

THE SELF SHELF

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The Self Shelf

The shelf is, of course, a huge bookshelf, stuffed with thousands of diaries, offering selves as varied as the spectrum of human existence. This essay will scratch the surface of diaries and their authors, inquire into motivation for keeping a diary, and admire a few of the most skilled diarists.

Is a diary the same as a journal? Samuel Johnson thought so. But because we relate the word "journal" to "journalism", we may prefer to regard a diary as a more intimate composition, and a journal as a more purposeful project, providing raw material for some practical, or political, enterprise, such as writing a travel book or establishing a first lady's place in history. "Diaries are the only kind of writing to take [the verb keep]. . . . Diaries are so much about the preservation and protection of the self that they demand the word . . . No form of expression more emphatically embodies the expresser: diaries are the flesh made word."

The best diaries have daily, or almost daily, entries over long periods of time. The concept of the diary as a chronicle of everything, shielded initially from critics, arose not much before Samuel Pepys. He perfected this notion. In the 3439 days of his diary he never fell more than twelve days behind and missed only eleven days.

A commonplace book is a less organized, not-quite diary. The author may insert clippings, describe his reading, write poems and build a verbal collage which he may publish under alphabetical headings, as a kind of loose series of insights and meditations.

Whatever. Diaries are popular and becoming more so. Adolescent school

girls confide their romantic impulses to their diaries, lock them and are angry when their brothers break in. Students of expository writing are asked to keep diaries. Political aides do so with a view to telling how their leaders days were really spent. My classmate Frank Sander, Professor of Law, teaches courses in negotiation and has his students keep diaries after each day's practice, to analyze what they might have done differently and better. At this moment some wretch, confined to prison, is scribbling in a diary to create a life he does not have.

And then, in the early 1980s, there was Dr. Ira Progoff, who organized and sold hundreds of Intensive Journal workshops, promising that if you follow his methods over as long a period as they require "an exciting awareness like the breaking of dawn will come to you" . . . " an ongoing, open-ended program of personal growth." All by learning to keep a Life History Log with multiple subdivisions. Dr. Progoff and Anais Nin admired each other's prolixity.

But even Dr. Progoff's commercialism did not set back serious diary writing. Evelyn Waugh, in a 1930 article on diaries in the Daily Mail, caught the essence of good diaries: "Nobody wants to read other people's reflections on life and religion and politics, but the routine of their day, properly recorded, is always interesting." It was his considerable achievement to turn an unattractive personality into a large and compelling diary.

What do diaries and diarists have in common across a broad and varied spectrum? In other words, why do they write? Sir Harold Nicholson, Foreign Service officer and member of Parliament, kept a diary which ran to three million words. His sons asked him why. He said "Because I thought that one

day it might amuse you." They asked again, later. He replied that his diary had become a habit, like brushing his teeth. When Nigel Nicholson read his father's diary, he realized that "His diary received the fantasies of his ambition and the dregs of his despair. In it he would talk to himself, reassure himself, take stock of what he had become and hoped to be." His entries describing the London blitz, sometimes penned hourly, sustained him in the Battle of Britain, when Western civilization tottered.

Edmund Wilson's voluminous diary is sometimes vulgar in its frank detail, as when he consents to beat a sexual partner with a hairbrush. But he wanted to be understood by what he put on paper; it was his life, hairbrush and all, and it was put there for others eventually to see. The intent to be read is common to diarists. They claim to value privacy (Pepys wrote his in shorthand and lapsed into a French-Italian jargon when describing his amours), but they take excellent care of their writings and seldom destroy them.

Virginia Woolf not only took comfort and self-knowledge from her diary but credited it with independent personhood. "Oh, yes, I've enjoyed reading the past year's diary, and shall keep it up. I'm amused to find how its grown a person, with almost a face of its own." William Soutar confessed addiction to his diary but warned, "A diary is like drink; we tend to indulge it over often: it becomes a habit which would ever seduce us to say more than we ought to say and more than we have the experiential qualifications to state. . . . A diary is an assassin's cloak which we wear when we stab a comrade in the back with a pen."

