

Secret Dictionaries: The Collages of William Davies King
by
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Rooms seem less crowded these days, but somehow less compelling. Once almost everyone lived in a vivid clutter of books, knick-knacks and dust-getters, magazines, plants, vinyl LPs, kitsch paintings or posters, cassettes, even CDs, photos printed on light-sensitive paper and stacks of letters with canceled stamps adorning the frayed envelopes. Now most of that stuff has been replaced by unsightly tangles of wire leading to smooth, shiny screens. In a few years even the wires will disappear, leaving those polished, ergonomic iPods, ultra-thin plasmas and Razors to float out towards their minimalist destinies, as though our spaces might become just that, *spaces*. It's what the designers and advertising executives always fantasized: an empty, perfectly white room with just their one perfect product, that impossible, single symbol of total satisfaction. Just as it was in the early sixties, the future is still signified by the absence of stuff, and those of us with stuff seem ever more Victorian. These days, even walls and doors are becoming translucent, as stores, whole buildings, and even homes somehow evolve into mediums for pure luminescence, some kind of mad, new age dream in which we aspire to the state of light, which, after all, was what Marshall McLuhan simply called a medium without a content: purity.

It is the screen that comes to fulfill Stéphane Mallarmé's dream "that all earthly existence must ultimately be contained in a book."¹ Fascinated by radiating pixels that reveal everything in their miraculous nothing, we find a much lighter kind of religious significance than the poet imagined when he wrote "yes, were it not for the folding of the paper and the depths thereby established, that darkness scattered about in the form of black characters could not rise and issue forth in gleams of mystery from the page to which we are about to turn."² If the screen is our transubstantiation into creatures of light, the book remains "a tomb in miniature for our souls."³ Yet I think Mallarmé is not confining us to some hell that the lights of the screen would redeem. Depictions of snowy white heavens have never moved us like the bloody torments of the judged, for in our most secret selves we feel not some radiation of angels, but grisly earth and sea riddled bodies that smell of abject blood and mold—and old books too smell of fecund blood and mold from the body of earth.

William Davies King did not choose collage—he was born a collector, scavenging, gleaning, and even digging in the ashes for things. Since childhood he has gathered together the decaying world: stamps, stones, cereal boxes, metal objects flattened by cars, nuts, scrap, bolts, bottle caps, labels from tuna fish cans, and cat food cans, and canned soups, the labels of bottled waters, cigar bands, matchboxes, coupons, skeleton keys, business cards, postcards, canceled envelopes and their interior linings, trademarks, expired library cards, expired and promotional credit cards, fruit labels, vinyl records, and even books too, and still more: all "collections of nothing" as he calls them.⁴ His 75,000 objects are actually several tons tying him to the earth. The most lyric theorist of collecting, Walter Benjamin, writes: "the flâneur optical, the collector tactile."⁵ Collecting holds, arrests the motions of fashion and decay, trying desperately to stave off change and chance by drawing a magic circle of possession and order that wards off death. And yet, collections are abject in their funereal silence. Left untouched they incarnate the corpse they would conjure away, and all the more so since their project must fail: "As far as the collector is concerned, his collection is never complete; for let him discover just a single piece missing, and everything he's collected remains a patchwork."⁶

King could perhaps have been overcome by the gravity of a horde, but he found instead the soul of collage. King writes, "I have let my having run wild, to the very end of what's out there 'for the taking.' Each impulse I have, in the name of collecting, toward making a unity seems counterbalanced by an

opposite impulse to cut up and scatter.”⁷ The collector must find a way to spin from psychotic faith in a patchwork corpse towards the shattering leaps, cuts, and collages named allegory. Writes Benjamin, “The allegorist is, as it were, the polar opposite of the collector. He has given up the attempt to elucidate things through research into their properties and relations. He dislodges things from their context and, from the outset, relies on his profundity to illuminate their meaning.” Instead of perfect, eternal and universal order of the collector, for the allegorist “objects represent only keywords in a secret dictionary.”⁸ Many allegorists were secret collectors. Andy Warhol left behind a town house that looked more like a well curated museum of Americana, and Joseph Cornell had a suburban home stuffed to its rafters with collections of anything from silent films to plastic owls. Those collections fueled astonishing productions, as if the implosive force of gathering suddenly acquires a critical mass that must either collapse into a black hole of hoarding or explode onto silk screens or shadow boxes or collages.

