Packing My Library: Benjaminian Fragments of a Peripatetic Life

Rebecca Gould
“I have made the most memorable purchases on trips, as a transient,” wrote Walter Benjamin in his 1931 essay, “Unpacking My Library.” In this essay, Benjamin imagines the book collector as a spy on a literary reconnaissance mission. “Collectors are gifted with tactical instincts,” he writes, “their experience teaches them that when they capture a foreign city, the smallest antique shop can be a fortress, the most remote stationary store a strategic position.”[i] Benjamin’s book collection condenses his nomadic life, traversing Riga, Naples, Munich, Danzig, Moscow, Florence, Basel, and Paris. “How many cities have revealed themselves to me in the marches I undertook in the pursuit of books!” (396) the collector exclaims nostalgically, imagining how the books salvaged from antiquarian shops could patch together a life ravaged by wars. Gathered together on the shelves of a single collector, Benjamin believed that books stood for more than their contents: inscribed with their collector’s mortality, they are marked by every way station through which the reader’s life has passed.

Benjamin’s Riga, Naples, Munich, Danzig, Moscow, Florence, Basel, and Paris are my Tbilisi, Dushanbe, Delhi, Hyderabad, Tehran, Damascus, Yerevan, and Grozny. In each of these cities, so far off the beaten path of the European metropolises that housed Benjamin’s nomadic soul, I have acquired the books that have come to constitute my life. And now the time has come to part with my collections, too large and various for any library to house. Taken separately, these volumes—the Grimm Brothers in Chechen, full-color illustrations of Old Javanese Gold, the architecture of al-Andalus, the first feminist tract in Urdu—do not amount to much. But viewed collectively, these books are way stations for my soul. Although books with such diverse origins speak across their shelves as rarely as their subjects speak to each other, in my home these subjects abide together like their authors, siblings of one womb.

Will the act of saying farewell be one of selling, donating, or recycling? All that is known is that their days with me are numbered. After having passed a year longing for my books, their mother is moving across the world, possibly for the remainder of her life. When she returns home, it will only be for visits. And so she must relinquish her box of a house and that town called Yonkers on the edge of New York City. She must leave that used-to-be Irish town of Yonkers, a place so strange and quiet the authors who inhabit her shelves could not have conjured, let alone inhabited. If Heidegger is right to insist that our dwelling is in language, and that “language is at once the house of being and the home of human beings,” her books are the sum total of her world.[iii] The early modern Indian poet Bidel of Delhi spoke of how we carry our houses on our shoulders like snails as we travel through the world, moving across deserts towards oases flashing in the darkness. Bidel (whose name symptomatically means “heartless”) did not however detail how these mobile horizons stretch into eternity, on sands as shifting as our very selves.

Even when I have not enjoyed their physical proximity, my books have given me the stability that in former lifetimes was conferred by the concept
home. During my travels across Palestine, Iran, and India, remembering the locations of my books on their Yonkers shelves organized my life and gave it direction. Visual memory is the most lucid among the many ways of evoking the past. When I returned, I could still regard my abandoned home as a repository for my absent soul thanks to the order observed by my books. These books are soldiers of a bloodless war. I have inhabited the mental spaces their spines have etched on my memory for the better part of a decade, a decade that has seen me through my first job, my PhD, a failed marriage, and the manuscript that will soon apply for admission to their community of words. I have always been a stranger here, in Yonkers, crouched within my cramped apartment that awakens in the middle of the night to swells of speeding cars—teenagers are enjoying the weekend away from school—booming across the asphalt like ocean waves against the rocks. I rejoice in the anonymity my paper companions afford, as they shelter me from dissolution, and furnish a moveable home amidst internal homelessness.

Assembled together on the shelves of a Yonkers apartment, these books have witnessed more middle passages than any single human is fated to see. Notwithstanding their venerable age, I have not always revered their antiquity. Instead of holding them at a distance, as might the disengaged bookseller who views his merchandise with an eye to its market value, I have abused my books with too much love. I have suffocated them by reading intensively, by underlining, highlighting, annotating, by marking and bending covers backwards against the spine. Seeking to inscribe their words on my soul, I have branded my brain on their flesh. So many of my adolescent annotations are illegible today, and yet they stare at me from beyond the grave of my former selves. Are erased inscriptions legible?

