

1. On Commonplace Books, James Mustich (author of 1000 Books to Read Before You Die, 2018)

Some time ago, and for a few years, I owned the domain name *commonplace.com*; it was my intent to create under its auspices a digital version of the amalgamations of readings, writings, and annotations, known as “commonplace books,” kept by people of letters throughout the ascendancy of print culture. These intellectual scrapbooks served as stores of ephemeral ideas and sustaining inspiration for common readers as well as for prominent authors from John Milton to Giacomo Leopardi (his *Zibaldone* is something like an Everest of the genre), Mark Twain and W. H. Auden (whose *A Certain World* is a splendid published example). As we post our way into our online future, the old-fashioned, handwritten versions of commonplacery will likely be permanently superseded by Facebook timelines, Twitter feeds, Instagram collections, etc., etc. Yet these new forms are shaped by the same impulses of personal inventory and narrative-by-assembly as the originals, and they may even be better suited to realizing them once we can master their twitchy spells of distraction. Indeed, it occurs to me that the assumption that drove the shaping of commonplace books — that the paths of the reader are more important than the purposes of the writer — are more suited to the distributed and discontinuous nature of digital engagement than to the (albeit often falsely inferred) focus demanded by print. Indeed, digital interfaces are once again habituating us to accumulation and arrangement as modes of cognitive engagement, if not of thought. I’ve been prompted along this course of thought, aptly enough, by two passages I culled from an

essay by Robert Darnton published nearly twenty years ago, which I jotted into a notebook in December 2000 (and which I rediscovered not too long ago through serendipitous Vipping through old journals). Keeping a commonplace book, Darnton explains, involved a special way of taking in the printed word. Unlike modern readers, who follow the flow of a narrative from beginning to end, early modern Englishmen read in fits and starts and jumped from book to book. They broke texts into fragments and assembled them into new patterns by transcribing them in different sections of their notebooks. Then they reread the copies and rearranged the patterns while adding more excerpts. Reading and writing were therefore inseparable activities. They belonged to a continuous effort to make sense of things, for the world was full of signs: you could read your way through it; and by keeping an account of your readings, you made a book of your own, one stamped with your personality. He further elaborates:

All the keepers of commonplace books ... read their way through life, picking up fragments of experience and fitting them into patterns. The underlying affinities that held those patterns together represented an attempt to get a grip on life, to make sense of it, not by elaborating theories but by imposing form on matter. Commonplacing was like quilting: it produced pictures, some more beautiful than others, but each of them interesting in its own way. Just as a bookshelf is a tangible autobiography — scanning its titles, no matter how haphazardly arrayed, one can follow the contours of one’s thought, learning, and fancy — so reading itself offers palpable evidence of our minds in action, as commonplace keepers knew; what they sought to capture — keep (that significant word!) — was consciousness in the act, or process, of apprehension.

“Who are we, who is each one of us, if not a combinatoria of experiences, books we have read, things imagined?” asks Italo Calvino at the end of *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. “Each life is an encyclopedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable way.”

As Heraclitus put it two-and-a-half millennia ago: “The most beautiful order of the world is still a random gathering of things insignificant in themselves.” Reading and its avatars provide our threads of meaning.

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