

JOHN PLOTZ



Out of Circulation

For and Against Book Collecting

Books—the few massive tomes of a medieval monastery or the impressive stacks that fortify a patriarchal study—have historically walled the reader away from the world, and the world from the reader. Shut the door to your study and find shelter from the mundane. And yet—there’s always an “and yet” in that escape—the refuge turns out to be a different sort of viaduct to the outer world. Reading “is an inner sheltered place (bower, closet, room, cradle) that has to protect itself against the invasion of an outside world, but that nevertheless has to borrow from this world some of its properties.” The reader “possesses [the outer world] much more effectively than if he had been actually present in an outside world that he then could only have known by bits and pieces.”

Roger Chartier, writing of the respect and the distrust that a library full of books inspired in the nonreader of the late Middle Ages, talks of the “loaded solitude” of the reader. The phrase remains resonant. Stumble upon someone reading a book, and you recognize she has absented herself from society—but what is she reading about? The new sociality established with the text, a one-way intimacy, means an entire world is available to her. It is apt that the medieval French word for “study” meant both the act of studying and any room with ten or more books in it.

The collector within a locked study—or even an unlocked one, since the perusal of books creates a kind of chamber without the need for an elaborate technology of privacy—is a Janus. Is she a solitary busy contemplating or cataloging a tiny valuable object? Or has the book caught her, removed her from our petty concerns, our economic worries and ambient political problems?

True, any sort of collection is theoretically capable of posing that sort of question. Even the perfect tiny world of toy trains is at once a self-contained delight and an allegory of motion, a potential passage-way back out into the world. But the creviced interiors of books

promise more than other objects can. Because the book collection describes so nicely the ways in which an apparent voyage inward—to a sheltered room—can in a certain sense be a radical step outward into the world at large, book-collecting may seem the supreme exemplar of the spirit of collecting in general. But the book is also a profound threat to the very notion of collecting. Its internal expansiveness is a challenge to collecting's apparent preference for hermetic enclosure.

The collector of anything but books labors, as Walter Benjamin puts it, "to free objects from the burden of being useful." But the collector who reads her own books also uses books to step away from the sealed system of the collection, to look out into the world at large. Other sorts of collections—paintings, for example—certainly may have this sort of "dislocative" power. Books however, unlike other collectibles, are always being endowed with this double life: once opened, they reveal in their interiors a passage to another world entirely. A collection may consist solely of books about collecting and catalogues of collections: Henry Spencer Ashbee prided himself on collecting, and writing, books about books. But any other sort of book collection must always contain shrouded within its pages instructions to forsake the closed system of the collection and look toward the systems circulating outside the walled library, the systems known collectively as the world. The provincial collector—and all collectors are provincial in relation to some object they seek, since they are not omnipresent—collects the cosmos, mimetically interred in the pages of her books.

I.

Printing, having found in books a refuge in which to lead an autonomous existence, is pitilessly dragged out into the street by advertisements and subjected to the brutal heteronomies of economic chaos. —Walter Benjamin

Collecting strives to eliminate chaos. An arcane order, by preference not an order recognized by or indeed even comprehensible to the outside world, guides every great collection. The man with the most matchboxes in London, a friend of mine who carefully hued all

her books, R-G-B-V and intermediaries, into a winding rainbow around her baseboards, and des Esseintes, the protagonist of J. K. Huysman's 1884 *A Rebours* [*Against Nature*], all share a penchant for novel order in construction. They all want a rampart against a chaotic world supremely oblivious to their efforts. The rise of collecting, like so many other overzealous attempts to establish one's individuality, is linked closely to the rise of great anonymous cities in nineteenth-century Europe, and the greatest collectors migrated naturally to Paris and London, where their brilliant idiosyncrasy could hope to win them far-flung recognition.

Roland Barthes's *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*, though it never explicitly discusses the collector per se, accounts as well as any book for the curious order that prevails inside the systematized collection. Barthes explains the internal logic of Sade's torture castle, Loyola's sacred meditations, and Fourier's utopian phalansteries. All are meant to operate at right angles to the world's rules; the language each proposes is meant to be similarly new. So too the collector, whose hermetic enclosure hides a realm of objects that call out each other's hidden qualities and graces. Balzac's eponymous hero, Cousin Pons, a collector and compulsive cataloguer, cannot but treat the replacement of four masterworks on his carefully hung walls by four paintings of the same size as heresy—as profound a rupture in his system as the sun's stillness in the sky.

