

Timbremelancholy: Walter Benjamin and the Fate of Philately¹

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“O philately, philately: you are a most strange goddess, a slightly foolish fairy; and it is you who take by the hand the child emerging from the enchanted forest in which Little Tom Thumb, the Blue Bird, Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf have finally gone to sleep side by side...”

Louis Aragon²

In Michael Chabon’s 2007 alternative history novel, *The Yiddish Policeman’s Union*, a Jewish refuge in Sitka, Alaska is created during the Second World War and survives for six decades after the stillborn creation of the State of Israel. In a preliminary essay foreshadowing his novel called “Say It in Yiddish,”³ Chabon mused that such a settlement would boast postage stamps honoring heroes of Jewish history. Among them is one adorned with a portrait of Walter Benjamin, who would have felt moved by the honor, although probably just as much by the location of the tribute as the tribute itself. For Benjamin had a special place in his heart for stamps and all they represented in the modern world. In his 1928 collection of aphorisms, *One-Way Street*, he included an evocative rumination on the “Stamp Dealer” and for a radio broadcast a few years later, he wrote a script on “Stamp Swindles,” which focused on the issue of postmarks and the chicanery of stamp forgers.⁴ Unlike his friend Theodor W. Adorno, who was honored on his centenary in 2003 by an actual German stamp showing him writing at his desk surrounded by a page of his hand-edited text, Benjamin has not been so recognized, as far as I can tell, by any

government outside of Chabon’s imaginary Alaskan refuge for Jews. This is a pity, for he far outpaced Adorno in his appreciation of the wealth of conflicting meanings condensed in the small, fragile pieces of gummed paper used to send letters or postcards. Indeed, in many respects, his reflections on this theme can themselves serve as a microcosm of much of his own remarkable *oeuvre*.

In the vast literature on Benjamin, however, only two commentators, to my knowledge—Pierre Missac and Jeffrey Mehlman—have paid any serious attention to his thoughts on stamps.⁵ The former situates it in his discussion of Benjamin’s theories of collecting; the latter introduces it to bolster his claim that Benjamin was a forerunner of deconstruction. I want to build on their insights and offer some reflections, filtered through my own experiences as an amateur philatelist, of the meaning they retain for our own time, when both postage stamps and their collectors are on the wane. Indeed, it is perhaps fitting that Chabon’s imagined District of Sitka had a time-limit that was on the verge of expiring when the action of his novel transpires, as Benjamin had a premonition that the days of stamps and their collectors were numbered.

Before reflecting on their decline, however, we need to focus on the reasons Benjamin found postage stamps and the hobby of collecting them so rich a lode for his ruminations on modern life. At the most basic level, he argued in *One-Way Street*, they are monadic exemplars of the eternal struggle between life and death. “A mass of little digits, tiny letters, marks, and spots,” he wrote, “they constitute graphic scraps of cell tissues. Everything seethes and teems and, like the lower animals, lives on even when shredded in pieces.”⁶ But shadowing their vitality is the inevitability of death, for on stamps, “life always carries a whiff of corruption as a sign that it is made up of dead matter.” Its mortality is realized when a stamp is cancelled, producing a postmark that “is the stamp’s nocturnal side.” Cancellation is an act of violence, as “no sadistic fantasy comes close to the sinister procedure that covers faces with weals and rips through the soil of whole continents like an earthquake.”⁷

And yet, stamps—both mint and cancelled—gain the chance for a second life when they enter the world of the collector, who rescues them from their initial use value in delivering mail and resituates them in a new, essentially non-utilitarian context. Decontextualization allows the imaginative reconstellation of objects that Benjamin always thought had allegorical potential. Although in some ways like legal tender—stamps, after all, are backed by the state and sometimes can function to pay debts⁸—they differ from printed or coined money by not retaining their assigned exchange value after they are used. But ironically, unlike other goods whose value disappears when they are consumed, their liberation from their role in their initial system of value can allow them to realize an even greater potential. Or more precisely, two different potentials are unleashed. For in addition to their entering a secondary commercial market based on their rarity or imperfections, which attracts unsentimental investors, for Benjamin, they also possess a non-utilitarian value that lies elsewhere for true collectors. Especially for the child who starts a collection, stamps contain the ability to awake a yearning to leave mundane routine behind, and discover something beyond quotidian experience. “Is there perhaps a glimpse,”

Benjamin muses, “breaking through in the color sequences of long sets, of the light of some strange sun?” Even tiny stamps with no colors, pictures, or indications of their origin and the currency for which they can be purchased, can seem to a child, he argues, just like “fate’s real lottery tickets,” if they simply have numbers on them.