Jerome K. Jerome complained about the burden of diary keeping. "It would

have been a very enjoyable ride . . . if I had not been haunted . . . by the idea that I should have to write an account of it next day in my diary. . . . I enjoyed it as a man enjoys dinner when he has got to make a speech after it. . ." Anais Nin, wonderfully self-absorbed and wholly without terminal facilities (74 volumes) claims, "The real Anais is in the diary," then rebels against her own creation: "I am more interested in human beings than in writing, more interested in love-making than in writing, more interested in living than in writing. More interested in becoming a work of art than in creating one. I am more interesting than what I write." Her last point may have been right.

Some diarists value truth more than others. J.R. Ackerley, keeping a diary of his grief over his sister's suicide attempt, thinks of ways he could have supported her, "phrases I wish now I had used. In the course of time, I daresay, I should have come to think I really did use them - if this diary did not confront me with the truth." Evelyn Waugh on the other hand tended to write unfounded accounts until he believed them.

Bruce F. Cummings (pseudonym Barbellion) went further, "I'm damned sick of myself and all my neurotic whimperings, and so I . . . intend to lead a new life and throw this Journal to the Devil. I want to mangle it, tear it to shreds. You smug, hypocritical readers! You'll get no more of me." But when his diary was published, he exulted, "I've won! This morning at 9 a.m. the book arrived."

Evelyn Waugh's Daily Mail article on diaries was entitled, "One Way to Immortality." William Soutar in 1943 elaborated beautifully on this: "Why do we wish to be remembered, even when none remain who looked upon our

face? Surely, though it must retain an element of self-consideration, it is a last acknowledgment that we need to be loved; and, having gone from all touch, we trust that memory may, as it were, keep our unseen presence within the borders of day." What more intimate way to be remembered than as a diarist!

Not everyone becomes a good diarist simply by recording the daily round. Waugh required "proper" recording. Living in interesting times may help a fine diarist, but Pepys would have become famous for his diary even without the restoration of Charles the Second, bubonic plague or the great fire of London. What pitfalls must a diarist avoid? Verbosity is one, within the daily entry, despite the fact that the total words of determined diarists often reach the millions. When Anais Nin published her diaries, she was forced to cut them down from seventy-four to four volumes. Perhaps this made her more readable. Attitude is important, meaning a degree of objectivity about one's self. A diarist who develops the habit of daily self-justification, a habit hard to break, earns our disgust. William Allingham, a deservedly minor Victorian poet, worried about being a bore and missing matters of interest. He wrote:

"A man who keeps a diary pays
Due toll to many tedious days;
But life becomes eventful - then
His busy hand forgets the pen.
Most books, indeed, are records less
Of fulness than of emptiness."

Bad writing will kill a diary, and good style make one famous. Think of Joshua Slocum, that intrepid sailor of the 1890s, keeping the log of his thirty-five foot sloop as he crossed oceans. His diary became that classic of the sea *Sailing Alone Around the World*. He was just a sea captain, but he could write. His reading while at sea was classical - Shakespeare, Macauley, Bunyan, the

great essayists.

A final caveat about diary keeping. Beware of self-incrimination! In *Parker v. Newman*, a suit alleging alienation of affections against another woman, the "plaintiff was properly allowed to state on redirect examination that after she had seen the entry in her husband's diary, referring to the defendant, and called her husband's attention thereto, he erased the entry." Too late!

Readers of diaries should give them a break by not reading too much at one sitting. Remember, diaries unfold day by day, and the diarist's life is as repetitious as our own. It is unfair for the reader to become impatient and ask "How many times can someone have breakfast?" or criticize Pepys for using "Up betimes and to my office" to get going on his daily entries.

Diarists have been categorized by those who write histories of people and their diaries. Thomas Mallon, American novelist, published such a history in 1984, *A Book of One's Own*, reissued in 1995. It is a source for this essay.