"To the collector, in every one of his objects the world is present, and indeed, ordered—but according to a surprising relationship, incomprehensible in profane terms." But the idiosyncratic or the eclectic can in the right circumstances pass for sacred. A man's home is his collection: in the modern city everyone who can afford an interior is a collector of sorts.

One of the most stunning attempts at collection is Walter Benjamin's Paris Arcades project. Benjamin's was three collections in one: copious notes for an eventual book; masses of quotations ordered by Benjamin in an arcane system; and photos, lithographs, and objects from Paris of the 1830s–1860s. Benjamin had the supreme collector's authorial ambition: to write a book simply by arranging others' words and images. To him we owe the germinal insight of the book collector: that only inside a safe haven can the messy world outside be systematized.

The collector dreamed that he was in a world which was not only far-off in distance and in time, but which was also a better one, in which to be sure people were just as poorly provided with what they needed as in the world of the everyday, but in which things were freed from the bondage of being useful.

Theodor Adorno describes, in *Minima Moralia*, a child's toy trucks. In his description we can glimpse the objects in Benjamin's collection, and the purpose he imagined they could fulfill:

The little trucks travel nowhere, and the tiny barrels on them are empty; yet they remain true to their destiny by not performing, not participating in the process of abstraction that levels down that destiny, but instead abide as allegories of what they are specifically for.

Like these toys, the images and quotations collected in Benjamin's capacious files on Paris are a system serving as allegorical map of a greater system without. Benjamin stores things away, makes a "true" context by taking them out of their original one. Why, it has been asked, did Benjamin choose to memorialize the doomed Arcades rather than the early Parisian department stores, still a going concern in his own day? Benjamin was convinced that the true life of the culture, even the true life of ephemera, would be most visible in its dead artifacts—a uniquely collectorial insight. Writing about the yet-living department stores could not achieve the sort of abstracted empathy available from dead arcades, which are quickened by the thought of novelties past, haunted by the ghosts that only gather round an object trapped in its defunct past.

But Benjamin's collection probably gives us a more idyllic view of the late Victorian/early Modern collection than that era merits. By contrast, Huysmans' *Against Nature* puts its protagonist des Esseintes to work obsessively attempting to seal the edges of his world with a glue of valuable objects. Des Esseintes' country house is filled with enormous lists of proper nouns, from perfumes to colored fabrics to drugs, and the novel offers the (consciously doomed) hope that collecting could forestall some unnamed but inevitable catastrophe. The forward, written twenty years later, explains the entire project of writing the book as part of Huysmans' rarefied quest for

religious consolation in obscure works of medieval theology. But we could have guessed that from the novel itself. Des Esseintes' decision to dress his servant in monk's cowls gestures at the medieval monastery, that exemplary blister of sacred order in the profane universe.

However, one important thing differentiates des Esseintes, Cousin Pons, or Eduard Fuchs (Benjamin's ideal "collector and historian") from Loyola, and from denizens of the medieval monastery. The great religious orders intended their monasteries and their holy libraries to function as a "strait gate" through which religious revelation might enter. Like Bunyan harrowing himself so the living letter might enter his soul, the scholars of the Middle Ages sought to be transformed by the Holy Word. They acknowledged, as des Esseintes does not, some higher ordering principle than the yen for a personally pleasing system.

The successor to the sacred collection is not the merely static collection of valuable things. The sacred gaze upward, or at least outward, reappears in the dislocative power that books—in contrast to other collectible objects—possess. When the craze for collecting that swept Europe in the nineteenth century looked toward the "private passion" of the collecting individual, collecting held "pushpin equal to poetry." Everything becomes a collectible in the nineteenth century, but nothing is more than a collectible. For a "possessor" such as Balzac's Cousin Pons or Eduard Fuchs, who got rich selling reproductions of the gems of his collection, within the "sacred" space of the study everything has its price as well its place.