Not surprisingly, Surrealists such as Louis Aragon—who had written about stamp collecting in a work Benjamin revered, *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926)—appreciated their potential through juxtaposition, disparities of scale and unnatural hues to awaken a sense of the marvelous. Like other readymades or *objets trouvés*, they had the potential to spark what Benjamin liked to call “profane illuminations,” which miraculously appeared without anyone intending them.¹⁰ As Benjamin’s friend Missac put it, “it is easy to see [the stamp] as a suitable vehicle for surrealist imagery based on precision and trompe l’oeil. The routes it opens lead not only to Constantinople or Colombia but to imaginary countries or to planets.”¹¹

But more than containing generic utopian intimations of a world beyond our own, stamps also open the eyes of children to the actual splendors of the real world. They are stimulants to the imagination, triggering dreams of voyages to exotic destinations, dreams that avoid the commodity fetishism of modern consumerism. For Aragon, “great adventures have shaken those childhood companions of ours, stamps which a thousand bonds of mystery unite with world history. Here are the newcomers which take into account a recent and incomprehensible reshuffling of global boundaries. Here are the stamps of defeats, the stamps of revolutions. Used, mint – what do I care? I shall never understand the first thing about all this history and geography. Surcharges, surtaxes, your black enigmas terrify me: they conceal from me them an unknown sovereign, a massacre, palaces in flames, and the song of a mob marching towards a throne, waving placards and shouting slogans.”¹² Albums of stamps, Benjamin concurred, “are magical reference books recording the number of monarchs and palaces, animals, allegories and states.” As if they are looking at countries through the wrong end of an opera glass, children can see a miniature version of the world and can fantasize emulating a great explorer in the Age of Discovery. “Stamps are the visiting cards that the major countries leave in the nursery,” Benjamin writes. “Gulliver-like, the child visits the land and people of each stamp,”¹³ learning a bit about the institutions, personalities, histories, and celebrations of the Lilliputians. Held between your fingers—or in a tweezer, if you’re serious about their pristine condition—stamps combined proximity with distance, a combination that Benjamin later claimed was an important source of auratic enchantment.

There is, however, Benjamin concluded in the aphorism in *One-Way Street*, a looming crisis for stamps and their collectors. The practice of putting beautiful flowers on stamps, which he attributes to the great 19th-century German postal director Heinrich von Stephan, is now in danger, and the cause is technological. “How long will this floral abundance survive between telegraph poles? The big art stamps of the post-war years, with their wealth of color—are they not already the autumnal asters and dahlias of this flora? Stephan, a German, and not by chance a contemporary of Jean Paul, sowed this seed in the summery

mid-19th-century. It will not survive the twentieth.”¹⁴ Implied in that scenario of impending doom fostered by technological “progress” is the fear that the art of writing letters is also in jeopardy, a mark of the decline of bourgeois culture in the age of information.¹⁵

Benjamin, to be sure, was never simply nostalgic for that culture, nor did he express Luddite contempt for the depredations of technology. In fact, his ruminations on the potentially emancipatory transformation of art in the age of mechanical (or technological) reproduction, expressed in 1936 in his most widely influential essay, are anticipated in his fascination for stamps, those mass produced miniature images that in some ways foreshadow the films whose revolutionary potential he extolled in his great essay. Unlike unique works of auratic art, they do not gain their value through being unique and authentic originals, but from the very beginning are always already duplicated. Yet ironically, as Benjamin was well aware, it is when they regain a certain rarity, either by virtue of the disappearance of most of their exemplars or a flaw in the execution of a few of them, that an aura can emerge, as well as enhanced monetary value. But the irony doesn’t end there, as he noted in his radio script on “Stamp Swindles,” for some states deliberately duplicated what had become rare stamps in order to sell them to collectors, implicitly acting as forgers of their own postal currency. Then, to compound the irony, collectors became suspicious of these pseudo-originals and began trusting only stamps that had been cancelled (or as it were, “stamped”). But the ironic spiral doesn’t end there, for cancellations could themselves be even more easily forged than actual stamps, undermining the latter’s value in the secondary market of collectors. It is thus easy to see why Jeffrey Mehlman could see Benjamin’s essay as proto-deconstructionist, because “the two maxims proffered in the text—the postmark as both validating supplement or completion and seal of inauthenticity—are kept in suspension throughout the text, endowing it with an unresolvable ambiguity.”¹⁶

