

U npacking My Library

A Talk about Collecting

I am unpacking my library. Yes, I am. The books are not yet on the shelves, not yet touched by the mild boredom of order. I cannot march up and down their ranks to pass them in review before a friendly audience. You need not fear any of that. Instead, I must ask you to join me in the disorder of crates that have been wrenched open, the air saturated with wood dust, the floor covered with torn paper, to join me among piles of volumes that are seeing daylight again after two years of darkness, so that you may be ready to share with me a bit of the mood—certainly not an elegiac mood but, rather, one of anticipation—which these books arouse in a genuine collector. For such a man is speaking to you, and on closer scrutiny he proves to be speaking only about himself. Would it not be presumptuous of me if, in order to appear convincingly objective and matter-of-fact, I enumerated for you the main sections or prize pieces of a library—if I presented you with their history, or even their usefulness to a writer? I, for one, have in mind something less obscure, something more palpable than that; what I am really concerned with is giving you some insight into the relationship between a collector and his possessions, into collecting rather than a collection. If I do this by elaborating on the various ways of acquiring books, this is something entirely arbitrary. This or any other procedure is merely a dam against the spring tide of memories which surges toward any collector as he contemplates his possessions. Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories. More than that: the chance, the fate, which suffuse the past before my eyes are conspicuously present in the accustomed confusion of these books. For what else is this collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent

that it can appear as order? You have all heard of people whom the loss of their books has turned into invalids, or of those who in order to acquire books became criminals. These are the very areas in which any order is nothing more than a hovering above the abyss. "The only exact knowledge there is," said Anatole France, "is the knowledge of the date of publication and the format of books."¹ And indeed, if there is a counterpart to the confusion of a library, it is the order of its catalogue.

Thus, the life of a collector manifests a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order.

Naturally, his existence is tied to many other things as well: to a very mysterious relationship to ownership (something about which we shall have more to say later); also, to a relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value—that is, their usefulness—but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate. The most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magic circle in which they are frozen as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them. Everything remembered and thought, everything conscious, becomes the pedestal, the frame, the base, the lock of his property. 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 whose quintessence is the fate of his object. In this circumscribed area, then, it may be surmised how the great physiognomists—and collectors are the physiognomists of the world of things—turn into interpreters of fate. One has only to watch a collector handle the objects in his glass case. 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, I might call it.—*Habent sua fata libelli*. These words may have been intended as a general statement about books.² So books like *The Divine Comedy*, Spinoza's *Ethics*, and *The Origin of Species* have their fates. A collector, however, interprets this Latin saying differently. For him, not only books but also *copies of books* have their fates. And in this sense, the most important fate of a copy is its encounter with him, with his own collection. 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. For children can accomplish the renewal of existence in a hundred unending 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 childlike modes of acquisition, from touching things to giving them names. To renew the old world—this is the collector's deepest desire when he is driven to acquire new things, and this is why a collector of older books is closer to the wellsprings of collecting than the acquirer of luxury editions. How do books cross the threshold of a collection and become the property

of a collector? The history of their acquisition is the subject of the following remarks.

Of all the ways of acquiring books, writing them oneself is regarded as the most praiseworthy method. At this point, many of you will remember with pleasure the large library which Jean Paul's poor little schoolmaster Wutz gradually acquired by writing; himself, all the works whose titles interested him in book-fair catalogues; after all, he could not afford to buy them.³ Writers are really people who write books not because they are poor, but because they are dissatisfied with the books which they could buy but do not like. You, ladies and gentlemen, may regard this as a whimsical definition of a writer. But everything said from the angle of a real collector is whimsical.—Of the customary modes of acquisition, the one most appropriate to a collector would be the borrowing of a book and the subsequent failure to return it. The book borrower of real stature whom we envisage here proves himself an inveterate collector of books not so much by the fervor with which he guards his borrowed treasures and by the deaf ear which he turns to all reminders from the everyday world of legality as by his failure to read these books. If my experience may serve as evidence, a man is more likely now and then to return a borrowed book than to read it. And the nonreading of books, you will object, should be characteristic of collectors? This is news to me, you may say. It is not news at all. Experts will bear me out when I say that it is the oldest thing in the world. Suffice it to quote the answer which Anarole France gave to a philistine who admired his library and then finished with the standard question, "And you have read all these books, Monsieur France?" "Not one-tenth of them. I don't suppose you eat off of your Sèvres china every day?"