Collecting's traditional claim that it is exempt from worldly systems—that collecting is done out of the love of collectibles and not at all for money—is transparently false. The alibi appears in almost all writing about collecting, and anyone who has ever read the *New York Times* Living section is familiar with it. Take a striking example from Benjamin himself:

Fuchs belongs in the ranks of those great, systematic, and unswervingly single-minded collectors. His idea was to restore the work of art to its existence in society, from which it had been so completely cut off that the place where he came upon it was

the art market where, as far removed from those who had produced it as from those who were capable of understanding it, shrunk to mere merchandise, it yet survived.

Art is saved for a societal existence only by removing it from society's omnipresent medium of exchange, the market. Stifle the ordinary voice of the object, in other words (the one that shouts its cash-value continually) and it will "truly" begin to speak. The art object thrives socially only when at least one pace away from society's most exemplary nexus, the market.

This disingenuous claim—no stink of the market here—may well be the necessary lie upon which collection depends. Key to the alibi of the collection, and key to its complicity in the money system, is the fact that spending one's money to surround oneself with beautiful things allows one to claim that it is not money one cares about. "I know there's one thing vulgar about money," says Rosedale, the rapidly rising Jewish entrepreneur in Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*, "and that's the thinking about it." Money rewards us by giving us something other than money to think about.

To pretend that the collection's outer walls don't glow dimly from cash, to pretend not to know that one's money has brought this serenity, is a sort of mystification of cash. And any collector, humming over objects "rescued from the burden of being useful" knows well the energy that was devoted to bringing the object into being, and the energy spent nestling it within the safe walls of a collection. Ruskin claimed to perceive in lace, stored as "the life-blood of the commodity," the lost eyesight of the Bruges women who had woven it. This is not just a reluctant admission of collectors in darker moments, but a part of the pleasure of owning. Not only the fact that others do not own what you do, but the fact that others have suffered to bring this thing into being. In torment, delight: Sade's battery of victims is in this sense a forerunner of the modern collection.

The story of the collector who rushed to France to buy the only other copy of a work he owned, so that he could burn it immediately, bespeaks one underlying desire of collection: to withdraw what you love from the rest of the world. The chamber of wonders of the modern age is not, as it was in its early modern heyday, an assemblage meant to point to all the wonders the far reaches of the world still

held. Instead it is an involution of the world meant to proclaim that things thought to be in circulation have been privatized, to be made available only by the owner's discretion.

Is the upshot, then, that the collector always and only has her mind on money, and that the pleasure in objects she claims to derive is a false consciousness, readily translatable back to a love of money? So runs Walter Benn Michaels' account of the junk man's collection in Frank Norris' *McTeague*. According to Michaels, the desire for gold, for junk, and for objects all comes back to a desire for a natural standard of value.

Yet it seems necessary to disentangle the worship of any object other than money from the worship of money itself. As Benjamin notes about paper money, "nowhere more nicely than in these documents does capitalism display itself in solemn earnest"—for that reason every other icon of value (be it book, junk, or matchbox) falls short of money's naked expressiveness. A collection can be turned into cash, but because it is not cash (even a collection of foreign or old coins has this immediate resistance to being spent) its obvious participation in "exchange-value" is blunted. It is mediated, slowed up. Michaels' claim cannot be directly applied to a collection, because a collection at the very least contains the artifice of the arranger, and at most it contains a sort of immanent challenge to its own order.

Adorno and Benjamin messianically proclaim the collection's exemption from exchange value. Michaels assumes that collecting anything comes back to collecting money. Both sides miss part of the picture. Having a collection is at once about putting exchange-value into temporary abeyance, and about letting that exchange-value resurface, with a vengeance, at certain points. What entangles collecting most securely in the damaging net of cash exchange is not its cost, but its tremendous profits. From Cousin Pons onward, collectors have been depicted as buying cheap, ordering a collection, and selling dear. Pons's collection is "worth" something because another collector, who also knows the value of the objects he has chosen to go after, offers his heirs a bundle. In other words, a collection is able, so long as knowing collectors increase in number and purchasing power, progressively to increase its value, as the knowledge (Ben-

jamin calls it "passion") of what belongs alongside the pieces in one's collection adds value to everything that enters it.

