5 IMAGES, THE COMMONPLACE BOOK, AND DIGITAL SELF-FASHIONING

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The way we use, collect, and acquire digital images can be guided to some extent by an understanding of the late medieval and renaissance-through-mid-19th-century concept of the commonplace book. As these earlier texts provided their collectors ways of constructing, altering, and mediating identity, so the ways that we collect visual images in digital–visual "commonplace books" may provide ways of self-definition and self-construction.

COMMONPLACE BOOKS AND SELF-CONSTRUCION

We know of the commonplace book as a handwritten artifact, popular among the literate in the late middle ages through parts of the 19th century, consisting of a bound blank book wherein a reader would hand-copy information that struck him or her as interesting, useful, necessary for future use, or that simply sounded memorable. "In the strictest sense," according to Earle Havens (2002), "the term commonplace book refers to a collection of well-known or personally-meaningful textual excerpts organized under individual thematic headings" (p. 8). Literacy historian Kenneth Lockridge (2001) extends and focuses this definition, asserting that "commonplace books are blank books in which genteel men and eventually women wrote down, and in some instances transformed, selections from their reading that they thought particularly interesting or significant" (p. 337).

While these descriptions are useful, perhaps more revelatory is another assertion from Havens (2001) about manuscript commonplace books (as opposed to printed ones):

> These more undisciplined and disorganized commonplace
> books appeared in every permutation and degree of sophis-
> tication, and included nearly every imaginable type of text:
> lines of epic poetry, lofty quotations, and, just as often, medic-
> inal and culinary recipes, ribald couplets, hermetical numeri-
> cal tables, cartoons, monumental inscriptions, magical spells,
> bad jokes; in short, all the literary flotsam and jetsam of the
> more vigorous sort of reader. (pp. 9-10)

Thus the actual commonplace book as assembled by the compiler (and not cleaned up for printing, as were many commonplace books intended to serve as "examples" of what a commonplace book should be) are an unruly space, a space wherein the compiler can both record and try out. They are places where-in the compiler sets down material for future use and reference, and catchalls for the miscellany of one's determined knowledge. They are, in essence, places wherein the compiler begins a kind of making, a kind of building of intellect, of storing material that one keeps not for the simple sake of keeping but for the purpose of making the material part of one's intellect and therefore construct-ing part of one's self. Why else, indeed, would one collect a miscellany of mate-rial if not to improve oneself, to provide oneself with ready building material?

"Manuscript commonplace books," Havens (2002) wrote, "were essentially practical, written expressions of the larger enterprise of reading itself, in the *legere* sense of gathering selecting, and collecting."[1] They are, in effect, places of private self-fashioning. Commonplace books, as Lockridge (2000) stated, "often function as [arenas] for the shaping and consolation of a self" (p. 338)— sites for individual identity formation, reinforcement, and negotiation.

VISUAL COMMONPLACES

We can see this identity formation at work, but in a primarily non-textual way, in a mid-20th-century scrapbook collected and collated in the late 1930s. (see figures 1 and 2).[2] This text shows a passion—one common in the 1930s, especially to boys[3]—for airplanes and their pilots, an exciting, relatively new, and contemporary technology, and the heroes who operated that technology. In this way, this portion of the book seems to identify a segment of what that compiler might want to be at some later point. Does the compiler have dis-tinct plans to become a pilot? Join the Army Air Corps? We don't know. Do airplanes make up a significant part of the compiler's interest and focus? We can probably say a fairly strong "yes" to this. Through the use of deliberately

Figures 1 and 2: Images from a 1930s commonplace book.

selected visual texts (often accompanied by alphabetic text in the form of captions), the collector has expressed a focus of importance, that, in its own way, is equally as indicative (if not more so) of the compiler's *ethos* (in the word's meaning of essential or habitual element of character) as, for example, the copied text of an apothegm or pithy argument.

THE DIGITAL COMMONPLACE BOOK

The commonplace book is no longer a construct only of ink and paper. Jen Almjeld (2006), drawing on Kenneth Lockridge, crafted a persuasive connection between the commonplace book tradition on the one hand and blogs on the other. Blogs, to Almjeld, can be knowledge storehouses, keeping-places for information and knowledge, in much the same way textual commonplace books served as repositories of information for future use.[4]

Almjeld (2006) also noted the use of blogs as commonplace book-like storage spaces, as does Lucia Dacome (2004), who argued that "throughout the early modern period commonplace books provided repositories for arranging notes, excerpts, *drawings, and objects*" (p. 603; emphasis added). Thus the 1930s airplane scrapbook is noteworthy because it is largely a collection—a set of commonplaces, if you will—of some text, but mostly, almost entirely, photos of airplanes and some pilots cut from the pages of contemporary magazines. It is a visual commonplace book of its compiler's passion.

I've written elsewhere about what I believe might be a new kind of writing process—or, perhaps more accurately, a production process—for multimedia composing. I've noted that, in my multimedia composing process, I rely on a process of collection. In an earlier article (Whipple, 2008), I noted that

> I find myself collecting media in a kind of semi-serendipitous "gleaning" process as I go through my days, collecting digital images and clips… that I may not need right then for the project under construction, but might need later, or which seems, for lack of a better word, "useworthy." I take more advantage of visual opportunities. Indeed, I find that I am keeping a commonplace… of… digital images…. as a medieval or renaissance scholar would keep a commonplace book in which to keep aphorisms, quotations, exercises, and ideas… I find myself keeping a video/still image commonplace book with the camera on my cell phone.