Significantly, that productive ambiguity was in danger of being lost with the evolution in postal practices that Benjamin foresaw in predicting the decline of the postage stamp. That is, he anticipated the waning of the importance of physical stamps, those colorful stimulants to childhood reveries, with postmarks sufficient unto themselves. Not only did this happen with the advent of postage meters and prepaid mailers, but has also been intensified with the radical dematerialization following the replacement of snail with electronic mail. Traditional postage stamps, of course, still exist and rare stamps still command substantial prices in the market place—the 1868 American Benjamin Franklin “ZGrill” was acquired by the financier Bill Gross in 2005 for a block of four 1918 “Inverted Jenny” stamps worth \$3 million—but there are clear signs that the heyday of collecting is now over. The “timbremania” that began soon after the first stamp was printed in 1840 and evolved into the more elevated pursuit called *philatélie*—a term coined by one Georges Herpin in 1864 from the Greek words meaning “the love of prepayment or tax”—is now irreversibly turning into “timbrelancholy.” The internet is filled with articles expressing alarm at the imminent demise of the hobby, and the investment value of most collections—especially after the bursting of a bubble in the 1970’s—seems to have declined with the inexorable shrinkage of demand.¹⁷ Organizations for junior collectors, such as Kidstamps,

now have a fraction of the members enjoyed by comparable groups a generation ago. Always a hobby more for boys than for girls—even the most famous female collector of the 20th century, Louise Boyd Dale, was carrying on a collection started by her father—it has never managed to spread vigorously across the gender line.¹⁸ The time when famous leaders like King George V and Franklin D. Roosevelt were also renowned collectors is past, and it is unlikely that the fans of their more recent successors like John Lennon, Freddy Mercury or Ron Wood would swoon over their stamp collections rather than their music, if they even knew the former had existed. Truth be told, the decline probably began after World War One, symbolized by the seizure by France of the vast collection of Philip von Ferrary, often called the greatest of all time, to help pay war reparations. But its full extent has only been apparent in our own century. Philately is now increasingly a hobby for old men, who wonder anxiously what will become of their collections once they pass from the scene.

As one of their number, albeit whose collecting days are long over, I cannot help being gripped by a certain twinge of regret for the decline of what once kept me so happily busy as a child.¹⁹ The feeling, however, is ironically appropriate, for nostalgia for something lost was always part of the fascination of stamps, which reflected not merely an exotic new world waiting to be explored, but also an old one on the wane. Salvaged from history's famous dustbin, they were numinous relics of *temps* irrevocably *perdu*. Aragon insightfully noted the ability of stamps to render the recent past archaic: "Edward VII already looks like a monarch from ancient times."²⁰ My initial interest in stamps had, in fact, been piqued when I was about twelve and inherited a half-filled album from an older cousin, which dated from the 1930's. Not only were many of the stamps it contained from the interwar era, a period that seemed very remote in the 1950's, but a good number of the countries or provinces from which they had come were no longer in existence, or had lost whatever autonomy they once enjoyed. Some—Cilicia, Epirus, Ubangi, Cyrenaica, Roumelia—sounded to my ears no more real than Shakespeare's Illyria in *Twelfth Night*, while others—Fiume, Danzig—still conjured up their unhappy fate in the recent past. World War II had rearranged the map, a process accelerated by the rapidly unfolding process of decolonization. It was eye-opening to see how ephemeral nation-states or the lesser entities that had minted postage stamps could be.