This second collector, the Jew Elias Magus, who values pictures more than his family and his own life, serves as the novel's scapegoat for the evils of collection. He embodies parasitism, the true spirit of capitalism, and unhealthy object-fetishism simultaneously, while Pons's true friend—the German, Schmucke—remains, lamb-like, oblivious to all questions of money. That Balzac would choose to shift the worst excesses of collecting onto a Jew's shoulders signifies how ominous a figure the collector is, and how closely allied to the naked forces of market capitalism for which the Jew so often provides a convenient exemplar in this era of "anti-Semitism, the fool's socialism."

In certain ways, then, the collector is so implicated in the cash-nexus and in questions of exchange-value that an interesting parallel can be drawn between the collector and the modern consumer, the light and dark twins of the marketplace. In this paradigm, both collector and consumer are trapped in the world of consumer capitalism, and both come to believe that the value of an object is not inherent, but derives from its place in a system. Thus a collector buys a book for fifty cents in a thrift shop and later, as part of a collection of Roosevelt memorabilia, sells it for thousands. On the other side the consumer, too impatient to wait for the library, or not well connected enough to buy a review copy, or too naive to read the long excerpts in the *Atlantic Monthly*, spends thirty dollars for a new hardback, only to sell the book four months later, its novelty value gone, for three dollars. One adds value arbitrarily, the other subtracts, but collector and consumer both deploy their intellectual energies around a cash-nexus where any object's "worth" is subsumed into the question of comparative advantage.

II.

Every recto has its verso. The "loaded solitude" of the book means that we must pay money to be entitled to be exempted from perpetual attention to money. But in so doing the book grants access to knowledge, or to various forms of life, by making an end-run

around present community. Books are passports to idiosyncrasy, an escape from enforced community or from solitude that may lead one either to a more desired form of solitude, or to a different sociality.

A book asks only the smallest space out of the rush and bustle of the world. "In order for a part of the past to be touched by the present, there must be no continuity between them," Benjamin's dictum on history, can be rewritten: "in order for a part of the outer world to be touched by a book, there must be no continuity between them." Behind walls of cash and collectibles, the world may be recreated at the book's discretion. True, this relationship depends upon an originary closed space. But a book's salient property is its ability to take the captured reader away from that space.

The curious double life that books lead, by which a mere brute object summarizes an entire world within, does of course have its relatives. Any object in a collection contemplated with some intensity can transport the purchaser back to some other locale, perhaps the time and place where it was bought or made. This is what Susan Stewart calls the "souvenir" quality of a work. Books are especially rich in these qualities, but they by no means hold a monopoly.

During what many think of as the great era of collecting, between 1870 and 1930, this power of objects to transport us from one frame of mind to another is explored in canonical and noncanonical European and American literature with great thoroughness, and books are by no means the only object granted dislocative power. The madeleine in Proust comes to mind, but so do paintings in Henry James's *The Ambassadors* and a streetcar-wire in Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep*. The mystery that surrounds "The Aspern Papers," for example, in Henry James's short story, is precisely the protagonist's lack of access to a secret trove that would "take him away"—whether that trove turns out to be a sexual secret or copies of the genuine writing of the dead Aspern. Inside the sanctum that the protagonist never gains is either the bliss of sexual conquest—which would involve essentially "conquering" a woman—or the bliss of a peephole into the paper-preserved mind of his dead literary idol.

Mundane possessions or everyday surroundings, in the novels of the era, often turn out on closer examination to contain a path to the great world beyond. It would be easy to find this sort of passage in Proust or in Joyce, whose literary innovation was after all just such

moments of discontinuity and rupture. But the pattern is more pervasive than that. This sort of metonymical transfer from a mundane reality to adventure beyond crops up, for example, in E. M. Forster's stylistically and formally unadventurous *Howards End*. Early in the novel the protagonist, Margaret Schlegel, goes to King's Cross station to see her aunt off:

[The London train-stations] are our gates to the glorious and the unknown. Through them we pass out into adventure and sunshine, to them, alas! we return. In Paddington all Cornwall is latent and the remoter west; down the inclines of Liverpool street lie fenlands and the illimitable Broads; Scotland is through the pylons of Euston; Wessex behind the poised chaos of Waterloo. . . . And he is a chilly Londoner who does not endow his stations with some personality, and extend to them, however shyly, the emotions of fear and love.

