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Belton House MS S.115.20

Belton House MS S.115.20 self-consciously reflects on the practices of textual collection and commentary with which its miscellaneous contents are framed. The introductory notes by the scribe (assumed to be 'Old' Sir John Brownlowe, 1593/4-1679, 1st baronet of Belton, Lincolnshire)¹ on the first few leaves establish the book as a volume of adversaria and commentaries resulting from the author's own reading, and they convey some essential ideas about the relationship between reading and writing in the tradition of the miscellany or commonplace book. Along with other notes interspersed throughout the manuscript, they help us to appreciate how writers or readers might relate and respond to this book as a particular form, or indeed, to other manuscript miscellanies.

Several of the many commonplace metaphors which appear throughout the manuscript emphasise the physicality of the book as a site of collection, and this essay examines in particular the tropes which construct the volume as a kind of physical container. As Mary Thomas Crane has commented in her important work on the development of the commonplace book in the sixteenth century, writers of early modern educational treatises stress the ideas that 'books contain matter, that reading consists of gathering that matter, and that writing consists of reusing it'.² While there is quite a range of material included in this mid-seventeenth century miscellany, the evident awareness of its function as a 'container' for literary matter is perhaps its most interesting feature.

Although ancient texts are the most traditional source material for writers of early modern educational miscellanies, Crane points out that many writers 'identify the space or container from which sayings are to be gathered as including pagan literature, Scripture, patristic texts, modern writings, and personal experience'.³ The scribe of MS S.115.20 outlines his intention to

set fourth in this voloum
a Collection of Historicall notes, worthy of
memory & serious obseruation. with other
things more Excellent of morrallity and

¹ See Peter Hoare, 'Belton House, Lincolnshire, MS S.115.20', <http://scriptorium.english.cam.ac.uk/resources/articles/pdf/hoare_Belton_House_S.115.20.pdf>.

² Mary Thomas Crane, *Framing Authority: Sayings, Self, and Society in Sixteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 57.

³ Crane, p. 57.

Divinity gathered from good Authours (f. 3v).

The contents of the book are based on a selection of historical and religious texts (mostly English works published in the mid-seventeenth century, but also some unidentified sources) supplemented by personal reflections, sometimes in the form of 'Oracles. dreames. & prognosticks, which though but light and meane, may serue to make way for that which follows' (f. 3v). Memory is a recurring concern for this scribe, and intimately bound up with the purpose of his manuscript. Material in the volume is selected because it is 'worthy of memory', and the miscellany is portrayed as a physical, written annexe to the metaphorical space of the reader's memory.⁴

The first inscribed leaf begins with the popular Renaissance humanist image of the fountain:

If one should aske why doe writers take paines
to abridg the workes of other men, is it not
better to drinke at ye Fountain, then to haue
it fetcht in bottles

It is indeed, but then you haue but a draught
so when wee haue recourse to a great vollum
wee take but a draught, that is so much as our
memory carries away, or can for the present
retain (f. 2r; see also Figure 1 below).