No less jolting than the stamps of obliterated countries were those that had honored leaders or regimes that had passed into history, none more so than the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich. It was easy in the 1950's to come by German stamps from the early 1920's with successive overprints reflecting the run-away inflation of those years: ten marks turning into a thousand turning into a hundred thousand in the blink of an eye, or rather on the same flimsy piece of gummed paper. My favorite had "2 million" imprinted over its original 200 mark value. The giddy explosion of prices captured on the faces of stamps was a reminder that the stability of a currency could be no less ephemeral than the sovereignty of a state. Benjamin, as it turned out, had himself written about the sinister effects of the postwar inflation in *One-Way Street* in a section on the "Kaiserpanorama," a

drum-shaped series of stereoscopes with scenes of passing life. He had bemoaned the loss of human warmth and intimacy, the shame induced by sudden impoverishment, and the crushing ambiguity of a future that was anything but secure. Metaphorizing his title, he darkly warned, "the air also teems with delusions, mirages of a radiant culture future that, despite everything, will dawn tomorrow: because everyone is committed to the optical illusions of his own isolated standpoint."²¹

My twelve-year-old self could not, of course, know of Benjamin's ruminations or even fully understand the human consequences of the hyper-inflation, but I had no trouble connecting to the delusory future of the Germany that followed. In the stamps bearing the face of General Hindenburg and the once obscure corporal who succeeded him as Germany's chancellor, it was chillingly evident. Others from that period were decorated with swastikas or heroes of the Third Reich, little material residues of a history that was still very raw in my imagination on pieces of paper, I realized with a shudder, likely bearing traces of the spittle of Nazi letter writers. Especially sinister were my Hitler heads with the words "Ukraine" or "Ostland" printed over them, the latter referring to the occupied territories of the Baltic States and parts of White Russia and Poland, the very territories from which my grandparents had luckily fled in the late 19th century.

Equally redolent of the recent past were the stamps from erstwhile British colonies, many of which had gained or were in the process of gaining sovereignty. Stamps and their collectors had always had a special place in the British imperial imaginary, which reflected the need to communicate over vast distances of the globe ruled from London. The first adhesive postage stamp, the Penny Black, was, in fact, printed in Britain in 1840, with the Tuppence Blue following two days later. Affordable and plentiful—more than 68 million of the former were ultimately printed—they revolutionized the delivery of mail, which had previously been paid for by the recipient. The central role of Britain in the history of postage stamps is nicely symbolized by the fact that theirs never explicitly named the country from which they are issued, remaining the unmarked norm in a sea of marked rivals. There was no need to do anything but include a picture of Queen Victoria or her successors to insure the provenance of the stamp (the first non-royal to appear on a British stamp was Shakespeare in 1964). At times, the word "imperium" was added to make clear that they were issued from one colony or another, whose individual identities were less important than their inclusion in the larger community subjected to the British crown. Although the creation of the Commonwealth in 1949 put a fig leaf over the transition, it was clear even to a young stamp collector that the days of British hegemony were over.

When it came to the stamps of my own country, whose often white-washed official history I had no reason to question as a boy, there was also something backward-looking about the exercise. American stamps had been introduced in 1847 during the Polk administration, and quickly spread with the increased geographical mobility spawned by the Gold Rush and the Civil War. The next twenty-five years, according to the historian David Henkin, saw a democratic revolution in communications that rivalled the rapidly growing transportation network knitting together remote parts of the expanding country.²²

As personal letters replaced newspapers as the major cargo paid for by modestly priced stamps, a new culture of epistolary intimacy spread down the social ladder.

With the invention and dissemination of the telephone, however, alternative means of long-distance communication began to rival those of stamped letters. And so expedients had to be designed to maintain profits for the post office. The first commemorative issues were introduced with the Columbia Exposition of 1893. The Post Office Department established the Philatelic Agency in 1921 to handle requests from collectors for commemoratives (something, it might be noted, that the Treasury Department never did for coin collectors). Thus began a revenue-generating practice that culminated with the most successful commemorative stamp of all time, that honoring the popularly chosen “young” Elvis Presley in 1993, well after I had stopped adding to my own collection. By then celebrities were replacing more conventional heroes, as the post office sought to boost its sagging sales, a practice that reached its nadir in 2011 with the controversial decision to issue millions of stamps with images of a non-American, fictional character, Harry Potter, and his friends.²³ For my own generation, the most recent commemorative stamps had celebrated FDR’s New Deal programs, as well as the military victories of the war. Although there were over-sized, lavishly colored and stunningly designed stamps to acquire, often ironically from “postage stamp-sized” countries like Monaco or San Marino, most American stamps of that era exhibited the gravitas of a country that saw itself as the responsible leader of the free world.