To Margaret—I hope that it will not set the reader against her—the station of King's Cross had always suggested Infinity. Its very situation—withdrawn a little behind the facile splendours of St. Pancras—implied a comment on the materialism of life. Those two great arches, colourless, indifferent, shouldering between them an unlovely clock, were fit portals for some eternal adventure, whose issue might be prosperous, but would certainly not be expressed in the ordinary language of prosperity.

The spirit of book-collecting is intimately related to the sort of transference that Forster expects of every Londoner contemplating London's train stations. Books evoke a far distant reality, and by diving into them the reader may at the same time plunge outward into the world. "To them, alas! we return" is the apology of the novelist for not being able to make his novel infinitely long. The romantic glow of the portals at King's Cross is the special radiance of the red cloth that wraps that latest Anne Rice novel.

Even as this passage primes readers for the trip out of the mundane, it reminds them of the love that is bestowed on our legible gateways—the attention paid to the thing speaking, not the thing spoken of. Phenomenologies of reading too often imagine that books can be assimilated as pure mental phenomena, straight from the page to the far-off landscape inside. But book collecting ought to remind us that

the material facts of the book—its year, its binding, its place in the series, even where it sits on the shelf—influence the world the text creates. Book collecting forces us to remember that books' powers are both metaphorical and metonymical. They always bid to transport us metaphorically, but they can never help reminding us associatively of their mere physical properties. Forster's analysis of train stations is as good a guide as any to what exactly the novel's dislocative powers are, and to the nature of the tangible, physical characteristics of such gateway objects.

The metonymy of the rail station centers first and foremost on its arches (an explicit reference to Tennyson's "Ulysses," "all experience is an arch wherethro' / Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades / For ever and for ever when I move"). To walk under them is to board a train for Eternity, which is to say for a realm non-contiguous to ours, one where the ordinary rules don't apply. Though we may spend years in a book, we don't die in it, don't age in it, emerge only a bit stiff and tired. The respect Forster's text has for the "infinity" available on the Great Northern Line is comparable to that the first readers of novels granted to the text—an acknowledgment it could whisk them entirely away from their ordinary world. It doesn't take much ingenuity to see, in fact, that Frederic Jameson gets it exactly wrong when he claims that Infinity in *Howard's End* stands for the alarming presence of material development and of the Imperial regime. Infinity at this point is manifestly an attempt to deny any sort of relation to "the materialism of life" and so to avoid—for the prosperous intellectual like Margaret Schlegel or Forster himself—any sort of metonymical involvement in the excesses of Empire, its obsession with rubber, or "telegrams and anger." To pass through the arches, like opening the pages of a book, is to escape mundane accounting for ethereal accounts, for as long as the spell of the reading—or the journey—lasts.

Another way to express this might be to say that the truly passionate reader is attempting to fulfill Blake's instruction to "see eternity in a grain of sand, and all heaven in a wildflower." These "readings" of the small in legible world to get to the large are not far from a true reader's commitment to his book. Benjamin's description of the compressible imagination sets us on the right track. The world writ small in a book not only substitutes for the world, it also bids to supersede it.

The faculty of imagination is the gift of interpolating into the infinitely small, of inventing, for every intensity, an extensiveness to contain its new compressed fullness; in short, of receiving each image as if it were that of the folded fan, which only in spreading draws breath and flourishes, in its new expanse, the beloved features within it.

It is little wonder, then, that the persecution of the sixteenth century mystic Benedetta Carlini had as much to do with her using her (locked) study to teach another nun in her convent to read as it did with the accusations of lesbianism leveled against them. Both sexual delight and the act of instruction represented abuses of the "loaded solitude" a locked chamber signifies. Both offered the nuns a way to "be moved" while remaining still.

It would be stinting the powers of writing, however, to suppose that the only sort of threat to the collection's continuity posed by the book was some sort of dreamy lassitude, in which the reader, transported in mind, was paralyzed in body like a lascivious dreamer—the illustrations of novel readers in the eighteenth century, especially women, often choose to represent such vulnerable oblivion. In fact, the text within can be disturbing stimulus too, liable to rouse the reader's awareness not just of the danger of getting involved in a book, but even her awareness of contradictions within the text itself.