Incidentally, I have put the right to such an attitude to the test. For years, for at least the first third of its existence, my library consisted of no more than two or three shelves which increased only by inches each year. This was its militant age, when no book was allowed to enter it without the certification that I had not read it. Thus, I might never have acquired a library extensive enough to be worthy of the name if there had not been the inflation. Suddenly the emphasis shifted; books acquired real value, or, at any rate, were difficult to obtain. At least, this is how it seemed in Switzerland. At the eleventh hour I sent my first major book orders from there and in this way was able to secure such irreplaceable items as *Der blaue Reiter* and Bachofen's *Sage von Tanaquil*, which could still be obtained from the publishers at that time.—⁴ Well (so you may say), after exploring all these byways we should finally reach the wide highway of book acquisition—namely, the purchasing of books. This is indeed a wide highway, but not a comfortable one. The purchasing done by a book collector has very little in common with that done in a bookshop by a student getting a textbook, a man of the world buying a present for his lady, or a businessman intending

to while away his next train journey. I have made my most memorable purchases on trips, as a transient. Property and possession belong to the tactical sphere. Collectors are people with a tactical instinct; their experience teaches them that when they capture a strange city, the smallest antique shop can be a fortress, the most remote stationery store a key position. How many cities have revealed themselves to me in the marches I undertook in pursuit of books!

Many of the most important purchases, though, are not made on the premises of a dealer. Catalogues play a far greater part. And even though the purchaser may be thoroughly acquainted with the book ordered from a catalogue, the individual copy always remains a surprise and the order always a bit of a gamble. There are grievous disappointments, but also happy finds. I remember, for instance, that I once ordered a book with colored illustrations for my old collection of children's books only because it contained fairy tales by Albert Ludwig Grimm and was published at Grimma, Thuringia. Grimma was also the place of publication of a book of fables edited by the same Albert Ludwig Grimm. With its sixteen illustrations, my copy of this book of fables was the only extant example of the early work of the great German book illustrator Lyser, who lived in Hamburg around the middle of the last century. Well, my reaction to the consonance of the names had been correct. In this case, too, I discovered the work of Lyser—namely, *Linias Märchenbuch*, a book which has remained unknown to his bibliographers and which deserves a more detailed reference than this first one I am introducing here.⁵

The acquisition of books is by no means a matter of money or expert knowledge alone. Not even both factors together suffice for the establishment of a real library, which is always somewhat impenetrable and at the same time uniquely itself. Anyone who buys from catalogues must have flair in addition to the qualities I have mentioned. Dates, place-names, formats, previous owners, bindings, and the like: all these details must tell him something—not as dry, isolated facts, but as a harmonious whole. From the quality and intensity of this harmony, he must be able to recognize whether a book is for him or not.—An auction requires yet another set of qualities in a collector. To the reader of a catalogue, the book itself must speak—or possibly its previous ownership, if the provenance of the copy has been established. A man who wishes to participate at an auction must pay equal attention to the book and to his competitors, in addition to keeping a cool enough head to avoid being carried away in the competition. It frequently happens that someone gets stuck with a high purchase price because he kept raising his bid—more to assert himself than to acquire the book. On the other hand, one of the finest memories of a collector is the moment when he rescued a book to which he might never have given a thought, much less a wishful look, because he found it lonely and abandoned

in the marketplace and bought it to give it its freedom—the way the prince bought a beautiful slave girl in the *Thousand and One Nights*. To a book collector, you see, the true freedom of all books is somewhere on his shelves.

To this day, Balzac's *Peau de chagrin* stands out from long rows of French volumes in my library as a memento of my most exciting experience at an auction. This happened in 1915 at the Rümman auction held by Emil Hirsch, one of the greatest of book experts and most distinguished of dealers. The edition in question appeared in 1838 in Paris, place de la Bourse. When I pick up my copy, I see not only its number in the Rümman Collection, but even the label of the shop in which the first owner bought the book more than ninety years ago, for one-eighth of today's price. "Papeterie J. Flan-neau," it says. A fine age, in which it was still possible to buy such a deluxe edition at a stationery dealer's! The steel engravings of this book were designed by the foremost French graphic artist and executed by the foremost engravers. But I was going to tell you how I acquired this book. I had gone to Emil Hirsch's for an advance inspection and had handled forty or fifty volumes; that particular volume had inspired in me the ardent desire to hold on to it forever. The day of the auction came. As chance would have it, in the sequence of the auction this copy of *La peau de chagrin* was preceded by a complete set of its illustrations printed separately on India paper. The bidders sat at a long table; diagonally across from me sat the man who was the focus of all eyes at the first bid, the famous Munich collector Baron von Simolin. He was greatly interested in this set, but he had rival bidders; in short, there was a spirited contest which resulted in the highest bid of the entire auction—far in excess of three thousand marks. No one seemed to have expected such a high figure, and all those present were quite excited. Emil Hirsch remained unconcerned, and whether he wanted to save time or was guided by some other consideration, he proceeded to the next item, with no one really paying attention. He called out the price, and with my heart pounding and with the full realization that I was unable to compete with any of those big collectors I bid a somewhat higher amount. Without arousing the bidders' attention, the auctioneer went through the usual routine—"Do I hear more?" and three bangs of his gavel, with an eternity seeming to separate each from the next—and proceeded to add the auctioneer's charge. For a student like me, the sum was still considerable. What happened the following morning at the pawnshop is no longer part of this story. I prefer to speak about another incident, which I would like to call the negative of an auction. It occurred last year at a Berlin auction. The books offered were a motley collection in both quality and subject matter, and only a number of rare works on occultism and natural philosophy were worthy of note. I bid for a number of them, but each time I noticed a gentleman in the front row who seemed only to have waited for my bid to counter with his own, evidently prepared to top any offer. After this had