His seven categories are:

- o **Chroniclers:** Diarists who set out to record everything they notice during their lifetimes and do so with zeal and curiosity. In this group are Pepys, Virginia Woolf, the brothers Goncourt in France, and many others.
- o **Travelers:** Diarists who, as they set out on some journey, want to hoard the sights and sounds of places to which they may never return. Examples are Lewis and Clark, Boswell on his trip to the Hebrides with Johnson, and Prince Louis Philippe's travels in America in 1797.
- o **Pilgrims:** Diarists with inward destinations, intent upon discovering who they really are. Henry David Thoreau, the American poet May Sarton,

C. S. Lewis, grieving over the loss of his wife Joy, and Thomas Merton are among those mentioned.

o **Creators:** Novelists, poets, painters, dancers, philosophers and other creative people have used their diaries to imagine, sketch and brainstorm.

A vast group, including Mary Shelley, Gerard Manley Hopkins, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Franz Kafka and Edgar Degas.

o **Apologists:** What do these diarists want to promote? Their politics, the injustices which they have endured, their outraged principles, their spurned loves. Harold Nicolson^h, Charles Lindberg, Leon Trotsky and George Sand fit in here.

o **Confessors:** The preoccupation here is often love, and sex. Stendhal's diaries rank with the randiest of them all. Edmund Wilson and Lord Byron are also rans.

o **Prisoners:** These diarists live in a wish world as they experience prison, fear, or, often, slow dying. They try to create some kind of life for themselves. Captain Alfred Dreyfus, Anne Frank, Albert Speer, Alice James (sister of William and Henry) and Barbellion are examples.

These categories are not mutually exclusive. Virginia Woolf, for example, could go from being a collector of days, a chronicler, to using her diary to explore ideas for *The Waves* or *To the Lighthouse* to musing, pilgrimlike, on who she was and what would become of her.

Stendhal (pseudonym for Marie Henri Beyle) was in Paris in the summers of 1810 and 1811. He had more reason than most to say that his diary was written only for "three or four friends whose character [predatory] resembled" his own. But two paragraphs after this statement he writes, "Don't go any farther, you bastards." Yet he was not trying to conceal who he was from himself or anyone else. He knew what a magnificent cad he was. His endless yearnings for women did not obscure his first and deepest love - himself. He agreed with women who insulted him, remarked on his careful editing of letters employed in seduction, and later annotated such remarks in his diary by scrawling "This man ought to have been thrown out the window."

Stendhal's mistress at this time was Angeline, a pretty opera singer. His passion was the Countess Daru who teased him but did not capitulate. When his siege failed, he consoled himself with her husband's young niece. ". . . for want of something better to do, I took a few liberties, there wasn't any resistance. So yesterday, not knowing what to do with myself, I . . . showed up at Villemomble. . . I went out on the terrace and the little girl followed me, . . . I [stroked] her knees and thighs. Her eyes thanked me by their look of love, outside that it was innocence itself. But on the terrace I became conscious of a great truth. Novelty is a great source of pleasure, you must give yourself up to it. I was sure of sleeping in the evening with the pretty Angeline, but I can only do anything with her now by making an effort, and by thinking of another woman. On the other hand P—, who is inferior in every respect, put me in a superb state." Stendhal's motto was "Know thyself." He said, "My means is this diary."

