

The Commonplace Book Tradition

...my diaries, multitude of notebooks and memoranda, box upon box of correspondence and some fragments of memoir. I sift, I file, I collage. I'm trying to set them in some form of order, trying to discern some underlying pattern or theme amidst all that insignificance and muddle. It's a good job for an old man with time on his hands.

William Boyd *The New Confessions*

A commonplace book is what a provident poet cannot subsist without, for this proverbial reason, that "great wits have short memories:" and whereas, on the other hand, poets, being liars by profession, ought to have good memories; to reconcile these, a book of this sort, is in the nature of a supplemental memory, or a record of what occurs remarkable in every day's reading or conversation. There you enter not only your own original thoughts, (which, a hundred to one, are few and insignificant) but such of other men as you think fit to make your own, by entering them there.

Jonathan Swift Letter of Advice to a Young Poet

At the end of this inquiry I return to the questions of whether and how the practice of keeping a commonplace book has changed me in any respect. I know it has enhanced my reading experience, as I am sure it has for other readers who keep a similar collection. Reading tends to be a fairly passive process. We move rapidly from sentence to sentence, rarely stopping to mull over any single one. Marking those that seem notable for one reason or another slows reading down. It

transforms the reading experience from a page turning exercise into an occasion to think further about the material, while a timely annotation also gives the reader a chance to reflect further on the marked passages and their personal significance. Rarely do we stop to think twice about a passage, or make note of it so that we can react to it sometime later. In my view, this is the real advantage of collecting notable passages. It deepens the reading experience, turns it into an engagement with issues and educational experience.

I have also been wondering how this practice has influenced the beliefs and attitudes I hold. And have I come to a greater understanding of my self as a result of the many long years I have been collecting notable passages from works of literature? I know that I often found a correspondence between my reading and personal experience. But did transcribing the passages that described this relationship change me in anyway? I am sure it has but not in ways that are clearly discernable to me or that I can describe very concretely.

Other than the record keeping itself, I can't think of many activities I engage in now that I would not be doing if I didn't keep a commonplace book. At the same time, I know it has made me into a more alert reader and motivated me to give much more thought to the text than I would if I didn't keep one. Perhaps that has strengthened some of the beliefs and attitudes I hold and led me to think more critically about them. And it has also introduced me to a range of new ideas and to consider their relationship to those I already hold or have come to through other experiences. Absent another life or a group of persons to compare with my own experience, the extent of these effects and the specific role of commonplacing in producing them will have to remain a matter of conjecture at this point.

I recall that my initial rationale in making note of dazzling or provocative passages was to learn how to write better. I suspect it has in a limited way. But now I am more focused on collecting ideas. I am sure that has been intellectually

worthwhile, at least it has kept me thinking and, above all, identified issues that command my interest and sometimes generated a good deal of further study.

On balance then, the act of transcribing passages surely leaves its mark. While we may be able to assimilate a passage once again by copying it, the fact of the matter is that most commonplace books contain far more entries than any of us can ever hope to recall. So whatever influence the act of copying has, it is surely one that is limited to short-term effects on accessibility and availability. The long-term effects are far weaker. We may recall having read something memorable in a particular book or by a certain author. But unless we go to the effort of memorizing it at the time we transcribe it and perhaps return to it from time to time again, we will be hard put to bring forth its content with any confidence.

While I record all these truths in my Commonplace book, these choice pieces of wisdom, I am not at all sure they have a great deal of influence on my day to day behaviors. I often find that they do not readily come to mind when they might be useful. I put these passages to paper in the hope that they will narrow the gap between gap between thought and action and that I will be able to make more intelligent decisions. But I confess that rarely happens.

At a party the other night someone used in jest the phrase “the meaning in life.” I instantly recalled reading that very morning a passage in Joseph’s Epstein’s essay *Talking to Oneself* that dealt with the meaning of life.¹ However, while I thought the passage would contribute to our discussion, for the life of me I couldn’t recall it. Epstein quotes Edward Shils who when the son of a friend of his committed suicide, leaving a note saying that he found life meaningless, responded: “...of course it is meaningless, but most of us are fortunately too busy to dwell on its meaninglessness.” It was only a few hours before that I had read the essay and had, in

¹ Joseph Epstein *Talking to Oneself*. New Criterion 2001.

fact, copied that very passage into a Word document and then entered it along with a few others from the essay, into my Commonplace Book.

