far beyond a detached impersonation of the
Bookworm role. After all, Benjamin did figure himself in his real life as a flâneur, a
flâneur who of course the same as a collectioniste and a rentier. I suspect that
Marxist theorists are once more paying the price of their bourgeois origins.

However that may be, I refuse to read this essay in a straightforward way. It is finally a piece of ironic writing, and the ending makes this clear: the speaking persona splits, and it is a "he" that disappears into his appalling world of opaque books at the end of the essay, while the saner observer remains outside. I think Benjamin is overstating his bourgeois inclinations, and at the same time confessing that he is unable to overcome them. His nostalgia for collectors also contains a measure of relief: the bourgeoisie will disappear, and with it the old type of bourgeois intellectual, as is only fitting.


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* Of course, all this can only be applied to Benjamin's persona in this essay; I suspect that Benjamin did read his books. On the other hand, this persona is very much like Benjamin in other respects; otherwise the essay could not be the self-criticism I take it to be.


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References


http://fleursdumal.org/poem/224

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