been repeated several times, I gave up all hope of acquiring the book which I was most interested in that day. It was the rare *Fragmente aus dem Nachlass eines jungen Physikers* [Posthumous Fragments by a Young Physicist], which Johann Wilhelm Ritter had published in two volumes at Heidelberg in 1810. This work has never been reprinted, but I have always considered its preface, in which the author-editor tells the story of his life in the guise of an obituary for a supposedly deceased unnamed friend—with whom he is really identical—as the most important example of personal prose in German Romanticism. Just as the item came up, I had an illumination. It was simple enough: since my bid was bound to give the item to the other man, I must not bid at all. I controlled myself and remained silent. What I had hoped for came about: no interest, no bid, and the book was put aside. I deemed it wise to let several days go by; and when I appeared on the premises after a week, I found the book in the secondhand department, and profited from the lack of interest when I acquired it.

Once you have approached the mountains of crates in order to mine the books from them and bring them to the light of day—or, rather, of night—what memories crowd in upon you! Nothing highlights the fascination of unpacking more clearly than the difficulty of stopping this activity. I had started at noon, and it was midnight before I had worked my way to the last crates. Now I put my hands on two volumes, bound in faded boards, which—strictly speaking—do not belong in a bookcase at all: two albums with paste-in pictures which my mother had glued 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, though no longer in my garden.—There is no living library that does not harbor a number of booklike creations from fringe areas. They need not be paste-in albums or family albums; autograph books or portfolios containing pamphlets or religious tracts. Some people become attached to leaflets and prospectuses; others, to handwriting fac-similes or typewritten copies of unobtainable books. And certainly periodicals can form the prismatic fringes of a library. But to get back to those albums: Actually, inheritance is the soundest way of acquiring a collection. For a collector's attitude toward his possessions stems from an owner's feeling of responsibility toward his property. Thus it is, in the highest sense, the attitude of an heir, and the most distinguished trait of a collection will always be its heritability. You should know that, in saying this, I fully realize that my discussion of the mental climate of collecting will confirm many of you in your conviction that this passion is behind the times, in your distrust of the collector type. Nothing is further from my mind than to shake either your conviction or your distrust. But one thing should be noted: the phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning when it loses its subject. Even though public collections may be less objectionable socially and more useful academically than private collections, the objects get their due only in the

latter. I do know that night is coming for the type that I am discussing here and have been representing before you a bit *ex officio*. But, as Hegel put it, only when it is dark does the owl of Minerva begin its flight.⁶ Only in extinction is the collector comprehended.

Now I am on the last half-emptied crate, and it is way past midnight. Other thoughts fill me than the ones I am talking about—not thoughts but images, memories. 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 Iselwald 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. O bliss of the collector, bliss of the man of leisure! No one has had less expected of him and no one has had a greater sense of well-being than the man who has been able to carry on his disreputable existence in the guise of Spitzweg's "Bookworm."⁷ For inside him there are spirits, or at least little geni, which have seen to it that for a collector—and I mean a real collector, a collector as he ought to be—ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to things. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them. So I have erected before you one of his dwellings, with books as the building stones; and now he is going to disappear inside, as is only fitting.

Published in *Die literarische Welt*, July 1931. *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV, 388–396. Translated by Harry Zohn.

Notes

1. Anatole France (pseudonym of Jacques-Anatole-François Thibault; 1844–1924), writer and ironic, skeptical, urbane critic, was widely regarded in his day as the ideal French man of letters. He was elected to the French Academy in 1896 and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1921.
2. *Habent sua fata libelli*: "Books have their own fates," or "Every book has its fate."
3. The poor little schoolmaster Wutz, a perpetually happy figure, appears in Jean Paul's *Leben des vergnügten Schulmeisterlein Maria Wutz in Auenthal* (Life of the Contented Little Schoolmaster Maria Wutz in Auenthal; 1793).
4. *Der blaue Reiter* was edited by Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc and published in 1912. A compendium of reproductions of works of art and theoretical texts, it served as the manifesto of the group of artists known as Der blaue Reiter. *Die Sage von Tanaquil* [The Legend of Tanaquil] is a rare book by Johann Jakob

6. Bachtelen (1815–1887), Swiss professor of law, historian, and anthropologist best-known for his study of matriarchal societies.
 7. Johann Peter Lyser (1804–1870) was an author, graphic artist, and music critic. Benjamin admired his illustrations for children's books; see "Notes for a Study of the Beauty of Colored Illustrations in Children's Books" and "Old Forgotten Children's Books" in the first volume of this edition.
6. Hegel, introduction to *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (Elements of the Philosophy of Right).
 7. Carl Spitzweg (1808–1885), German painter, established himself with humorous and often satirical scenes from bourgeois life. "The Bookworm" depicts a collector on a ladder, examining his vast collection.