This example is instructive. Most works of literature are usually read in a fairly casual, relaxed fashion. Indeed, some read so quickly it is hard to imagine they are catching much of anything. But for even the most focused readers, it is fair to say that little is recalled or recorded in any permanent fashion. Other than for those who have a photographic memory or are in the practice of regularly reviewing the passages they have collected, it should not be surprising that so very little of what is read is translated into action.

In a review of Keith Gessen's *All the Sad Young Literary Men*, Joyce Carol Oates describes this dilemma well:²

The predicament of Gessen's characters, as it is likely to be the preeminent predicament of Gessen's generation, is the disparity between what one has learned of history and the possibilities of making use of that knowledge in one's life...

A lifetime of studying psychology as well as a good deal of current research on the many factors that give rise to biases and errors in thinking has convinced me, that all too often we overestimate the influence of the written word on behavior. Information by itself, even when it is read carefully and often reviewed does not appear to have a strong effect on behavior. Instead, it represents only one of the many factors that influence behavior, especially in situations where there are other pressures that make it difficult for individuals translate what they have read into action.

² Joyce Carol Oates Youth! The New York Review of Books, 55, No. 7, May 1, 2008.

The real value, then, of keeping a commonplace book is to insure that whatever it is that we want to remember will permanently reside, not in our mind, but rather in our notebook or computer document, there to revisit and think about further. And by doing so, perhaps we will gradually assimilate these ideas so that they can more readily guide our behavior when they become relevant. Gilbert Highet put it this way: "We are meant to assimilate them as slowly and steadily as a bone grows in our skeleton."³ But this surely takes much revisiting and a good deal of additional practice.

On Annotating

With rare exceptions I did not annotate the passages at the time they were added to my commonplace book. To annotate takes time. To annotate thoughtfully takes even more time. According to some of the survey respondents annotating also interferes with the flow of ideas and is thereby to be resisted. Indeed, in contrast to historical tradition, the practice of annotating entries in commonplace books has all but disappeared today. Yet on some accounts, it is an essential feature of commonplacing. William Cole claims:

The key word for the commonplace book is "annotated." It is not just an anthology; the compiler reacts to the passages he has chosen or tells what the passages have led him to think about. A piece of prose, a poem, an aphorism can trigger the mind to consider a parallel, to dredge something from the memory, or perhaps to speculate with further range and depth on the same theme.⁴

Cole leaves open the question of precisely why annotating is so important, as well as if he is referring to annotating each and every passage that one enters in their

³ op. cit.

⁴ William Cole. Speaking of Commonplace Books. *New York Times* May, 3, 1970.

commonplace book, a task that would take most practitioners several lifetimes to complete. In fact, his definition of the genre—"an annotated personal anthology"—would exclude most of the printed and electronic versions of commonplace books that we know of today. Notable exceptions include in Auden's *A Certain World*, Curtis' *A Commonplace Book* and Cecil's *Library Looking-Glass*, where in response to a memorable passage, these authors, composed brief notes, observations, poems, and sometimes-lengthy commentaries.

Linking together similar passages in an extended treatment of their common theme or connections seems to me annotating at its best and most systematic. To paraphrase one of the survey respondents: I am forever searching for interconnections, for those invisible lines of connection between ideas and things that appear to dwell in mutually exclusive realms. This does not call for a lengthy essay or discourse on the topic at hand, although nothing prevents a reader from composing one. Nor does it call for doing so at the time the passage is read or even when it is entered in a commonplace book. The model I have in mind was described by Olivia Dresher in an e-mail she sent to me:

So it seems to me that it would be interesting if you were to write an essay in which you moved back and forth from selected quotes which reflect directly on your own experience to explaining how and why they do, talking about your own life and experiences....

And in a way this commentary is an extended annotation on my Commonplace Book entries, a great many of which are cited, in the manner Dresher suggests. It is also an autobiography of the issues that have continued to engage me for a very long now time. Sometimes it takes a fair amount of time for a reaction to a set of passages to develop or for their relationship to come into focus as it did for me in deciding to embark on this analysis.

