

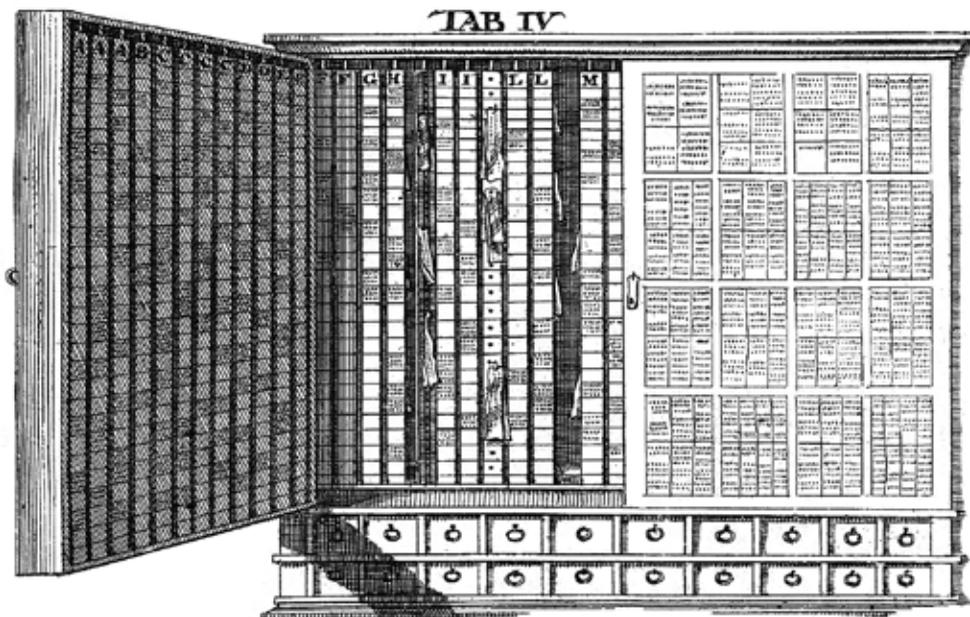
FOUR LEAVES FROM A COMMONPLACE BOOK

D. GRAHAM BURNETT

Reading is perhaps best understood as a peculiar form of writing, and vice versa. Renaissance thinkers took this paradox very seriously, giving it concrete form in their “commonplace books,” manuscript journals of passages copied from assorted texts and organized under various headings. The origins of the practice lay in the preparatory methods of classical oratory and medieval sermon composition, but commonplacing achieved the status of a true art among humanists like Erasmus and Montaigne, who used these notebooks to maintain command over an ever-expanding body of published texts, while culling material for their own correspondence and literary compositions. Never merely a means to those ends, the well-wrought commonplace book—an elaborately configured bibliographical collage, capable of making new meanings out of juxtaposition and excision—eventually became a way of thinking about thinking itself. What started as an *aide-mémoire* began to look like a theory of mind.

For the apotheosis of this tradition, consider the illustration here, which shows an *arca studiorum* or *scrinium literatum*, a “literary chest” of commonplaces, penned on cards and impaled on subject-heading hooks (this one hails from Vincent Placcius’s *De arte excerptendi vom gelahrten Buchhalten liber singularis* of 1689). These devices—mobile, expandable, easily rearranged, and cross-referenced—were the cognitive prosthetics of the early modern period.

Overleaf are excerpts from a project by D. Graham Burnett, who has worked for several years on a set of departures from the tradition of the commonplace book.



Courtesy The Houghton Library, Harvard College Library. Thanks to Ann Blair, Department of History, Harvard University.

I

“*Homo ‘sapiens’* regards *Homo faber* through the frosted case-ment and decides, ‘I am like a smith who must forge his own tools.’ But this is not quite right. Up in his freshly painted room with its Delft-tiled stove, guarded by his faithful hounds, bolstered on plump and downy pillows, dreaming now and again of the inside of exotic fruits (the *Lee-Chee*, the *Passion-Melon*, the tiny *Star-Berry* brought from Banda), this philosopher does not need any tools.”

—Anacharsis, a worker,
Callused Tradition, or The Repair of Self-Made Men,
1849

II

“The tree house, I can assure you, had windows made of hardened sap.”

—Fabrizio Delmano,
A Tour of the Apricot Stone, 1873

III

“If we put the problem of aseity on too long a leash, we will discover very quickly that the creature we intended to exercise has made itself filthy chasing bullfrogs in the wet rushes and digging termite nests in an old stump. On a short leash, however, or, indeed, kept gnawing at a salty bone beside a good fire, a more stalwart defender cannot be imagined.”

—Arthur Smith,
Hounds and Heaven: Metaphysics in the Kennel, 1905

IV

“When you pull on the two strings, the little castle will build itself, complete with an orchard in the courtyard.”

