

Review of *Reconstructing the Personal Library of William James: Markings and Marginalia from the Harvard Library Collection*. By Ermine L. Algaier IV.
Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020. 298 pp. ISBN
1498552905. US\$115.

One of the more thoughtful reflections on libraries and book collecting is Walter Benjamin's essay "Unpacking My Library." Facing the daunting task of removing his extensive collection from its packing crates in order to shelve it, Benjamin observed that

there is in the life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order. . . . 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?¹

One imposes order initially by placing the individual volumes on shelves. But how ought one to arrange them? Will it be by subject matter or perhaps alphabetically by author? Shall it be according to chronology of publication date? Might the different languages in which they are written require their own clustering? Whichever system of orderliness we choose, it must permit us practical ease in the quick retrieval of any desired volume that circumstance makes necessary. As it is with libraries, so too it is with experience itself. In "Reflex Action and Theism," William James writes that the world comes to us "in an order so foreign to our subjective interests that we can hardly by an effort of the imagination picture to ourselves

what it is like.”² A library collection mirrors brute experience itself. It presents us with an initial disorder that we must convert into an orderliness as subjective interest and practical action dictate. In this way, the arrangement of a library collection is the reflection of the one who arranges: of their interests as well as the diverse channels and tributaries of their intellectual curiosity.

James amassed an impressive personal library over the course of his career, and in *Reconstructing the Personal Library of William James: Markings and Marginalia from the Harvard Library Collection*, Ermine Algaier IV has provided the scholarly community with a painstakingly careful inventory of the books that found a lasting place in James’s massive third floor study on Irving Street. An initial estimate of close to 10,000 volumes from the early 1920s may be open to dispute, but what is not disputed is the manner in which the titles bear witness to the full range of James’s intellectual curiosity. Yet, as is the case with everyone, the horizon of James’s reading certainly far exceeded the inventory in his personal library; one does not purchase every book that tempts one’s curiosity. And if we are truthful, while some volumes we do possess are worn to the threshold of destruction by repeated study, we do not read and reread with careful attention every book that we purchase.

A moment’s reflection suggests certain useful parallels between Algaier’s project and elements of James’s thought. The decision to add a volume to one’s permanent collection represents both a deliberate decision and a statement about its value in relation to other works that one could, but does not acquire. In examining the titles that one chooses to keep close at hand, we can learn much about the collector’s temperament and interests. A collection represents something of an organic whole, more or less unified, that the collector selects from the vast universe of printed books available. Such selective activity is guided, as James notes, by one’s practical interests: “the exuberant excess of [one’s] subjective propensities,” as he puts it.³ Each newly acquired volume enters into a relationship with every other one already cataloged; the inclusion of each transforms both the new addition as well as the established collection as a whole. Each new edition contributes its own

perspective and content to one already established and defined. Thus, a library grows by its edges, as it were. Recall James's vivid assertion that our

minds thus grow in spots; and like grease-spots, the spots spread. But we let them spread as little as possible: we keep unaltered as much of our old knowledge, as many of our old prejudices and beliefs, as we can. We patch and tinker more than we renew. The novelty soaks in; it stains the ancient mass; but it is also tinged by what absorbs it.⁴

Is this not also the case with a library collection?

Algaier's text falls into two main sections. The first is primarily introductory and contextual. It describes the library as it resided in James's home. Algaier examines various source lists of its contents, along with the history of the fate of the collection after James's death. While some volumes ended up in Harvard's university libraries, other titles were dispersed as gifts or purchased by private individuals. Still others were sold off to local booksellers, and unbelievably, not a few suffered the ultimate indignity of returning to the primal chaos of the trash heap. The picture we get is rather a complicated one and, owing to the vicissitudes of fate, less than exhaustively complete. This only enhances our appreciation for Algaier's careful work. In addition to his overview of the history of James's library, he includes brief, yet useful discussions of the resources used to reconstruct the collection as well as a section on preservation of the collection that remains.

The discussion potentially of greatest interest to the scholar examines James's marginalia and annotations, which include the inscriptions in presentation copies from authors who were among James's close friends. Most interestingly to the scholar, some volumes are heavily annotated while others hardly at all. As Algaier observes, these notations provide "a brief glimpse into another's world and how James interacted with it."⁵ They allow the reader to eavesdrop on a conversation between James and the author of the text he has in hand. James's specific annotations aside, Algaier

offers some interesting reflections on the practice and significance of these markings and notes. Margin notes may be terse or expansive, but regardless, they pose miniature riddles to those who seek to reconstruct the connection between James and the author with whom he is engaging. The reader thus confronts two texts: the original content of the book as well as the brief comments that the book elicited in James as he read.

The second bibliographic section, which catalogs the contents of James's library, takes up the bulk of the book. It is divided into sections on books and pamphlets as well as periodicals, some held at Harvard and others elsewhere. The vast variation in title and topic at first appears to be nothing but a symptom of the discontinuity and disorder to which Benjamin alluded. One finds works as diverse as St. Francis of Assisi's devotional writings and Gustave Le Bon's influential study of crowds. There are volumes of biblical criticism as well as works dealing with clinical psychology and neurological disorders. Charcot's early research into issues in psychology finds a place here as well, along with a copy of Freud's revolutionary *Über den Traum*, the only Freud text identified in James's collection. Sources known to James's readers primarily by name are included as well—Benjamin Blood and Thomas Davidson, for example—providing the researcher with resources to dive more deeply into the James texts where these names appear. James knew that valuable lessons can be learned from unexpected sources, from intellectual giants as well as rural farmers and urban subway workers. So too with books.