A kindred lover of books once told me of how, after she submitted her PhD dissertation, she ripped to shreds her copy of Plato’s Republic, hoping to purge herself of the Greek philosopher to whom she had dedicated the better part of her life in graduate school. When she awoke the next day from her nocturnal rages, my friend immediately sought out a bookseller who agreed to mend her shredded Republic (for a hefty fee). She then resumed her life’s work of interpreting the Republic, eventually publishing her first book on the very text she tried to destroy. After repenting of her initial rebellion, this fanatical book lover has not wavered from her dedication to the Greek philosopher.

To compensate for my violence, I bandage my children’s broken limbs with tape, and hope that the paper will soon mend the gaps and paste over the open wounds. In this intimacy that alternates between tenderness and abuse, I have merged more fully with my books than with any other object that has passed through my life. I caress their brittle leaves with affection bordering on fanaticism. Childless as I am, the books I have owned have become lives I never lived. I am a mother who gives birth to texts, hoping to give her children opportunities she never had as they navigate imagined futures that someday may become real. I am an overprotective mother.

“Ownership is the most profound relation that one can have to objects,” Benjamin declares (396). Benjamin’s dictum might seem an uncharacteristic disavowal of the Marxist critique of consumption, were it not for the qualification of the possessor-possessed relation that concludes his thesis on ownership: “Not that they come to life in him; it is he who lives in them” (396, emphasis added). Referencing himself in the third person, as though he had already become a book by virtue of having loved and collected them, Benjamin addresses his reader: “I have erected one of his dwellings, with books as the building stones, before you, and now he is going to disappear inside” (396). This declaration merges Benjamin’s essay into the book that would (in English) become Illuminations, the posthumous assemblage of essays collected by Hannah Arendt. In the years since Benjamin’s death, this work has achieved a fame more prodigious that any that Benjamin could have envisioned for himself. Like the paper assemblages that have given my wandering soul a home, Benjamin’s books could never have foretold their author’s posthumous lives.

Benjamin defines writers as people who write books because they are “dissatisfied with the books they could buy but do not like” (390). Yet, critical though he was of everything that crossed his path, Benjamin’s writing is better suited for the essay than the monograph. By the time he wrote “Unpacking My Library,” Benjamin had in effect ceased to publish books. His turn to genres that could not be confined within the covers of a single book was one consequence of his aesthetic predilection for the fragment, as contrasted to the spurious whole. Neither of Benjamin’s two published academic monographs—The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism (1920) and The Origins of German Tragic Drama (1928)—served their author well during his lifetime. Notoriously, The Origins of German Tragic Drama was rejected when Benjamin submitted it as the most important element in his application in 1925 for the position of Privatdozent in the German Department at the University of Frankfurt. “We cannot tenure Geist” (the philosophical principle that guided Benjamin and his predecessor, Hegel), said the professor who rejected this work, the immortality of which increases ever year. Like Benjamin, ideas like Geist may be untenable, unable to penetrate the public sphere immediately, but they have longer shelf lives than their more fashionable counterparts.

The minutiae that captured the book collector’s imagination constitute the peripatetic philosopher’s saving grace. Enraptured by minute objects others have discarded, by the detritus of mechanical reproductions, by second, third, fourth, and fifth editions, water-soaked paperbacks, and dog-eared hardcovers, the book collector is modernity’s arch antiquarian, bringing order to chaos and chaos to life. His “disreputable” existence is redeemed, not unlike civilization itself, when his collecting confers new futures on long-discarded pasts. Benjamin’s specter of the collector’s ramblings through besieged cities, be they Paris or Grozny, Sarajevo or Damascus, in search of the material artifacts of eras past suggests that a life sewn together from fragments may find an anchor for its restlessness in a world made of books.