A Reading From

UNPACKING MY LIBRARY

By Walter Benjamin

A Talk about Book 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 view before a friendly audience. Instead I must ask you to join me in the disorder of the crates that have been wrenched open, the air saturated with the dust of wood, 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 which these books arouse in a genuine collector.

What I am really concerned with is giving you some insight into the relationship of a book collector to her possessions, into collecting rather than a collection. Every passion borders on the chaos of memories.

More than that: the chance, the fate, that suffuse the past before me 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 them become criminals. These are the very areas in which any order is a balancing act of extreme precariousness. If there is a counterpart to the confusion of a library, it is the order of its catalogue.

Thus there is in the life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order. Naturally her existence is tied to many other things as well: to a very mysterious relationship to ownership, a relationship to objects 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 fixed as the thrill of acquisition passes over them.

So books like The Divine Comedy, Spinoza’s Ethics, and The Origin of Species have their fates. But for the collector 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 her, with her own collection. I am not exaggerating when I say that to a true collector the acquisition of an old book is its rebirth.

To renew the old world – that is the collector’s deepest desire when she is driven to acquire new things, and that is why a collector of old books is closer to the well-springs of collecting than the acquirer of luxury editions
I have made my most memorable purchases on trips, as a transient. 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 stationary store a key position. How many cities have revealed themselves to me in the marches I undertook in the pursuit of books.

Once you have approached the mountains of cases in order to mine books from them and to 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 cases.

Now I am on the last half-emptied case 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, memories of sumptuous rooms and musty book cellars, memories of rooms where these books had been housed.

Of no one has less been expected, and no one has had a greater sense of well being, than the woman who has been able to carry on her disreputable existence in the mask of a “Bookworm”.

For inside her there are spirits, which have seen to it that for a collector, ownership is the most intimate relationship one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in her; it is she who lives in them. So I have erected one of her dwellings, with books as the building stones, before you, and now she is going to disappear inside, as is only fitting.