SUNDAY, DECEMBER 1st, 2013

2 PAGES

THE ROAD TO THE MEMORY PALACE

I have often thought about village griots, whose memories held the entire histories of their people, both achievements and disasters, in great detail. Different cultures had different names for these prodigies, but they have existed everywhere for thousands of years. In many ways, the enormous content they held in their minds sustained the very identities of the people they served. They were the memory heroes.

It is a cliché that the American people have a collective memory of about two weeks. Of course, that very short memory span is largely a result of the media making stories disappear, or simply reinventing history every day, à la Orwell's 1984. But the history almost everyone has forgotten concerns memory and complex mnemonic devices. In Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451, each character memorizes a whole book. That seems like a stunning feat, but in the Middle Ages some people memorized whole libraries. One of the devices used in this effort was the memory palace, where every room and every part of the structure was a different book and the contours of those places represented different parts of the books. Another mnemonic device was the chain, with other chains attached to each link of the master and Such chain, on. extraordinary feats of memory were necessary, because access to books, in this case handwritten parchments, was so limited. If people wanted to have these books, they had to carry them around in their heads. Thomas Aquinas was a good example of this.



He composed three of his great books simultaneously, dictating to three different scribes in his cell, turning from one to another, quoting freely from his memorized master sources. Granted Aquinas was probably a genius, but more ordinary men achieved great feats of memorization as well.

I'm not suggesting that we should memorize books verbatim, as those men did centuries ago, but that we need to possess those books, as Quentin Tarantino and Daniel Estrada have learned to possess movies. If legions of young cultists can memorize virtually the entire script of *The Big Lebowski*, just imagine what else they might accomplish. And I'm not knocking the Coen brothers; I believe they are among the most creative minds of their generation.

It is delusional to believe that a person can possess books because they sit on his or her bookshelf. It is even more delusional to believe that instant access to information on the internet, especially to sources like Wikipedia, gives someone possession of these works. If the books are not in your head, they cannot interact to produce new stories and visions. And if they are not internalized, the kind of creative work that goes on without conscious awareness cannot take place. To be able to listen in on that grand cacophony of voices that is the history of books is a requirement for participation in the ongoing conversation called human culture.

This is not an argument for physical as opposed to digital books. A book is a book, regardless of the format. What really matters is where that book ends up, in the reader's head or somewhere in the ether, or in the din of white noise that is social Social media—Twitter. media. Facebook, and all that have followed them—and endless texting, have become a plague that has caused serious harm to the mental function of individuals, institutions (including a press that chooses to believe blogs are journalistic sources), and the collective mental functions of our society. There is real danger here. I'm not talking about texting while driving, although that is insane. It is like trying to read a map while going 75. (I have seen people do that too.) Rather consider the tragic but common scene of people together, groups or couples, busily exchanging texts with people who are somewhere else, or even sadder, people who are actually in the same room. Their physical bodies are the zombie avatars of the infantile, narcissistic fluff that has overtaken what was once their minds and memories. Space, time, and memory have collapsed to create a digital prison. This is the diametrical opposite of the memory palace, where people had the ambition of taming and reshaping huge chunks of knowledge

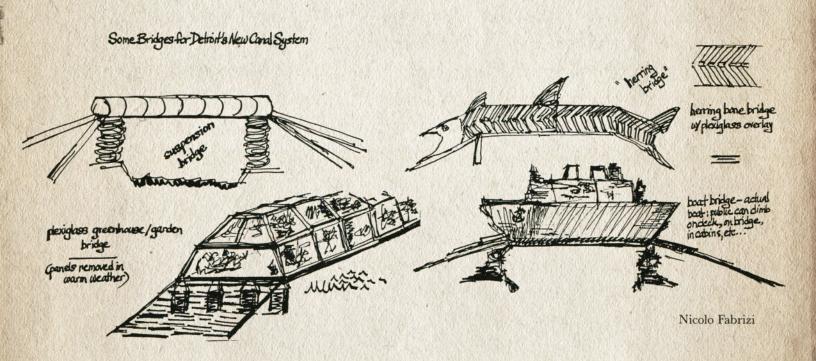
and creative work in order to advance their own innovations.

We have become a society obsessed with the preservation of memory on the most literal level. The fear of Alzheimer's disease has touched almost everyone. I admit to the same anxiety. But it is never too late, young or old, to build a memory palace. Think how much more fun it would be to read books of all different sorts, rather than memorizing number

sequences or image grids to stave off dementia. It is unnecessary to be restricted by the Harvard Bookshelf or someone's idea of the hundred greatest books. Read widely and with an open mind, be surprised how often you find brilliance, and how often in a place you never expected. Be a memory hero; start building the palace now.



A week after "The Practical Utopia in Detroit Revisited" (Caliban Chronicles #9) came out, an interesting op ed piece in the New York Times appeared: "Let's Build a New Bridge. No Cars Allowed." by Mark Vanhoenacker. With the idea of oneiric bridges passing over canals still rolling around in my head, I was struck when Vanhoenacker said London's Millenium Bridge was "both a destination and a transport link." That was exactly what I was arguing for! Then he delivered the best line of the piece: "the iron grace of bridges remains our simplest metaphor for connectedness and uplifted civic space." Wow. His poetic line excited me so much I decided to reprint Nicolo Fabrizi's selection of bridges from the original project in Caliban #6 (1989):



Some recent book releases from our contributors:

Diane Wakoski, Bay of Angels, Anhinga Press, Tallahassee, Florida, 2013, \$20.00

Nico Vassilakis, Letter of Intent, 2013 (visual poetry) (http://www.scribd.com/mobile/doc/168267849Nico), no charge

(This will be a regular feature of Caliban Chronicles, so we are asking contributors to keep us updated on new book releases.)