

BOOK REVIEW

Phyllis Reeve

Wharton, Thomas. *The Logogryph; a Bibliography of Imaginary Books*. Gaspereau Press, Kentville, Nova Scotia (2004). 256 p. \$27.95. 4.5 x 6.5 inches, sewn paperback with jacket. Handbound edition, \$59.95, limited edition of 25 copies.

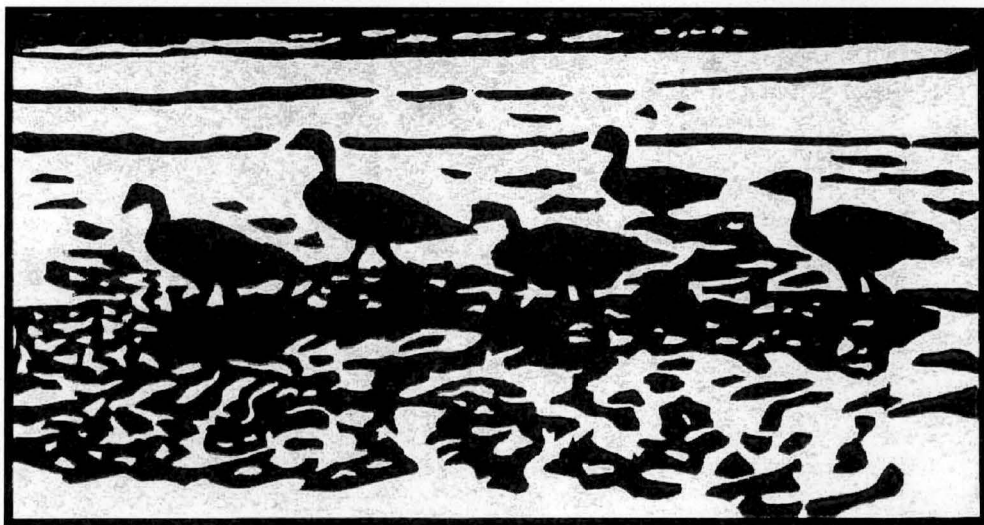
As a reviewer, I like to know, and to be able to tell my readers, what it is I am reviewing. I confess to some uncertainty about this book. Is it a bibliography, as the subtitle maintains? or a novel, which is Wharton's usual genre? or a Logogryph? A Logogryph, or "logogriphe," Wharton assures us has been defined in *Johnson's Dictionary* as "a sort of riddle." We can accept this, or check the *OED*, which expands the riddle to "a kind of enigma, in which a certain word, and other words that can be formed out of all or any of its letters, are to be guessed from synonyms of them introduced into a set of verses."

But inside the book we encounter a Logogryph who is a "fabulous creature that flies on wings made of ribbons and

shreds of ink-dappled paper," and whose nest is glimpsed high on a ledge of weathered, carved stone, in the remains of a gigantic and mummified Library.

Or, by a process of circular definition, we may conclude that the Logogryph is this book, a strange, loveable little volume whose medium is its message. We scarcely need to read it; holding it almost suffices. But if we do unwrap the overlapping outer wrapper, proceed past the faux-antiqued letterpress-printed jacket and the faux-embossed cover to the text, typeset in Carol Twombly's redrawing of Caslon and printed offset on Rolland Zephyr Laid paper, with emblematic drawings by Wesley Bates, we find a sort of novel.

Set in Jasper, Alberta, the elegiac narrative thread traces the narrator's boyhood relationship with the Merchant Ivory-ish Weaver family. At last we realize the narrative is really about itself, about "turning Mrs. Weaver into words." But since *The Logogryph* is also a sort of bibliography, it alludes to other books — quotes Borges and echoes Eco. The



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episode concerning Fray Raphael reminds me first of George Szanto's *Conquests of Mexico* and then of the prophet Ezekiel and the *Revelation of St. John*.

But the Logogryph is less interested in such "real" books than in "ideal books, impossible books, books that you have always longed to read."

A treatise on the literature of post-modern Atlantis informs us that Rupert Brooke survived the Great War after all, and lived on in Atlantis until 1960, shaping the outsider's view of that island, especially in his "*Atlantis Quartet (1919-27)*."

Odysseus voyages home on a vessel that is the *Odyssey* itself, and must sometimes, depending on winds, "set a reading course alternately to one side or the other of the path of the narrative," leading, of course, off course to "severe digressions."

A protagonist falls, or is pushed, from his novel. Two readers wage a duel by marginalia. We are haunted by unquiet texts and challenged by "new plagues of fragrant grammatic backscatter."

Discussing his imaginary Atlantean novelist iAi, Wharton discusses his own book, for the Logogryph also "utilizes fantasy and magic realism for their power to make strange and new that which is familiar."

Thus the Logogryph gives itself an imaginary review, and, finally, an imaginary colophon: "This book was set in Mythica, the last typeface from the hand of the master Atlantean engraver whose name did not survive the inundation of that great city... [and] whose talents were dedicated to illusion and disappearance." And I have become an imaginary reviewer.

A Splendor of Letters. The Permanence of Books in an Impermanent World. Nicholas A. Basbanes. HarperCollins, New York, 2003. 444p. Can \$45.95.

Reader, beware. This book reinforced one of my most persistent disinclinations, which is probably also one of yours, or you wouldn't be reading this journal: a reluctance bordering on complete refusal to discard any book — ever. Nor can I in all conscience give away books from my shelves to libraries, archives or museums, as Basbanes and others have shown all such institutions to be untrustworthy stewards. Moreover, libraries, archives and museums seldom even want my donations — although they should. In a rare fit of deaccessioning I took a carton of second copies of classic novels as far as to my daughter's house, where I can keep an eye on them. Friends moving to smaller quarters and unable to face secondhand dealers or the recycling depot are apt to deposit their semi-discards with me.

Should a yellow newspaper clipping once topical but now of no perceivable relevance, fall from a book, I hesitate and think there is no guarantee that anyone else has saved that clipping, or even that newspaper.

The responsibility is daunting, so is the clutter, and Basbanes exacerbates the dilemma.

As his subtitle indicates, he tries to demonstrate the tenacious survival of the written word despite all efforts to erase it. In the course of his demonstration he shows how some people have made written records under difficult circumstances — and how other people have destroyed them. He tells of messages surviving in