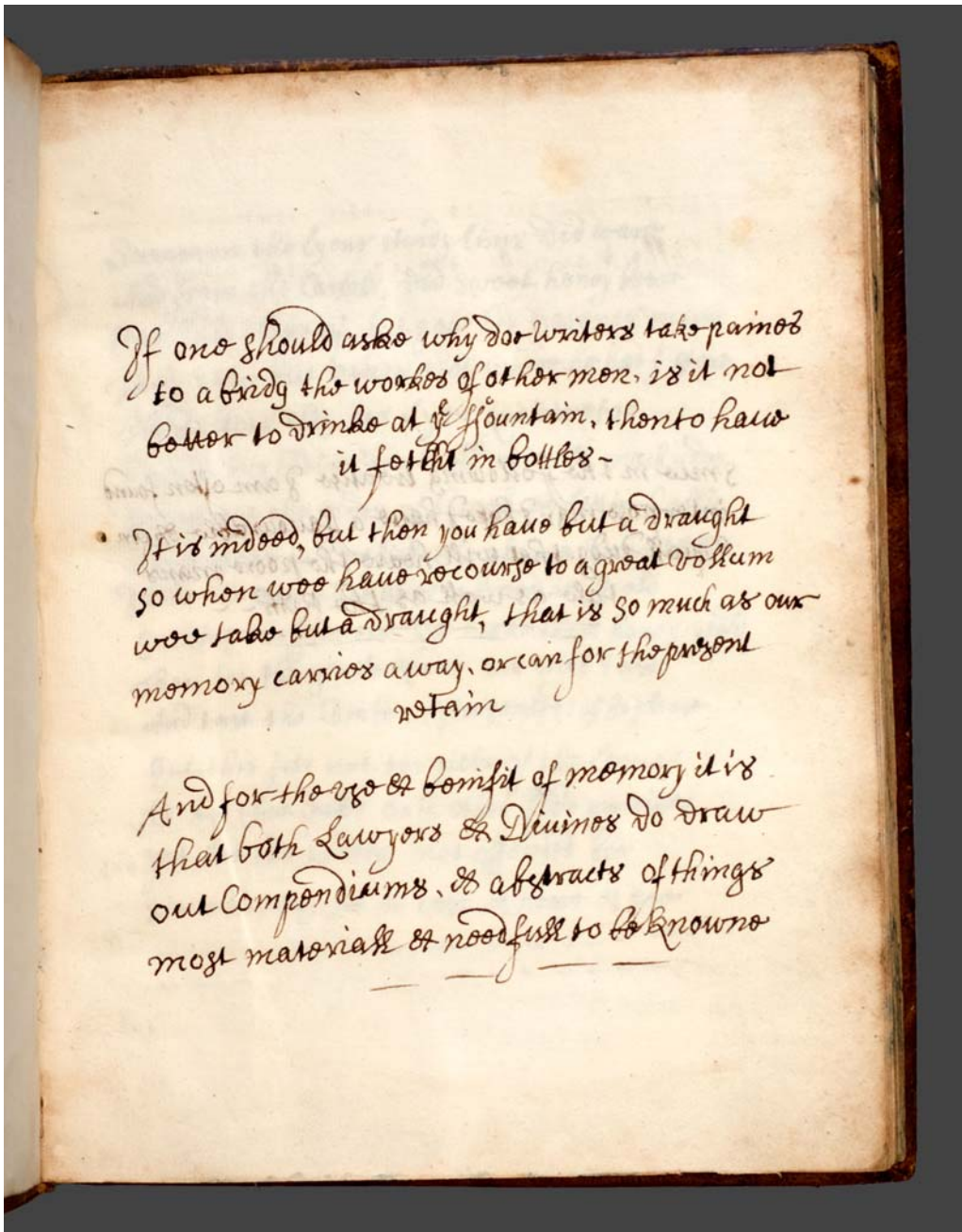
Metaphorising ancient literature or scripture as a classical *fons* or a Christian well of life, the fountain is an ideal image for authoritative sources of intellectual and spiritual enrichment.⁵ Direct engagement with ancient texts is key to the sixteenth-century humanist belief in returning *ad fontes*, as Erasmus insists in his pedagogical treatise *De Ratione Studii*: 'almost all knowledge of things is to be sought in the Greek authors. For in short, whence can one draw a draught so pure, so easy, and so delightful as from the very fountain-head'.⁶ In his opening note the scribe of MS S.115.20 challenges this commonplace, developing the fountain metaphor to suggest that while consulting the source directly is usually thought better than reading isolated parts 'fetcht in bottles', this method may also have its own limitations. When one takes 'but a draught'

⁴ Mary Carruthers' classic work *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) contains much useful material on the memory imagined as a physical container.

⁵ See Crane, pp. 66-8. See also Hester Lees-Jeffries, *England's Helicon: Fountains in Early Modern Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) for a discussion of fountains as loci of dense literary, cultural, social, religious, and political significance.

⁶ *Collected Works of Erasmus*, ed. Craig R. Thompson et al, 42 vols (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974-), XXIV, p. 669.

from a 'great vollum' it allows only 'so much as our memory carries away', and so inside his own book the author aims to isolate and comment upon carefully chosen sections of larger sources in a format that will supplement the human memory. The two chief senses of 'a great vollum' – a particular quantity or mass (often of liquid), and a scroll or bound book – both resonate in the metaphor of the source-text as fountain and the smaller miscellany as a new vessel for its contents. For the scribe of MS S.115.20, the volume provides a way to manage the inevitable copiousness of the material he has read.



(Figure 1: Belton House, MS S115.20, f. 2v)

We are told further that:

And for the vse & benefit of memory it is
that both Lawyers & Diuines do draw
out Compendiums, & abstracts of things
most materiall & needful to be knowne.

Extracting the most useful parts of larger texts is a valid activity practised by ‘both Lawyers & Diuines’, and thus the author of MS S.115.20 indicates his intention to do the same, emphasising again that it is for ‘the vse & benefit of memory’ that he presents such ‘abstracts’. Writing around a century later, in 1771 the popular French author Louis-Sébastien Mercier produced a utopian vision of the year 2440 in which the protagonist visits a once-great royal library, now reduced to one small cabinet of books. The librarian tells him that ‘wise men’ have extracted the essential material from a ‘thousand in-folio volumes, all of which they transferred into a small duodecimo-sized volume, somewhat in the same way that the skilful chemists who extract the virtue from plants concentrate it in a flask and throw out the vulgar liquors’.⁷ Through such metaphors of distilling or condensing, both writer and reader are reminded of the physicality of books as material objects, and more specifically, as containers of different forms and sizes to and from which literary matter can be transferred, as depicted through Mercier’s vivid imagery. The opening notes of MS S.115.20 are evidence of this idea being self-consciously enacted in the context of one man’s personal reading.