The Future of Commonplace Books

Will the digital commonplace book replace its written forerunners? There are really two issues implied by this question. The first is the future of electronic transcribing. Will readers come to prefer to record their commonplace selections electronically in a computer document rather than in a hand-written notebook? The second is the degree to which those who keep a commonplace book will wish to make them public. While there will always be readers who prefer to keep their commonplace books in a private hand-written manuscript, it is clear that electronic writing and communication is beginning to reposition commonplacing as a public, communal practice. Perhaps we are entering a transition period where those of us raised to read and write in the traditional fashion will simply fade away, gradually be replaced by those raised to read and write electronically.

Still I wonder. Reading is a largely private activity that often takes place at some distance from a computer. I read in bed, in an armchair, on the terrace, or on a park bench. Countless others do so as well. Who wants to take a computer with them in those settings? In addition, like so many others, I find it extremely difficult to read lengthy documents, including books, on a computer or e-book screen. If it is a short article or essay, I usually print the material; if it's a book or periodical, I purchase a copy.

Some claim there won't be any reason buy a book or print a document as increasingly sophisticated methods of electronic note-taking and reading begin to overcome the barriers to reading and note taking on the computer today. The following scenario was recently described to me in a recent e-mail exchange on this topic:

If you could have your book or reading material readable on a device smaller and lighter than a book, yet with your text at any size or degree of sharpness you desire in any degree of bright or dark

*conditions, if in addition to a single book, this device could hold hundreds of books, even access entire libraries, if the text could be edited, annotated, highlighted, extracted, if the device could be powered by the sun when you are outdoors, by one's own body heat when indoors--in short, if the little device could do anything a larger computer could do only more portably, why would one not want to use it?*⁵

Who can answer a question like this? Fortunately, I will never have to. I find this question somewhat like the one people are asking about libraries today. Who goes to the library anymore to get a book, let alone read one there? In fact, books are becoming increasingly hard to find in many libraries these days as they have been replaced by row after row of computer stations. But not everything can be read on a computer. And those who do serious scholarship will always need to read primary materials. My hunch is that there will always be a reason to go to the library and that there will always be individuals who want to do so. Similarly there will always be readers who find it more congenial and enjoyable to read printed books and to make their notes on paper. There were never very many of us in the first place, but there will always be enough to matter.

Self Analysis

Aside from their basic intellectual or emotional merit, it is also possible to infer from the passages in my Commonplace Book a good deal about my life and personality. As William Cole noted in his article on commonplace books in the New York Times: "One gets a pretty good idea of a man, his likes and prejudices, his quirks and manias, the variousness of his mind from reading a commonplace book."⁶

⁵ Victor Munoz. Personal communication. February 14, 2006.

⁶ op.cit.

In this respect a person's commonplace book is much like any self-revelatory technique employed in clinical research or practice. Indeed, I have been led to wonder if the practice of copying passages from literature as I have done might have useful psychotherapeutic implications. Consider the routine: clients are asked to mark passages in the books they are reading that seem significant to them and then discusses the reasons they were selected with the therapist.

The notion may seem fanciful, but I am not alone in suggesting it. Just recently I read an observation on this topic by Edward Santoro, a literature teacher that was posted on the web.⁷ Santoro wrote:

Many years ago I was thinking seriously about a radical psychology (though I wasn't calling it that) that would include fiction as therapy, quite similar to prescribing Prozac or Ritalin or whatever is the flavor of the day. If somebody is trying to work through a difficult issue, particular works of fiction could be prescribed, discussed, analyzed. This dialogue and the learning to think critically about a text would put a person into a better position of knowing the self and society and their interrelation. I thought and still do think this would be a successful therapy. The irony is that this is exactly what education is supposed to do. Years ago I was looking for books on just such a topic, and though there were a few, nothing really described what I had in mind.

Other than the research applications I have described, there has been no clinical application of this approach as far as I can tell. What I do know is that at times the

⁷ <http://blog.dennisfox.net/index.php/archives/2004/10/03/literary-therapy>

experience of reading literature can consol me. At other times it provides the kind of insight that traditional therapy is said to offer. In these two respects, then, reading literary fiction may have some therapeutic effects. Whether it can have the same effects for others in a clinical situation remains an open question at this time.