When Henry James read his sister's diary two years after her death in 1892,

he had not known that she kept one. Alice James was the victim of chronic, often undiagnosed ailments, and this invalidism became her profession and identity. Henry recognized that her diary was her alternative world, revealing "the extraordinary intensity of her will and personality." She settled in England, developed breast cancer, and as her world contracted, decided in 1889 to expand the commonplace notebook she wrote in sporadically into a diary. "I think that if I get into the habit of writing a bit about what happens, or rather doesn't happen, I may lose a little of the sense of loneliness and desolation which abides with me." She charted the approach of "the most supremely interesting moment in life", her death, and she saw that even on her "microscopic field, minute events are perpetually taking place illustrative of the broadest facts of human nature." Yet she was full of humor. "I suppose that one has a greater sense of intellectual degradation after an interview with a doctor than from any human experience." Learning that Queen Victoria was going to set aside a special studio for works of art depicting the Royal Family because the Queen did not want unfinished statues to be seen of family members in undraped marble, Alice commented: "Isn't she the supreme grocer?" No Anglophile, she admired American energy and contrasted British types like a spinster lady who ". . . was a refined mortal, and although fifty years of age, embodied still . . . the Wordsworthian maiden, having that wearying quality which always oozes from attenuated purity." Again, about her brother, "Henry . . . has embedded in his pages many pearls fallen from my lips, which he steals in the most unblushing way . . ." Like all diarists in the Prisoner category, Alice James knew that she could create art from the world which she could conjure inside herself. She wanted to be

published posthumously, and she was.

When the wife of C. S. Lewis, Joy Davidman Gresham, died in 1960, ending a truly happy marriage, Lewis wrote and published a diary entitled *A Grief Observed*. He did this to moderate his grief, and to work through an angry return to religious skepticism. God had suddenly become a "Cosmic Sadist" and an "Eternal Vivisector." He could no longer talk to Joy, or to God. "Time after time," he wrote, "when [God] seemed most gracious, He was really preparing the next torture." "I not only live each endless day in grief, but live each day thinking about living each day in grief. . . But what am I to do? I must have some drug, and reading isn't a strong enough drug now. By writing it all down . . . I believe I get a little outside it." But he torments himself with worry over what will happen when grief finally goes away. "Does [it] finally subside into boredom tinged by faint nausea?" And, "Am I . . . just sidling back to God because I know that if there's any road to [Joy] it runs through Him?" Lewis seems to want to sabotage the healing work his diary is intended to do. We sympathize but begin to lose patience with him. Yet we want to know the outcome, and the diary's part in it. Lewis does a sensible thing, close his diary after filling four notebooks. He concludes, "In so far as this record was a defense against total collapse, . . . it has done some good. [But] . . . I thought I could . . . make a map of sorrow. Sorrow, however, turns out to be not a state but a process. It needs not a map but a history." Lewis saw that his history could prove endless. His diary claims victory, by letting God have Joy, who died at peace with her Maker. But the victory required giving up the diary lest it continue to feed his grief. Time did the healing. The diary reminded its

keeper how slow relief was in coming to this special pilgrimage.

Bruce Frederick Cummings, known by the pseudonym Barbellion, died in 1919 of multiple sclerosis, age 30. More intensely than Alice James, he lived to write his diary, begun when he was thirteen. His book became a universe in which he was the ruler and only subject. He had enormous energy and appetite for life, all poured into his diary, for he had no normal outlets. His writing is ludicrously moving, filled with crazy bravura and manic vitality, a sort of imaginative tantrum. "The bare fact of existence paralyzes me - holds my mind in mortmain. To be alive is so incredible that all I do is to lie still and merely breathe - like an infant on its back in a cot." He craves every sensation life can give, including a fantasy that he will pull the brake cord of an express train as soon as he can spare the five pound penalty. "My hands tingle as often as I look at it." He reads voraciously, and finds almost audible in a library the "susurrus of desire - the desire every book has to be taken down and read, to live, to come into being in somebody's mind." He hates healthy, insensitive men: "From the drawing-room window I see pass almost daily an old gentleman with white hair, a firm step, broad shoulders, healthy pink skin, a sunny smile - always singing to himself as he goes - a happy, rosy-cheeked old fellow, with a rosy-cheeked mind. . . I should like to throw mud at him. By Jove how I hate him. . . . It is heartless, indecently so, for an *old* man to be so blithe." By 1915 he knows that his diary is his "real self" and has a special brass-handled cabinet built, which he calls his "coffin." "All day they [the volumes of his diary] make a perfect uproar in their solitary confinement - although no one hears it. And at night they become phosphor-

escent, though nobody sees it." He finds a publisher for his diary under the title *The Journal of a Disappointed Man*, and sees it sell well. Seven months later he is dead. Because of the complete identification between Cummings and his diary, and Cummings frustrated vitality and creative power, Thomas Mallon, the historian of diarists, considers his the greatest diary a man has written.