Indeed, formal experimentation with the curious layering of one sort of prose on top of another makes the era's novels into self-conscious explicitators of the heterogeneity that inheres in any book. Joseph Conrad's novels are shot through with moments where an alien form of language pushes its way into the smooth unfolding of the text. After killing her husband, Winnie Verloc of *The Secret Agent* discovers a phrase, "the drop given was fourteen feet," running through her mind like a gramophone record going round and round with needle stuck.

More striking yet are the moments in which even Thomas Hardy, generally classed among the waning Victorians rather than with the successor Moderns, practices the layering of one sort of text onto another. In his most brilliant short stories, "A Mere Interlude" and "On the Western Circuit," Hardy interrupts his own narratives to insert

ostensibly "authoritative" texts: a marriage contract, some love letters. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Tess at one striking moment "applies" to herself the peculiarly punctuated religious slogans she sees written on rocks: THOU, SHALT, NOT, COMMIT. Stranger still, Hardy spells out for the reader's edification the lettering on the outside of the marmalade jar that marks Sorrow's tomb: "Keelwell," it grotesquely exclaims. These inserted bits of text, which read not like authorial creations but like intrusive artifacts from a represented world, remind readers of the alarming power of words to shift, and shift their readers, from place to place without warning.

Texts of the modern period, conceived in dislocation and alienation, find remarkable ways to articulate the sense that the world has many levels, that all experience cannot be harmoniously reconciled in a single sphere. This is a description of a world constituted of books—of stored parcels of reality that rest, like mere tokens, in the neutral space of the study, but that when opened and read lead into quite another realm. The doubled or tripled realities that surface again and again in the novels of the era are symptoms of self-referential attempts to come to grips with the phase-shifts of modern life. Shifts that printed advertisements in the streets, movies, billboards—all the new forms of communication Benjamin aptly calls "vertical texts"—had helped to precipitate, but shifts of which the printed book still serves as the perfect paradigm.

By my hypothesis, even the texts most dedicated to the establishment of a well-ordered system of collecting ought to contain hints that the world is liable at any moment to removal from that safe hermetic space. Such evidence is strikingly present, not only in Benjamin, but also in Fourier's truest successor in systematization, Huysmans. One striking instance of the fracture of well-sealed sacred space in *Against Nature* is the allegorical trip to England, in which the babble of English voices, the taste of some English mustard and horseradish and a Paris train station (shades of Forster) substitute for the "real" England. The notion of signs substituted for actuality is a collectorial one (horseradish for Britons), but this time the substitution is beyond des Esseintes' own control, a function not of meticulous ordering, but of intrusive, unpredictable sensation.

However, the most notable rupture is the extended discussion of

books that essentially brings *Against Nature* to a close. When it comes to discussing the books des Esseintes owns, Huysmans actually inserts copies of reviews he himself had written: short pieces on, for example, Mallarmé and Baudelaire. The effect in the text is not completely disruptive, but it is curious. At that point, we are no longer reading a novel about a collector who has made a self-sustaining system for himself. We are inside des Esseintes' study, at the very heart of his fictional collection; but we find ourselves reading published texts about the outside world. We are, at our moment of deepest involvement in des Esseintes' world, also at our greatest remove from it—we could as well be reading a Paris journal of the day and thinking of nothing other than the world of Mallarmé. Little wonder that it is just after the description of the books that des Esseintes' doctor intervenes, saying that his continued confinement within the collection will prove deadly, and that he must return to the ordinary social world.