The stamps I and countless others of my generation collected were, of course, only the fragile material residue of a vast new network of practices and institutions that were deliberately nurtured by the growing modern state. If newspapers and novels were means of fostering the “imagined community” that was the modern nation-state, as Benedict Anderson famously argued,²⁴ the postal service was no less important. And yet, paradoxically, it could also function as an engine of international cooperation, especially after the volume of mail over long distances increased with delivery through the air. The postal convention of 1874 in Bern, Switzerland spawned a General Postal Union that ultimately became known as the Universal Postal Convention, which included most of the world by 1914. Although the League of Nations had issued a few stamps, mostly Swiss ones with “S.N.D” (*Société des Nations*) overprinted, the United Nations realized they could profit from the souvenir trade, and began minting their own in 1947, several of which found their way into my boyhood collection. But after 1981, when they produced one celebrating the “inalienable rights of the Palestinian people,” demand seems to have plummeted.

Political sensitivities have, of course, been only a minor reason for the secular decline of stamps and their collections. As Benjamin had foreseen, the classical letter, taking a while to compose and write out by hand, was in trouble well before the new technologies delivered the coup de grace. Slow food may have made a modest come-back, but snail mail is not likely to duplicate its revival. The introduction of self-adhesive glue rather than water-activated gum in the 1970’s made it much harder to detach cancelled stamps from their envelopes, a process that now requires obtaining special solvents like Bestine.²⁵

The arrival of generic “forever stamps” diluted the specificity of traditional ones proudly broadcasting their particular historical moment. But perhaps most damaging of all, the dematerialization of communication media—email itself being now rapidly overshadowed by texting, tweets, snapchats and the like—means that the tactile presence of stamps, their tangibility as durable things in the world whose existence can be “redeemed” for Benjamin by their collection, has evaporated. Most of the stuff we now do get by traditional mail delivery is rightly classified as “junk,” which we have no reason to touch delicately with tweezers and is the last thing anyone wants to collect.

Stamp collecting has, of course, by no means entirely vanished and it is still possible to examine potential additions “on approval” from dealers trusting in their customers’ honesty. Some shrewd investors can turn a profit and some forgers can make a modest killing at the expense of others. But most of us will enjoy no monetary gain from the collections we’ve held on to for half a century, nor, alas, find anyone to cherish them after we are gone. The future of philately, as Benjamin prophesied almost a century ago, like that of postage stamps in general, is not rosy. The world out of which it emerged seems to have a terminal date, like Chabon’s imagined “district of Sitka,” and it is likely to end before Walter Benjamin gets his face on a stamp. But perhaps there is some justice in that outcome, for after all, no one was as sensitive to the critical potential lurking in melancholy as Benjamin himself.²⁶ Timbremania is indeed over, but rather than mourning its end, achieving closure and moving on, we might appreciate what we’ve lost—or rather not yet gained—only by refusing to be consoled for its passing.²⁷ Interminable timbremelancholy, in other words, may have its uses. Philately, as the easy pun has it, may indeed get you nowhere. But perhaps we can also say, with a nod to William Morris, that it still may bring us the news from that nowhere, news from imaginary planets lit by strange suns that had once so captivated and enchanted our long buried childhood selves.

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Notes

¹ This essay was first published in *Salmagundi*, 194 (Spring, 2017), an international quarterly magazine of politics, culture, literature and the arts published at Skidmore College, NY.

² Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (London, 1971), p. 72.

³ Michael Chabon, "Imagined Homelands," *Maps and Legends: Reading and Writing Along the Borderlands* (San Francisco, 2008), the essay was originally published in 1997.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. J.A. Underwood (London, 2009); *Radio Benjamin*, ed. Lecia Rosenthal, trans. Jonathan Lutes (London, 2014). You can listen to a reading of the script on <http://clocktower.org/show/walter-benjamin-postage-stamp-swindles>.

⁵ Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholens (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), French original in 1987; and Jeffrey Mehlman, *Walter Benjamin for Children: An Essay on His Radio Years* (Chicago, 1993). Other commentators have discussed his comparable interest in collecting postcards, for example, Allan Wall in the *Fortnightly Review*: <http://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/2015/03/reflections-benjamin-5/>; and his general interest in collecting has been more widely acknowledged, for example by Michael Steinberg, "The Collector as Allegorist," in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, ed. Michael Steinberg (Ithaca, 1996); and Ralph Shain, "Benjamin and Collecting," *Rethinking History*, 20, 1 (2016).

