

BOOK REVIEW

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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 frangent 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

stone, wood, clay, palimpsests, scrap. He praises individuals such as Aeschines, fourth century B.C. Athenian who defended systematic record keeping, and Dave the Potter, nineteenth century A.D. Afro-American slave who embedded information in his ceramics. But for every such heartwarming tale, he has a horror story to match. Natural disasters play a minor role compared to human warfare, including deliberate genocide through the obliteration of documents and cultures. The really unbearable reading comes in the chapter "Shelf Life" recounting the dismantling of library collections in the name of financial exigency, i.e. greed. Political correctness has also much to answer for, and there seems no end to well-intentioned ignorance and short-sighted prioritising. The vignettes tumble over each other, and no great library or special collection escapes censure.

While his approach is less alarmist than that of Nicholson Baker's *Double Fold*, he leaves us with the same chilling warnings about putting our trust in technology. Microforms, e-books, and shiny new editions should protect the originals, not replace them. A fascinating exercise compares six editions and forty printings of the H.W. Janson's classic textbook *History of Art* for variations in design, typography, illustration, and paper stock.

While reproductions can educate us about the originals, they can not stand in for them. Basbanes cites the disappointment and confusion of many viewers of the exhibition mounted by the Royal British Columbia Museum purporting to feature the notebooks of Leonardo, but actually hanging 150

photographic reproductions, each carefully framed as though it were the real thing. At least the originals remain with their individual owners, and have not — yet — been thrown out and replaced by their facsimiles.

Basbanes credits computer technology for its contribution to letters and publishing, but he gleefully refutes one pundit's prediction of the demise of conventional book-reading among the younger generation, by reminding us of the day when millions of children ignored their on-line chat rooms and video games and sat down to read *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, a 734-page book totally devoid of interactive diversions.

A recent visitor gave me a glimpse of the evolving possibilities of computer technology as a tool. Long out of print, *Indian Petroglyphs of the Pacific Northwest*, by Beth and Ray Hill, has defied hopes for a new edition. The original plates have been lost, and a layout juxtaposing text, photographs and line drawings challenged the limits of scanning — until now. Just maybe, that specific technology has caught up with the demands of a thirty-year-old book.

But while he may harbour some optimism regarding the taming of the computer, Basbanes is less sanguine about the human race itself. His final page leaves us contemplating the gutted shell of the National Library of Iraq.



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