# Lost: Black Briefcase[1]

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A question that has long preoccupied the creative person: what degree of permanence is there in what I do? Will I, who am anyway impermanent, manage to be "a pleasant echo that remains eternally"[2] in this fleeting world?

Strangely, stories that both raise this uncanny question and make one respond to it with some hope frequently make their way to the newspapers: the sheet music of a Mendelssohn concerto, thought to be forever lost, is found; a Rubens painting, mentioned only in catalogues, emerges from the storage room of a church in Florence.

Ottoman culture above all, when considered in this way, is like an entire, endless buried treasure that fills the dreams of every child: one manuscript, a thousand manuscripts, which no hand has yet touched, or if it has, has then let drop with a sort of aimless nonchalance back into the well of forgetting. It is known that while looking for a certain manuscript in the Nuruosmaniye Library,[3] Fuat Köprülü[4] named, evaluated, and sometimes brought into circulation countless other works that until then had never been touched since having been left on the same shelf. It is unfortunately not comforting to think, as Adnan Adıvar,[5] Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı,[6] and Foucault put it, of the countless archeologists' contributions and findings. On the contrary, it darkens one's mood to think of the things left behind, the number of manuscripts that await the hand that is going to pull them out of the darkest regions of the underworld and bring them out to daylight.

I think of Borges: "The Library of Babel," that well-known story that withholds satisfaction—does it really reach us from a world beyond? Or does the world that we think to be beyond actually exist here, in this very one? Borges was, for many years, the director of the Argentinian National Library. I wonder if, in the early hours of the morning, or at night after all the staff had left, he would wander in the empty, quiet rooms, among the hundreds of thousands of books, and the countless volumes to whom no one had reached out since the year they had been published?

Borges must have wandered. Of the eerie realism of "The Library of Babel," we can ask, adapting what Adorno said about Beckett into another Borges story written in that infinitely coincidental mood of that which history has both spared and not spared: Does a bloody lottery not come to disgrace through its own reflection?

Asaf Halet Çelebi,[7] too, had worked for many years in the Beyazıt Library.[8] One day I asked Salah Birsel[9] what the two of them talked about. A nervous, to some

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[1] Originally published as Enis Batur, "Siyah Bir Çanta Aranıyor (1982)," *Babil Yazıları* (Istanbul: AFA Yayınları, 1986), 79–81.

[2] "A pleasant echo that remains eternally" is a line from a *gazel* by the Ottoman poet Bâkî, written upon the death of Sultan Süleyman I.

[3] Built in the eighteenth century by Sultans Mahmut I and Osman III, the Nuruosmaniye Library still houses about 5000 Ottoman manuscripts.

[4] Fuat Köprülü was one of the founders of the Democratic Party of the young Turkish Republic and a historian who made significant contributions to studies of Ottoman history and Turkish language.

[5] Adnan Adıvar was a twentieth-century Turkish politician, writer and historian, who, among other things, contributed to the study of Ottoman history of science.

[6] Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı was a twentieth-century scholar of Ottoman court literature.

[7] Asaf Halet Çelebi was a twentieth-century Turkish poet influenced by Ottoman court literature.

degree obsessive personality is what one could read from Asaf Halet Çelebi. One could tell that the oppressive silence of the manuscripts that read themselves in chests,[10] as if even their solitude had itself been abandoned, were making the call of the desert in his esoteric world. Thousands of people had written those thousands of manuscripts. All of them had died and disappeared into the world under a stone or under the naked earth. Their breaths, their voices were but a few drops that the universe had long drowned out, or subsumed in itself—but their manuscripts were gathered there like crowded screams, waiting.

How does history decide? How can one define that force that propels Bâkî to the first floor, Nâbi to the second and Nizâmî to the third?[11] That force that propels those nameless divans to the floor of forgetting, to the dusty and offended embrace of the shelves? Perhaps history has fallen victim to the individual ambitions of a few relentless archeologists that have been bitten by the "curiosity bug." If it had set its heart upon Yunus Emre,[12] whom Fuat Köprülü had rescued from the shadows, would it have relied on the resistant eye of mankind?

Clearly, history uses its cruel power according to its own logic: it forgets and makes one forget one masterpiece in its entirety and another one in parts. Once in a while, it cracks open its record book ever so slightly: mankind discovers Lautréamont, or starts to see the pieces of a puzzle signed Georges de la Tour, one after another, as if help had arrived from somewhere.

Most of us have heard of Lukács' famous Heidelberg suitcase. The philosopher's manuscripts and notes, left behind upon the sudden, unexpected start of the First World War, in that city where he had once been a student, were carried to the steel safe of a bank by God knows whom. Years later, when that suitcase was found and opened, many documents finally came to light that made the analysis of young Lukács' development easier.

Recently, in an issue (January 1982) of the Merkur magazine, published in the Federal Republic of Germany, was an article by Lisa Frittko that recounted the memoirs of Ms. Gurland who had been part of the Pyrenees adventure that had ended with Walter Benjamin's suicide. If the account is correct, in Benjamin's hand was a black briefcase, which perhaps contained his last handwritten manuscripts. Those which have made it to our day from among what Benjamin wrote between 1939–40 show us that this fearless actor had driven around a sharp bend with a loud noise. What was in that briefcase?

What is in that briefcase?

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[8] The Beyazit Library was the first Ottoman state library, opened in 1884. It still houses a collection of Ottoman volumes and periodicals.

[9] Salah Birsel was another, younger twentieth-century Turkish poet and essayist.

[10] The "manuscripts that read themselves in chests" is a reference to Çelebi's poem "Sandukalar" ("Chests").

[11] Bâkî (sixteenth century), Nâbi (seventeenth century) and Nizâmî (fifteenth century) were three major poets writing in the Ottoman Divan tradition. While Bâkî came to be considered the "Sultan of poets," and Nâbi recognized as a critic of the stagnation period of the empire, not much is known about Nizâmî and only a small number of his works survive.

[12] Yunus Emre was a thirteenth-century Turkish poet and mystic. He is one of the first Turkish poets on record to have composed works in Turkish instead of Persian or Arabic.