Against Nature is exemplary of the period's general sense, even in the most optimistic (and materialistic) accounts of collecting, that books pose a constant threat to the very idea of a safe hermetic space. Books, from the Bible onward, have always been incredibly frail denizens of a protected inner space—subject to fire, water, mildew, neglect and a thousand other shocks—which depend for their continued existence on a sharp distinction between the cozy inner world and the general outer one. Nonetheless, they remain, in all their frailty, potent conduits to a world outside themselves. Whether a giant old Gutenberg Bible meant to lift one toward God, or a Harlequin romance meant to blot out the jostling of the Boston T, books fail in their function as objects if they do not move our attention away from themselves. That is the spark of Benjamin's insight about the concurrent rise of accident-prone high-speed railways and the titillating or terrifying "railway novel" (designed for train reading)—"we blot out one fear with another." Phenomenology serves to remind us that our minds are not consistently localized; our attention, and hence the shape of the world we see, may be drawn off in a variety of directions. This is nowhere more obvious than in reading—the frame is a couple of elegant sheets of gilded paper, but the subject within is Araby or plasma physics, or a murder in a nonexistent country.

III.

Can the task of the collector and the disruptive power of books be reconciled? Well, haven't readers have been doing just that for centuries? Yes, but tensions, even downright contradictions, abound in the relationship between a safe cloister of collection and the dangerous, catholic, disseminatory power of prose.

We must avoid being lulled into agreeing with Benjamin that the "passion" of the collector justifies both her allegiance to the values of the capitalist market and her tendency to fetishize and store books that could instead enter circulation. Consider for example the cautionary tale of the Abnaki dictionary. Product of a Jesuit's painstaking lifelong work writing down and translating the language of a nation of Indians who even today spread from Canada down to the Mashpee tribe of Cape Cod, this dictionary was seized by the British during tribal wars in the early eighteenth century and given to the Harvard library ("Just after we had our fire," an archivist told me proudly). It remained a bibliographic marvel for over a hundred years, until some librarian with no sense for the collection deigned to publish it in the early nineteenth century, thus disseminating its contents but seriously denting its value as a collector's item.

Close to each other as the academic and the collector are, the war between them is at times as deep, bitter, and remorseless as any civil war must be—it is hard to forgive Houghton library for that century-long withholding. The case exemplifies well the sort of contradictions the collecting of books creates. Books thrive on reproduction. Even before print, the copying and distribution of books was a religious imperative. The "one-of-a-kind book," desirable to the collector as it may be, is practically a paradox: it is certainly anti-theoretical to the purpose and intent of books in general, which is to make some form of knowledge or conjecture available to more than one person simultaneously.

One of the most remarkable qualities of books is their fungibility and replicability: it holds out the possibility that others, spread out geographically and temporally, have experienced, are experiencing, or will experience exactly what you experience. It is not any one of

the characters—a textbook on relativity can still catch a reader—but the reading experience that transports her. That is just what a book denied replication and dissemination fails to do.

And yet. . . .

It is a characteristic of every age, and our age has the characteristics of every age with a vengeance, to see itself (as indeed it is) uniquely poised on the cusp between two rival worlds, between a waning past and a waxing future. So it would be immensely tempting now to hypothesize some sort of collecting that transcends the hermetic and subjective, and moves into a realm where the book's disseminative power and its place on a collector's shelves can be easily reconciled. Might this new collecting avoid being dedicated to value-addition by the creation of internal-system, and yet not be so hopelessly tied to the vagaries of market that every purchase became only the record of one year's follies for a later decade's amusement? Could collecting admit that a dour refusal to be moved was impossible, that putative "turning away" was complicity?

Maybe. But I think that the idiosyncratic egotists who presume to shore up their own system against a free-flowing world outside have got it at least part right. There is no magical Third Way between the collection and the wide-open cosmos. Of course one can vary the proportions—read throwaway comics but still collect old editions of Buffon. There are a slew of interesting intermediary solutions, ranging from the public library to the book group to the "Read Ride and Return" racks in some subway systems. Within all those laudable compromises, though, lingers at least some trace of the desire to free books from the profane outer world.

In "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" Yeats points out that in order to savor the rose's virtues he must both draw near it and, at the last moment, keep his distance:

Come near, come near, come near—Ah, leave me still
A little space for the rose-breath to fill!

Our society has as yet offered no better little space for that rose's breath to fill than a book-lined study or a carrel lodged somewhere in the library stacks. Gene Wolfe's claim that "we think we choose our

symbols, but in fact they choose us" is not only a threat to our secret selves (though it is that), but also a promise about the ability of books to change our lives. We may think our collections are our own, but we are theirs as well.