The bibliographic material is extensive and will prove invaluable to scholars seeking to survey the center, as well as the margins, of James's thinking. Let me offer some examples. I have spent some time studying James's relationship with the so-called Florentine pragmatists that he met in 1905 while attending a congress in Rome. Giovanni Papini seems to have made the greatest impression on James, leading him to publish a summary account of what he took to be Papini's brand of pragmatism shortly thereafter. But Papini alone does not exhaust the rich variety of pragmatism that James found there; others in Papini's circle would likewise

acknowledge James as a significant influence. Giuseppe Prezzolini who, with Papini, represented the more “Jamesian” variety of Italian pragmatism, claimed to draw heavily from *The Principles of Psychology* and went on to develop a very aggressive reading of “The Will to Believe.” Mario Calderoni and Giovanni Vailati represented the more positivistic wing of the group, taking their inspiration from Peirce’s original and more restricted application of the pragmatic maxim. They were highly critical of the voluntaristic strain that both Papini and Prezzolini sought to defend. James’s library contained Prezzolini’s polemically playful *L’arte di persuadere* as well as several of Papini’s works, ranging from *Il crepuscolo dei filosofi* to his studies of George Berkeley and Walt Whitman. While James’s inventory lists none of Calderoni’s works, Vailati is amply represented with several book-length entries dealing with problems of linguistic meaning and conceptual clarity as these might impact both science and wider culture. Most interestingly, there are four issues of Papini’s short-lived yet highly influential periodical *Leonardo* cataloged in the periodicals section of Algaier’s bibliography. James explicitly refers to this periodical, as well as the Papini titles, with great enthusiasm in his “G. Papini and the Pragmatist Movement in Italy” of 1907. Having this knowledge of James’s direct access to such works is useful for expanding upon his influence in Italy in greater detail.

Another example concerns works by George Holmes Howison. Today, his name is somewhat obscure, which belies his significant place within pragmatism and pluralism. He is particularly remembered as the individual who invited James to California in 1898 where “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results” announced pragmatism to the philosophical world. Howison was famous on the West Coast for his teaching as well as for the Philosophical Union he founded and maintained at Berkeley. He and James had been well acquainted for years, and James even expressed regret about having overlooked Howison in favor of Royce as his sabbatical replacement at Harvard in the early 1880s. Several years before James’s 1898 visit to California, the Union played host to Josiah Royce’s homecoming and subsequent debate with Howison

(and others), later published as *The Concept of God*. Howison constructed his personal idealism on the framework of Kantian thought, and when James closed “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results” with an attack on Kant, he meant it as a criticism of Howison as well. In spite of sharing a deep commitment to pluralism, James and Howison crossed swords over evolution and the a priori. Algaier’s bibliography shows that James owned several of Howison’s books on topics such as the philosophy of religion; commentaries on Kant, Hegel, and Royce; and multiple copies of *The Limits of Evolution*, a collection of essays, each of which develops Howison’s criticism of James. We learn that James clearly followed Howison closely; at least close enough to amass these volumes, and their inclusion in his personal collection is useful background material for understanding their relationship as well as its difficult conclusion when, in a sharp fit of pique, Howison broke off their friendship, angered at receiving no mention at all from James in the pages of *A Pluralistic Universe*.

In closing, let us recall Emerson’s own appraisal of the contents of libraries. “Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst,” so he famously tells us in “The American Scholar.”⁶ They serve the reader poorly if they harden into something akin to authoritative gospel but serve that reader well when they keep to their genuine office, that is, when they simply aim to inspire. The great mischief to which books and libraries are susceptible lies in subordinating the act of creation and thought to the record calcified in print. One “had better never see a book,” he writes, “than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit. . . . The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul.”⁷ If anything, Ermine Algaier’s book demonstrates just what an active and creative soul James possessed. As evidenced by the scope of the titles in his library, as well as by his annotations and margin notes, James allowed books to quicken his own thinking, all the while managing to resist their inexorable gravitational pull. Algaier writes that a mere hour’s perusal, as much as anything, will transport the reader into “the genuine pluralism of James’s world.”⁸ Scholars will find more than a few hours of rich material here that should quicken their

own research and thinking. *Reconstructing the Personal Library of William James* will find a vital and well-deserved place in the library of anyone engaging the thought of William James as well as the intellectual culture which helped to nourish his actively creative soul.

E. Paul Colella
Xavier University
colella@xavier.edu

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Algaier IV, Ermine L. *Reconstructing the Personal Library of William James: Markings and Marginalia from the Harvard Library Collection*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Translated by Harry Zohn and edited by Hannah Arendt. 59-68. New York: Schocken, 1969.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Essays and Lectures*. Edited by Joel Porte. New York: Library of America, 1983.
- James, William. *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. New York: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1907.
- . *The Will to Believe*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979.

NOTES

- ¹ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 60.
- ² James, *The Will to Believe*, 104.
- ³ James, 104.
- ⁴ James, *Pragmatism*, 168.
- ⁵ Algaier, *Personal Library of William James*, 72.
- ⁶ Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 57.
- ⁷ Emerson, 57.
- ⁸ Algaier, 4.