The Mind is a Collection: Case Studies in Eighteenth-Century Thought by Sean Silver (review)

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Silver, Sean. *The Mind is a Collection: Case Studies in Eighteenth-Century Thought.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. 384 pages. *mindisacollection.org*

Sean Silver's new book, *The Mind is a Collection: Case Studies in Eighteenth-Century Thought*, holds out hope to all of us who fear our puttering might be getting in the way of serious thinking. Instead of regarding a time-consuming crafting habit or a fascination with home-brewed beer as a distraction, we might instead regard these activities as constitutive parts of our cognitive ecologies. At least that is how Silver interprets Locke's book-buying, Addison's coin-collecting, and Walpole's eccentric curating style. By reassessing the centrality of hobbies and habits to intellectual discovery, Silver's book calls into question an increasingly prevalent cultural narrative about the deterioration of the line between pleasurable hobbies and professional pursuits. Silver's book may not allay the anxieties of critics concerned that it has become more difficult in modernity to separate "life" from "work," but for those looking for the hidden benefits of hobbies, *The Mind is a Collection* has a surprisingly encouraging message. Silver's book allows us to see anew the intuitive relationship between life and work and, more specifically, to appreciate the synchrony between pleasurable hobbies and intellectual insight, daily environments and innermost thoughts, and, most broadly, the ongoing mutual shaping of living and thinking.

Through a series of case studies, Silver sets out to show the entanglement of mind and matter in the mental processes and physical environments of scientists, writers, and artists of the long eighteenth century. "Environment" is a loose term in Silver's book, gesturing toward physical spaces, habits, and collections that both reflect and shape thought. Milton's bed and Hooke's laboratory are environments as well as Addison's coin collection and Woodward's rock cabinets. These spaces are inhabited as well as created; they can be entered into, pulled out of a drawer, or peered through, as in the case of a *camera obscura*. Examining the curated objects and spaces of Pope's grotto or Walpole's Strawberry Hill, for example, Silver discovers "the embeddedness of intellect in its material surroundings" (15). These portraits of embedded thinking, Silver contends, should replace the reigning critical story of the period's pervasive dualism. Eighteenth-century epistemology is too often casually associated with "naïve dualism" (269), Silver contends, and "[t]hinkers of the seventeenth century are often accused of having installed, at the very core of the new epistemology, a strange break between mind and matter, subject and object" (15). Silver does not discuss the contemporary critics he has in mind who defend a dualist separation of mind and matter in eighteenth-century thought (it would be interesting, for example, to know how Silver sees his work intersecting with long-running discussions about secularity and enchantment). However, Silver's accounts of the situated media practices of his subjects are consistently interesting and often surprising. Detailing Locke's book habits—from buying, reading, and notating books to organizing his volumes into a highly personalized library—Silver convincingly demonstrates that Locke's physical handling of books and mental digestion of them both shaped the way he conceived thought. Commonplacing, Silver shows, illuminates Locke's ideas about how the mind abstracts particularities into general categories. If, as Silver suggests, we can trace how environments

shape thought, the tantalizing possibility emerges of grasping what it was like to think like Locke or Pope. *The Mind is a Collection* suggests that, in fact, these complex men left behind revealing portraits of their inner lives and that, in some cases, we can enter into these spaces. We can visit Pope's grotto, as Silver does (first, unsuccessfully, as a graduate student led astray by the mischievous J. Paul Hunter and then, later, as a cannier assistant professor) to see, two hundred years later, how Pope plastered its low ceiling with Italian sculptures from a land he never visited that nevertheless helped define the imaginative and physical spaces in which he worked.