Collections dream an impossible unity, but *Ecclesiastes* reminds us that “of making many books there is no end,”⁹ and for William Davies King it is within the folds of books that allegory begins. Peter Bürger puts it most clearly: “the allegorist pulls one element out of the totality of the life context, isolating it, depriving it of its function.”¹⁰ Severed from its context, quotidian connotations and uses, the allegorical fragment inhales strange new meanings, not always rational or legible. The transformative force of this shattering gesture seethes in a book King names the *Incunabular Pictionary of the New Practical Standard Dictionary Lexikon of the NewWorld Dictionary, Based on the Labours of the Most Eminent Lexicographers*. Dictionaries fix and define, and lexicographers dream of precision, order, and wholeness, but King creates a secret dictionary. He explains his inspiration: “I had an old laboratory notebook: octavo, four hundred pages, and for years it awaited contents. But all at once I knew that I wanted to fill the book with the diminutive illustrations you find in dictionaries, those skimpy anonymous imagettes, so obsequiously not Art.”¹¹

King's book runs over 200 pages of closely packed animals, letters, architectural details, fashions, diagrams, and machines. Under the initial E, perhaps the sphinx makes sense for Egypt, but the riddle of the buffalo remains. On another page, the flying squirrel echoes the yacht, and both loom over the motion of the planets. Freed from mere illustration, these images swarm float and signify, and contemplating such dense mosaic one feels the vertigo of falling into a parallel universe. One imagines feeling something like the boy Jean-Paul Sartre in in his grandfather's library:

But for me the Larousse Encyclopedia took the place of everything: I would pick a volume at random, behind the desk, on the nest-to-last shelf, A-Bello, Belloc-Ch or Ci-D, Mele-Po or Pr-Z (these associations of syllables had become proper names which designated sectors of universal knowledge: there was the Ci_D region, the Pr-Z region, with their flora and fauna, cities, great men, and battles); I would set it down laboriously on my grandfather's blotter, I would open it. There I would take real birds from their nest, would chase real butterflies that alighted on real flowers. Men and animals were there *in person*: the engravings were their bodies, the texts were their souls.¹²

It is this power of books to create whole worlds in their form that supports the illusions of order in our dictionaries and heightens the allegorical mystery of work like King's. Sartre recalls his disappointment at the differences between the artificial and the real: “the monkeys in the zoo were less monkey, the men in the Luxembourg gardens were less man”¹³ But for Sartre, books themselves were both earthy and magical objects—the very bodies of their authors. Corneille “was a big rugged, ruddy fellow who smelled of glue and had a leather back.” while Flaubert “was a cloth-bound odorless little thing spotted with freckles.”¹⁴ He recalls, even before learning to read, “At times, I would drew near to observe those boxes which slit open like oysters, and I would see the nudity of their inner organs, pale, fusty leaves, slightly bloated, covered with black veinlets, which drank ink and smelled of mushrooms.”¹⁵ These ideal worlds are expressed only through the earthiest of bodies.

The story of King the collector is one of weight, of the gravity of things, and in his memoir he even characterized himself at eighteen as “already a man of tonnage and a substantial bill of lading.”¹⁶ I think this is the reason that almost all his collage work appears in the body of a book. A book has a lover's weight, and it pushes us towards the earth; its idealist whispers are caught up in the touch of our fingers, the pressure in our arms, and the secret foldings of a body. The weight and texture of King's work is the ground that allows the leaps of allegory, keeping them mysteriously convincing. And so we might catalog the books of William Davies King, their titles conjuring up a Borgesian story that would be necessary to explain them. There is the gargantuan *An Anomalous Atlas of La*, in which an anthology of National Geographic maps transform themselves into flags and hallucinatory, psychogeographic charts appear on their backs. It tells a story just a little further up and certainly much further out in the alphabet than O-Z on Frank L. Baum's file cabinet. The pages of *Kitschian Gleaningswordy Nesslessness* have captured the jabbering commerce that slides through our kitchens. Here are all the labels, codes, decals, coupons, and special offers—all those sticky wastes that we so quickly wash away now gathered together and redeemed in eighty allegorical leaves. In *Rousseau the History of Medicine*, innocence and experience confront one another. The realist paintings of eighteenth and nineteenth century physicians suddenly appear, gazing not at corpses and patients, but the vivid, naive fields of glowing flora, lurid fauna, and odd smiles. Are those fantastically fleshy figures the fantasy of these sinister, frock-coated men, or are they the nightmare desires of those unlikely pink creatures?

King's books remain secret to us, and here we catch sight of them like voyeurs at a window, or askance through a mirror. A page or two unfolds for us, repeated and reproduced, but we don't have their body or their love. We can only glimpse their radiating image, their weight remains on earth, inaccessible to the angelic auroras of our screens.

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- 1 Stéphane Mallarmé, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (New York: New Directions, 1982) 80.
 - 2 *ibid.* 82.
 - 3 *ibid.* 82.
 - 4 See King's remarkable reflections on a life of collecting in his recent book *Collections of Nothing* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008).
 - 5 My analysis of collecting and allegory is little more than an application of the work of Walter Benjamin, particularly his reflections on collecting from *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap, 1999).
 - 6 Walter Benjamin, 211.
 - 7 King, 120.
 - 8 Walter Benajamin, 211.
 - 9 KJV, *Ecclesiastes* 12:12.
 - 10 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) 69.
 - 11 King, 121.
 - 12 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Words*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: George Braziller, 1964) 51.
 - 13 *ibid.* 70.
 - 14 *ibid.*, 64.
 - 15 *ibid.* 41.
 - 16 King, 47.