In rereading some of the passages in my Commonplace Book, it is obvious the way they reflect the continuing concerns and interests that I have. I also found the experience of preparing lists of these passages a rather remarkable one. I kept saying: "No wonder I marked them." More often than not, they were provocative expressions of considerable insight and significance, at times one gem after another. It was often startled to see them on the page again. From my 2007 collection:

Never, never did she feel in life the sense of recognition, the companionship, the great warm fact of solidarity that she found between the covers of a book.

Love is letting be. Letting the other be as they are.

..the bond between teacher and student lasts a lifetime...the feelings we have for the teachers or students who have meant the most to us, like those we have for long-lost friends, never go away.

I also realized that the reasons I may have made note of them many years ago cannot possibly be the ones that draw me to them now. I was much too young then to appreciate the truths that I find in so many of them today. Perhaps my reaction is a simple failure of memory to be sure of the reasons I was intrigued by them originally. Or it might just as readily be due to the multiple ways a passage can be thought of as memorable. Whatever the reason is, I am often surprised to note a comparable regard for a passage that I may have marked in the margin long

ago. I also take delight in sensing this continuity in what I regard as worthy of note throughout the many long years of my reading history.

Further, I found a striking consistency in the content of many of the passages recorded for each theme. For example in the passages I recorded on Change, the fourth most frequent category, a sizeable number dealt with the extraordinary difficulty of changing another person's behavior especially by means of strong external pressures.

...essentially you could not persuade anyone to give up something that gave him intense pleasure

Joseph Epstein

He really didn't believe you could bend others to your will.

Jens Christian Grondahl

He (Balanchine) was convinced that you could not really change a dancer. All you could do was develop what she already had.

Joan Acocella

People were always saying something had completely changed them, some experience or book or man, but if you knew how they had been before, nothing much really had changed.

James Salter

I also noticed how many I have cited to bolster a point I've made in a lecture or essay I've written. Drawing upon the passages in this way is precisely the way they were used by the scholars and statesmen who kept commonplace books during antiquity and the Renaissance. I suspect the same is also true for present-day writers and teachers who have created commonplace books of their own.

Similarly, the commonplace book can become a useful tool in the helping students to develop ideas to write about. Erasmus was among the first to emphasize the considerable value in compiling a commonplace book in the education of young children:

I am of this opinion, that young children might muche more to their profecte and benefite bee excercised in the grammar schooles with theme, or arguments to write on...so that the schoolemaister dooe open and declare the rewlis and waies how that which is briefly spoken maye bee dilated and sette out more at large, and how that is fondly spoken...maye bee turned or applied to a serious use and purpose.

Students often report that one of the greatest hurdles they face in getting started on their writing assignments is in finding ideas to write about. Compiling a collection of topics and themes in their commonplace book might be valuable tool in helping them to overcome this problem and making them better, more involved readers. A notebook in which they collect notable passages from their reading could easily be drawn upon for writing assignments and might also serve as a catalyst in developing ideas of their own. Recording these passages under appropriate headings is the key to making such a collection useful to students. As Price noted in his discussion of this suggestion: "Without this commonplace book activity, however, very seldom would they take the time to think through ideas and discard insubstantial ones before sitting down to write a complete piece."⁸

Next Steps

This analysis of my Commonplace Book has been more of an exploration than a systematic research project. In terms of future study, the sample selections that I

⁸ Gayle B. Price (May, 1980). A case for a modern commonplace book. *College Composition and Communication*, 31, No 2, 175-182.

have classified might be completed by examining the pages I omitted. It might also be instructive if another rater replicated my procedure. However, as discussed earlier, there interpretive problems would arise with such a comparison since the experience of other raters would not be the same as mine and thus the meaning and classification of the passages for them would inevitably differ.

The categories were not rigorously defined nor at this stage of my review did I want to stipulate an objective measure of each one. Surely that will be required for any future analysis that intends to be a serious piece of research. Indeed, there is probably considerable overlap between the categories although I tried to reduce that as much as possible as I went along by combining those that were clearly overlapping.

In a word, what I have done is admittedly an informal review of my Commonplace Book that scarcely meets the strictures of systematic analysis employed in social research or literary criticism. Instead my goal was to begin to get a sense of what can be done with this kind of material and the kinds of questions one might put to it in a more refined and critical examination.

Commonplace Book Bibliography⁹

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⁹ This set of references is confined to works on commonplace books. References related to the subject matter of the chapter topics are footnoted on the page where they are discussed.

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