The fountain is by no means the only popular humanist metaphor in this manuscript. In the introductory leaves, a rhyming verse of sixteen lines refers to the Old Testament hero Samson, who ‘did teare’ the ‘sturdy lims’ of a lion and ‘from the Carcass, did sweet honey beare’ (f. 3r).⁸ The scribe suggests that the ‘doctors’ similarly draw ‘their Sweets wth pains and much a doo/ From out the sides of Greek & Lattin Cells’. The ‘Cell’, whether a grave, a storeroom, a part of the brain, or a section of honeycomb – these early modern senses of the noun may all resonate here – is another kind of contained space which here represents the sources from which some writers produce English works. Developing the association of honey and bees, however, the scribe prefers the image of the ‘Bee that Flies abroad in Field/Sucking the Flowers’ in order to

⁷ *L'An 2440, rêve s'il en fut jamais*, cited Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), pp. 68-9. See also Leah Marcus, ‘The Silence of the Archive and the Noise of Cyberspace’, in *The Renaissance Computer: Knowledge Technology in the First Age of Print*, ed. Neil Rhodes & Jonathan Sawday (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 18-28 (p. 20).

⁸ Cf. Judges 14. Samson famously challenged the Philistines with a riddle about his encounter with the lion and the honey.

'make them honey yeald'.⁹ In contrast with the violence associated with Samson's famous extraction of the honey, the scribe prefers a diligent and 'gentle' approach to gathering textual material, which will enable the reader to 'sitt with Ease/ And tast the Combe (presented) if he please'. We are warned, however, about the limitations of this honeycomb metaphor:

But this fits not the title of the leaues
 As he that lookes On th other side perceiues
 yet let the reader not offended bee
 Since he may sit & tast. & heare. & see

The scribe acknowledges that like the fountain, the honeycomb is not an unproblematic metaphor for his work, but hopes that the reader will appreciate the content in several ways: 'he may sit & tast. & heare. & see'.

One of the other most extensive self-conscious reflections is found at the end of a section of around twenty leaves of notes on Jeremy Taylor's *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying* (1651):

And now I am com to a Full stop.
 & I thinke I shall here take leaue
 of the Doctors into whose Fields
 I did not enter with syth nor sickle
 with intent to Cutt downe all before me
 but only haue pluckt some handfulls
 or rather gathered a few gleanings.
 for my intent in this booke was
 to set out a smale traine which in
 a transient veiw a man may sit &
 obserue in an hower or two without
 wearines because of diuers thinges
 And haueing ordered the van & the
 maine body, it behooues mee now
 to close vp the Reare. (f. 108r)

Here, as in the Samson verse, the scribe mingles several familiar metaphors. Imagery based on gathering, harvesting, pruning, or weeding is very popular in sixteenth-century humanist pedagogical discourse, and the scribe insists that his collection of notes involves only 'a few gleanings' rather than a complete harvesting with 'syth or sickle'. The military imagery resonates with earlier descriptions (e.g. ff. 3v, 49v) of sections of text as 'the van' or 'the maine body'. Marking the end of his notes on Taylor with a final military image, the author

⁹ Apian metaphors, derived from Lucretius, Horace, and Plutarch, are amongst some of the most frequently used in early modern humanist treatises which instruct students to gather material from many different sources. See Crane, pp. 57-9.

announces his duty 'to close vp the Reare'. The material in the manuscript is shaped by these scribal interjections; the visual, material images such as the marching army work as helpful reference points to guide the reader through a disparate collection of notes, and different sections of the miscellany are drawn together as part of a contained but diverse whole.

In another manuscript book at Belton House, dated 1660-1676 and also presumed to be the work of 'Old' Sir John, the scribe keeps a diary of notes on his finances, life in the local village, and how his garden fruits are progressing. Interspersed with these everyday observations are frequent references to his books and personal papers. There are descriptions of the locked boxes in which the papers are stored and the scribe makes a note every time he accesses them – in Sir John Brownlowe's world, written material is literally treasured away in secure containers as well as in the metaphors of the miscellany.¹⁰ Although MS.S.115.20 is constructed as a volume of useful material for implied readers, there is no evidence to suggest that it ever left Belton House, or that it had many readers other than the author. However, the scribe's interjections throughout the manuscript draw attention to the role of the author of such a miscellany: to present in a convenient volume 'things most materiall & needful to be knowne', whether for private or public perusal. Through its reflections on its own materiality, Belton House MS S.115.20 reminds us of the essential connections between form and content in manuscript studies.

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¹⁰ See Lady Elizabeth Cust, *Records of the Cust Family, Series II: The Brownlows of Belton* (London: Mitchell, Hughes, & Clarke, 1909), which includes a transcription of this book. Peter Hoare's essay has more details about the books at Belton which belonged to 'Old' Sir John.

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