—Refugio Soltero-Cane,
Iron Bellows, Paper Forge, 1922

I

“The region abounds in a marble having very much the appearance of fatty bacon. In the chapel an aged curé showed me the local wonder, a relic much venerated by the blind crones of the valley—it consists of two small cylinders of this peculiar stone, fragments of a broken column which, until the great earthquake, supported an unusual nielloed monstrance about the bigness of a common archery target. Snapped cleanly in two by that plutonic discharge, the pillar revealed the anatomy of a human thigh in cross section, for which reason it came to be known to its devotees as the ‘leg of Saint John Francis’ (a title which occasions lewd comments from impious sailors in the port). Taking the opportunity to examine this petrific curiosity, I was surprised to discover that the slab would do as well as *Gray’s Anatomy* for the student of medicine, and, to speak truly, brushed with ink it might serve to print the lithographs for that volume: fine details of the *Sartorius* and *Gracilis* muscles are clearly marked, not to mention the larger formations; indeed, a small eye-like crystalline intrusion precisely specks the locus of the Ischiadic nerve. The monstrance itself was recently stolen.”

—Max Dash,
On Foot in Ischia, 1902

II

“In 1899, while still at Harvard, Frost audited Nathaniel Shaler’s theologically robust lectures on historical geology, but less than six months later, degreeless, he found himself incubating two hundred chicken eggs and endeavoring to reinvent himself as a poultry farmer.”

—Lucius Surd,
“To peck herself a precious stone’: Robert Frost at
Amesburg,” *Lot’s Wife, A Quarterly*, 1969

III

“If by truth we mean something like equivalence (if, that is to say, truth resides in the double traits that indicate equality), then, admittedly, transubstantiation will be difficult to defend as true. However, the dialectical notion of truth-as-*unconcealing*—which we might symbolize with a hyphen-like *vinculum*, here representing the horizon line—may afford us a renewed approach to this matter.”

—Xavier Klasi,
Heidegger and the Accidents, 1976

IV

“They seem to see about as well as we do with our eyes closed.”

—Peter Legg *et al.*,
“Disruptive hatching behaviors and retinal asymmetries in domestic chicks (*Gallus gallus*),” *Developmental Psychobiology*, 1987

THE NESTED PEN AS KAABA AND QUILL

I

“Logic may indeed oblige us to reject even the happiest general law in the face of a single counter instance, and this may permit some sifting among the true lunatics and the merely misunderstood—now mixed willy-nilly in our funny farms. Even so, it should never be forgotten that the fateful Black Swan must be carted from *terra australis* to save induction, and unlike the Mute Swan, which is white, *Cygnus atratus* has a sharp, hissing call.”

—Nat VonGriff,

Falsification among Organized Birdwatchers, 1959

II

“Be cautious concerning your selection of mnemonics, since they become in time both chapter breaks and titles.”

—Cullen Stroke,

Shorthand for All Seasons, 1923

III

“Example: While a motion ‘to place on the ponds in the public parks swan boats’ stands pending, along with an amendment ‘to add the words *equipped with roller skates*,’ Mr. X moves to amend the amendment by striking out *roller* and inserting *ice*. Here the question of priority hinges on the chairman’s judgment concerning the *residual effect* of the superseded word or phrase.”

—Isabel and Henry H. Robert,

A Parliamentary Practicum, 1902

IV

“This is why everyone agrees that only a speaking being can ever be free.”

—Dr. Labalee Black,

Mutatis Mutandis: Cures for the Glossopetric, 1896

APOTHEOSIS AND THE POWDERED WIG

I

“For about the year 1686, a poet of rather ominous name (and who, by the bye, did ample justice to his name), viz. *Mr. Flatman*, in speaking of the death of Charles II expresses his surprise that any prince should commit so absurd an act as dying; because, says he,

‘Kings should disdain to die, and only *disappear*.’”

—Thomas De Quincey,

Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, 1821

II

“It was in 1622 that the aptly appellated Gerard *Malynes* (jurist, alchemist, and assayer of the mint under James I—and in this last capacity by no means the equal of our sublime patron), in the course of elaborating his metaphysical allegory of free trade (wherein commodities were likened to the ‘Bodie of Trafficke,’ money to the ‘Soule of Trafficke,’ and bills of exchange, somewhat deceptively, to the ‘Spirit or Faculty of the Soule of Trafficke’), first adverted to the power of the passage from the solid to the gaseous state that concerns us here, writing:

‘and there remaineth a Paste in divers Balles, called the Almond Paste, which by a limbecke receiving fire, causeth the Quicksilver to *Subleme*, and falling downe the neck into the water, which is in the receiver stopped close, taketh his bodie again.’”

—Michael Faraday,

Three Lectures on the Chemical History of a Candle, 1859

III

“The question of whether the miniaturist Thomas Flatman (who died in Three Leg Alley on December 8, 1688) actually painted a portrait of Father Huddleston sometime after his notorious bedside ministrations to Charles II (whereby that monarch reigned *more papistarum* for a matter of minutes over England and Scotland) would seem, then, impossible to resolve with certainty; nevertheless, this *thin-man*’s appetite for such a commission, and his likely attitude toward the toothless Benedictine who presented the Merry Monarch with the protesting liberty of Englishmen to devour as his *viaticum*, are together made clear enough in Flatman’s supine verses ‘On the Much Lamented Death of Our Late Sovereign Lord King Charles II, of Blessed Memory, a Pindarique Ode,’ a pandering toward the posthumous which has elicited spasmodic pandiculation in a dozen generations of ultramontane schoolboys:

‘But Princes (like the wondrous Enoch) should be free
From Death’s Unbounded Tyranny,
And when their Godlike Race is run,
And nothing glorious left undone,
Never submit to fate, but only disappear.’”

—Vatticus Wesley,

The Mirror of Satan, 1879