Reading My Library

It is the end of the year, and today I am reading my library. It’s a simple exercise, consequent upon moving too many times, twice in the last decade. There were once more than seventy book and record boxes, and next time, there will be fewer. Reading my library is in part a metaphor, or more exactly, a negative synecdoche. I am deaccessioning. Today I am reading my library. And tomorrow, I will be giving much of it away.

It is part of the elimination of books, book-copies, I should say (those with the banality of my annotations still in them), since the texts will be readily available on line or in libraries as long as I feel any need of them. I am being as systematic as I can, and there are a number of books and categories that will likely be spared: books in a foreign language, early printed books, books on books, books on Chaucer, books on metrics, books I have written, textbooks for courses I may one day teach again, books written by those friends and colleagues who may one day find themselves in my living room. A year ago, I had included here books on art or on music, but “what cannot be given away,” I find, is a steadily narrowing category.

That leaves too many to own, and still too many to move. I realize some will likely end up in the dumpster or in the garage of whoever cleans up after me and can’t bear to throw them away. But that also leaves books for reading, and that is what I am doing now.

There are a number of books I bought when I was a graduate student. In those days buying books was like mastering them, and a professor in the humanities who pretended to a wide
range of intellectual interests ought to own as many as possible. There is philosophy, most of Wittgenstein, Madwoman in the Attic, novels (a special category), architecture, mathematics, history. I am now reading them all, and when I am done with them, they will go to the “Free Books” bench outside the main English office. There they will stay, closely observed, far longer than they would have stayed had such a bench existed years ago. Students now pick them up, and think as I do, but never thought before: “Do I really want to move that in a year or two?”

It makes for an interesting read, my personal version of the low-brow Harvard Library of Civilisation.

Locke, Essay on Human Understanding, complete, paper, vol. 1
Wittkover, Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism
Frank, Dostoevsky
Pottle, Boswell: Early Years
Clifford, Dictionary Johnson
Clifford, Hester L. Pozzi

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It turns out the only way I could force myself to read all these was to threaten myself to give them away unread. I am now done, and thus they won’t be missed.

These, with others, go also to the Free Bench. Tom Jones sits for several weeks. Braudel’s Civilization and Capitalism lasts four days. Wilson’s Patriotic Gore and everything in imposing red wrappers by Marx last nearly two weeks. Yet Kojeve’s Introduction à la lecture de Hegel is gone within an hour. A lavish catalog of Daumier lasts a week.

What has gone to this shelf must be as good a reflection of my interests as what I retain: what I’ve read is who I am, or once desired to be; what I plan to read, study, re-read, or simply own is something else altogether. Books of both categories reflect my economic status, enthusiasms, simple greed, obsessions, and happenstance. But the self I will have constructed when my deaccessioned books are gone may well be much more coherent, consisting only of what is valuable and professional: bibliography, anything printed before 1800, Chaucer, French books, novels and now-dated criticism, Greek and Latin (the remnant
of my father's profession), German books of all genres (because I have the least competence in this language, oddly or thus it is the only one I read for pleasure). I will be left with a streamlined core or version of something, my academic self perhaps, an illusion of coherence, visible to anyone, despite my inability ever to find it myself.