Almjeld (2006) reminds us that digital "storehouses" may be found not only in blogs, but also in "hard drives, memory sticks, and other storage devices." We can add to these storage places others such as built-in digital camera memories, and cell phone cards, as well as Flickr, Photobucket, Google's Picasa, MSN Photo spaces, and other Web 2.0 storage entities. Indeed, my own digital commonplace book is scattered in several locations: the iPhoto archive on my MacBook, on a collection of flash drives in a pocket in my briefcase, on a card in my digital camera, and in the internal memory of my camera-equipped smartphone. While Kenneth Lockridge (2000) told us that individuals such as John Locke advocated complex and exhaustive systems of organizing commonplace books into personal knowledge systems (we might call them 17th- to 18th-century content management systems), this just doesn't work—at least for me, and perhaps for others. "People", said Lockridge (2000), "simply do not use commonplace books the way Descartes or Locke want them to" (p. 338).

Not all of the pictures in my digital commonplace-book are ones I've generated myself; the right-click/copy afforded by most browsers offers an effortless way to collect pictures—to appropriate them from someone else to make them, even if only for purposes of reference and storage, one's own. Consider, for example, the pictures below.

What is the importance of these pictures, each of which lives in my aforementioned storage spaces? To analyze each one in isolation is to lose sight of the context; an effective reading of my digital/visual commonplace book would involve the viewing of hundreds of pictures. The picture of the cat on the keyboard is a "taken for the moment" picture showing one of my cats in a favorite posture. Does this say something about me, how I wish to be perceived—or, since this is a private volume, how I perceive myself, beyond the fact that I like cute pictures of cats? Figure 4 is an "acquired" image, though I've had it for at least 10 years now, since I first began to construct webpages, and I have no idea

Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6: Photos I have taken or collected.

of its provenance. The last two are self-taken, one at an air show and the other in front of the window of a local clothing store. What can these say about me beyond the facile guess that I am a cat-loving airplane fancier with an appreciation for the silly and the incongruous?

Lockridge (2000) asserted that "if you know well the life of the keeper of a commonplace book, you soon find that the seemingly routine selections from his or her readings incorporated there, are startlingly revealing of that person's crises or issues of identity" (p. 338). I'd hazard, then, that we collect visual images for some of the reasons we collect text in more traditional commonplace instantiations: because *they are connected with our sense of what we are, or what we wish to become, or both.* We may know what we will do with the pictures we take, keep, and acquire; we may not. We may acquire them for specific present or future projects, or because they seem interesting. What about the things that we acquire on impulse, feeling some inchoate need that we cannot easily express? What about the acquisition, collection, and preservation of visual knowl-

edge akin to the 18th-century reader's writing down of the pithy *apothegmata* of his time? Lockridge would call this the "trying-on of bits and pieces" (p. 339) of the intellectual fashions of the time. Are not these digital commonplace books, then, private places "in which to construct and console the self?"

For answers here, we may need to look at a common item found in commonplace books—*sententiae*, or the particularly memorable, well-stated line or passage. I suspect strongly that there is a bit of *sententiae*-collecting going on in my digital commonplace. If a phrase or sentence were collected because it is particularly well-put, then wouldn't a visual image or object be selected for a similar reason? As not all items in a traditional commonplace book were necessarily selected for immediate or near-immediate use in a text, why must digi-visual items be collected only for immediate use? What, then, is the difference between a striking image that we collect or take simply because it is striking, and the sentence we write down because it is just as cool? In each case, there is an unspoken, and perhaps difficult-to-articulate, need to *have* the image.

Lockridge (2000) told us that commonplace books tell modern historians of literacy "what various forms of literacy did to the mentality of persons who acquired, possessed, and used" them (p. 337). Our visual, digital commonplace books inevitably perform the same function. They will turn out to be, as an anonymous 17th-century writer said, in penning yet another manual on organizing commonplace books, "a treasury (like that of an honest heart) where are good things stored up, both old and new, and a fair garment may be made of the shreds that are in such a repository" (Havens, 2002, p. 137).

NOTES

1. Havens (2001) earlier expressively defined *legere* as not only "the act of reading" but also to single out, select, extract, gather, collect, even to plunder and purloin. One did not merely encounter a text; one harvested it, separating the wheat from the tares in order to glean the pith and marrow. The term also signified a kind of rapine, even the violent confiscation of the fruits of another man's tree. (p. 8)

2. Almjeld (2006) also provided photographic images of similar commonplace-book scrapbooks.

3. Although, much as we would like to guess, we do not know the gender of the compiler of the book, as there are no gender-indicative cues, such as a name, on it.

4. By the same token, we can add social bookmarking systems such as Digg, cite.u.like, and del.icio.us to the list of commonplace-like digital systems, in

that they allow us to save information in a "place" whence they may be retrieved.

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