⁶ Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, p. 101.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ In America, according to David Henkin, "throughout the state-banking era (before the Treasury Department began issuing currency in 1863), stamps were the only pieces of paper authorized by the federal government to circulate at a set value through the country. During the war, when specie was rare and banknotes depreciated, stamps became useful as money, and stores in cities would give them as change." *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in 19th-century America* (Chicago, 2007) p. 37.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹⁰ More recently, deliberately fashioned "artistamps" (a *portmanteau* word from "artist" and "stamp") have proliferated with the digital revolution, allowing anyone to become a designer of replicable miniature artworks, sometimes with political intent.

Unlike genuine postage stamps, they have no utilitarian function or exchange value beyond their aesthetic merit, although if printed in limited editions and sold to art collectors, they too can be monetized. There is also a movement to create "mail art," which uses postcards to evade the gallery and museum system. See Mike Mosher, "Mail Art," *Bad Subjects*, 74 (December, 2005).

¹¹ Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, p. 45.

¹² Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, p. 72-73. For an analysis of the complicated debts Benjamin owed to Aragon's novel, see Vaclav Paris, "Uncreative Influence: Louis Aragon's *Paysan de Paris* and Walter Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*," *Journal of Modern Literature*, 31, 1 (Fall, 2013).

¹³ Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, p. 103.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 103. Benjamin, the editor of the text points out, was off in calling Stephan a contemporary of the Romantic novelist Jean Paul, who died six years before his birth.

¹⁵ Benjamin's interest in the bourgeois letter as serious form of literature was manifest in the series of letters from 1783 to 1888 he published pseudonymously first in 1931 and 1932 in the

Frankfurter Zeitung, and then with some changes as *Deutsche Menschen* in 1936 while in exile. In the script for one of his (undelivered) radio talks, "On the Trail of Old Letters," (1931 or 1932), he spelled out his reasons for valuing letters as a way into the "living tradition" of a culture.

¹⁶ Mehlman, *Walter Benjamin for Children*, p. 16.

¹⁷ See for example, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopping/howaboutthat/8829055/Philately-gets-you-nowhere-stamp-decline-sparks-fears-for-collectors.html>

¹⁸ Girls, it is sometimes argued, have many other outlets for their collecting inclinations: dolls, figurines, stuffed animals, spoons, beanie babies, quilts, and so on, most of which reflect traditional domestic gender roles. Stamps, in contrast, supposedly connect boys with the larger, more public world they are expected to enter.

¹⁹ In an earlier essay, "Momentoes Post-Mori: Thoughts on the Collectors Mania," *Salmagundi*, 180-181 (Fall, 2013-Winter, 2014), I conjectured that collected objects often served as transitional objects leading us away from life into what follows. But insofar as stamp collections are so often begun at an early age and lose their magic for many as they grow older, it is likely that they are exceptions to this generalization.

²⁰ Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, p. 72.

²¹ Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, p. 61.

²² Henkin, *The Postal Age*.

²³ For those who want to follow the controversy, see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/10463314/Harry-Potter-and-the-philatelists-ire-collectors-angry-over-stamps.html>. Other gimmicks have been more favorably received. In 2013 the U.S. Postal Service commemorated its most famous mistake, reprinting the famous 1918 upside-down Jenny bi-plane stamp. In order to increase interest, it mischievously printed 100 with the plane right-side up, which whetted the appetite of investors. According to one account, one lucky collector sold a plate of them for \$45,000 to an anonymous buyer.

²⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991).

²⁵ See Peter Butler, "It's like Magic: Removing Self-Adhesive Stamps from Paper," *American Philatelist* (October, 2010). Ironically, there has now emerged a new variant of the stamp scams about which Benjamin wrote in the doctoring of gummed backings to restore a simulacrum of their original unlicked status. For those who may be anxious they have been victimized it, here is one site that will help them figure out if they have: <http://www.ebay.com/gds/How-to-Spot-a-Fake-Stamp-/1000000008039710/g.html>

²⁶ See Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst, 1993); and Ilit Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy: Benjamin's Early Reflections on Theater and Language* (Stanford, 2013).

²⁷ See my essay, "Against Consolation: Walter Benjamin and the Refusal to Mourn," *Refractions of Violence* (New York, 2003).