Silver's project exists in its own form of media entanglement, as both a book and a website, or what he calls a "born-digital museum" (*mindisacollection.org*). The "exhibits" Silver relies on to show the embeddedness of each of his subject's working, personal, and professional environments are most fully explored in the online museum that accompanies Silver's codex. He writes on the digital site that the book "was all along imagined as the catalogue of a museum," which now exists as a series of exhibits online; though interestingly there is no complementary statement in the bound book. Indeed, in many cases the exhibits are more richly experienced online. Silver's manner of self-presentation also differs significantly between the web site and book: on the former, Silver foregrounds himself as a collector of experiences, stories, objects, and insights as he does not in the printed book, so that we see his mind being shaped through teaching, departmental work, and research trips. In the museum's exhibit on interiority, he confesses to letting his thoughts wander during long committee meetings or dry lectures to wonder what the irascible William Hay would make of the twenty-first century academy (*http://www.mindisacollection.org/pathological-calculi*). In the midst of this admission, Silver links to a Google Books reproduction of Hay's discourse on Hogarth's line of beauty, as well as a recent paper on historical urology, leading us to consider how Silver's wandering mind shaped his digital project and continues to facilitate his readers' digital browsing. Silver's erudition and interdisciplinary interests are on full display, and it is fun to explore the reading lists embedded in the pages of the site. Many linked texts are free to read, although sometimes we arrive at a Yale University Press purchase page or the National Trust's site for Woolsthorpe Manor, birthplace and family home of Isaac Newton; in these cases, the links feel like a curated itinerary for the eighteenth-century enthusiast with a research and travel budget. Other pages invite us to travel virtually, not solely as Pope might have done in his imagination, but by looking at the green terrain of Egeria's Grotto on Google Earth. Overall, the range of exploratory options that the online platform enables raises questions about access and commercial association that feel as if they have yet to be worked out by Silver—and, perhaps, by those working in the digital humanities more generally. What if Silver had linked to YouTube instead of the IMDb page for *Being John Malkovich*? Relatedly, a clear explanation about how the labor of editing or cost of site maintenance are shared between the digital site and the University of Pennsylvania print publication would be illuminating, especially for those researchers who will wish to follow Silver's model of scholarship.

In a moment when the environmental humanities is gaining steam in a way it hasn't since perhaps the 1970s, Silver argues that his book and museum "describe cognitive life from an ecological point of view" (270). Throughout the book especially, Silver ar-

gues explicitly that by "ecology" he means the complete workspace within which each of these thinkers, writers, and scientists worked. They lived in and cultivated environments that reflected and molded their habits of thinking. Silver explains that this "to-and-fro between models and minds, spaces of thinking and habits of thought, is what this book . . . mean[s] by cognitive ecologies" (viii). To what extent this attitude is an ecological point of view or whether in fact it is coopting the feelings of urgency swirling around the terms "environmental humanities" and "environmental criticism" as recently expressed, for example, in Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*, is up for debate. The question of whether Silver's book reflects an "environmental point of view" bears, moreover, upon the ambiguous relationship Silver wants us to draw between past and present. For example, he writes: "we talk about ourselves and our ideas as though there were 'in' somewhere; we speak about other things, like objects and the impressions they give, as though they were 'out.' For most of us, this seems intuitive, as though it were the only way it could be. But there is compelling research to suggest that interiority, the sense that feelings and ideas are inner qualities, has in fact to be learned. It has to be acquired, largely through the manipulation and observation of the kinds of containers we use every day. Though we treat interiority as though it were natural, it seems instead to be the achievement of an age" (*http://www.mindisacollection.org/interiority*). The temporality at these moments can be confusing. Silver urges his readers to examine their own intuitively held stances—regarding, in this case, whether there is an "inside" to ourselves—and then argues that the assumption that we have interiority can be historically traced to a moment of cultural transformation. This manner of linking the early eighteenth century to the present day feels strained, given Silver's emphasis elsewhere on historical particularity. Is his lesson that we should continuously re-examine how we model interiority, or is it that the ways in which eighteenth-century persons began to model interiority persist today?

Ultimately, Silver's book offers a rich addition to the history of eighteenth-century thought and an inviting example of what the burgeoning partnership between traditional scholarship and the digital humanities might look like. If his effort, at the end of the book, to add a history of intellectual and material dispossession to the overarching narrative of the possessive individual fails to carry conviction, it is perhaps because Silver has so convincingly shown the richness of these eighteenth-century thinkers' physical and mental environments. It may be that dispossession is not the obverse of collection, and that it will be an entirely different story that relates how humans think in environments that they have (often unintentionally) deprived of those things, ideas, and spaces that Silver demonstrates were so intellectually generative in the long eighteenth century.

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