

Introduction

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Perhaps the books I have acquired over my lifetime have yet to result in a collection extensive enough to qualify as the “real library” that Walter Benjamin describes in “Unpacking My Library” (489). Granted, both Benjamin and I began with “no more than two or three shelves which increased only by inches each year” (488). Eventually, however, his books, some of them rare—ordered from publishers and through catalogues, inherited, purchased on trips or at auctions—amounted to several thousand volumes, enough to fill “mountains of crates.” In my case, each change of housing necessitated a parting with some volumes: only so many shelves available after all, even as I build more and fill them with new books. How, then, to put my hands on a volume no longer to be found in my library, a book so familiar that I can still envision its well-used spine, or a book that I can still see in my father’s hands? A “real library” stores and stirs memory, Benjamin suggests, especially if, as should be, it harbours “a number of booklike creations from fringe areas,” such as “paste-in” or family albums (491). Only when, in “Unpacking My Library,” Benjamin, way past midnight, gets down to the last half-emptied crate, does he pause to share some of the images his library evokes for him:

Memories of the cities in which I found so many things: Riga, Naples, Munich, Danzig, Moscow, Florence, Basel, Paris; memories of Rosenthal’s sumptuous rooms in Munich, of

the Danzig Stockturn, where the late Hans Rhaue was domiciled, of Süssengut's musty book cellar in North Berlin; memories of the rooms where these books had been housed, of my student's den in Munich, of my room in Bern, of the solitude of Iseltwald on the Lake of Brienz and finally of my boyhood room, the former location of only four or five of the several thousand volumes that are piled up around me. (492)

As Lisa Fittko picks up Benjamin's story, forty years have passed since that day in September 1940 when she guided him, in flight from the Gestapo, along with two of his acquaintances from Marseilles, over the Pyrenees from France into Spain, Benjamin's hope being to escape from there through Portugal to America. The story is well known: Benjamin, now frail of heart, found the expedition laborious, at one point having to pause overnight to gather enough strength to continue; when turned back by the Spanish border control, too exhausted to make the return journey, he took his life in the town of Port-Bou. Likely, after five years in a rented Catholic crypt, his body ended up in a mass grave ("Chronology" 445-46). A list of his belongings discovered years later in municipal records includes, along with his spectacles and pipe, mention of a leather briefcase (445). In the absence of a library, it is the briefcase, never found, that made such a strong impression on Fittko: she remembers that, although it looked heavy, Benjamin refused to part with it, explaining that it contained a book, his "new manuscript," something he could not possibly risk losing (948). Forty years after his death, she still recalls Benjamin's "ballast, that black bag" (950) that, as he put it, "is more important than I am" (948).

The digital age notwithstanding, I wish you the joy of a library, even if you cannot take it with you on your final trek. And I hope that your library includes at least some issues of *Mosaic*.

WORKS CITED

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