Mallon admits that the genre in which he makes his judgment defies standards and criteria to support him. The best known diary admired through the centuries is that of Samuel Pepys, a man more like Stendhal than James, Lewis or Cummings, yet wholly himself, a dedicated extrovert uninterested in anxious introspection. Claire Tomalin's fine recent biography of Pepys is subtitled, *The Unequaled Self*. If one reason that Pepys diary is less read now than formerly is that the reading public is ignorant of the times in which he lived, Tomalin's writing may restore its popularity.

Pepys was born in 1633, a republican and a puritan who witnessed the execution of Charles I in January, 1650. Ten years later, on January, 1, 1660, still an insignificant clerk in the service of his aristocratic cousin, Edward Montagu, he bought a fat notebook, ruled its 282 pages and margins, and began his diary. He could not have foreseen the restoration of Charles II later that year, the Great Plague of 1665, the Great Fire of 1666 or the invasion of the Medway by the Dutch navy in 1667. Although his diary gives telling, informal accounts of these events, to Pepys history consisted primarily of the advancement of Pepys. At the beginning of the decade Pepys had barely twenty-five pounds to his name. At the end he had ten thousand. Worried about failing eyesight, he ended his diary on May 31, 1669. During this brief period

he had astonished himself by becoming known to King Charles, and relied upon in reorganizing the Navy, under the command of Catholic James, the Duke of York, the king's brother. He was the forerunner of modern, meritocratic man, rising from his father's tailorshop to graduate from Magdalene College, Cambridge, and surviving the treacherous politics of a country which, disagreeing upon the successor to Oliver Cromwell, turned again to the royal family Stuart.

From his puritan background he learned a powerful work ethic and calculation. "Chance without merit brought me in, and . . . diligence only keeps me so, and will, living as I do among so many lazy people, that the diligent man becomes necessary . . . they cannot do anything without him." This observation reflects no small self-esteem. But like his aristocratic cousin Montagu, he was a religious skeptic. "I see religion, be it what it will, is but a humour, and so the esteem of it passeth as other things do." He was loyal to his royal masters while finding them vain, dissolute and neglectful of their work responsibilities. "God forgive me, although I adore them with all the duty possible, yet the more a man considers and observes them and other men, the less he finds of difference between them and other men, though (blessed be God) they are both princes of great noblesse and spirits." He knew he owed the brothers Stuart everything.

Pepys lived to be seventy, but the diary, begun when he was twenty-seven, not his successful career, tells us who this unequalled self was. He had no role models as a diarist; other diaries by men in public life were either records of political decision-making or accounts which omitted the private lives of the writers, or both. Women did not keep diaries. Pepys' diary is a tale of ambition, acquisition, and his surprise at becoming "a very rising man". "Lord, to see how

I am treated, that come from so mean a beginning, is a matter of wonder to me." It incorporates contemporary history, fascination with scientific devices, love of music, the theater and books, all mingled with his marital disharmonies and sexual adventuring. He was interested in everything, including his own errant behaviour, and he held nothing back. His compulsion to write it all down, without guilt or much analysis, has a naive quality which is charming. "Thence away to . . . my bookseller's and there . . . bought that idle, roguish book, *L'escolle des Filles*, which I have bought in plain binding . . . because I resolve, as soon as I have read it, to burn it, that it may not stand in the list of books, nor among them, to disgrace them if it should be found." But he recorded his reading of this lewd book and its destruction in his diary. His criticisms of the theater, closed during Cromwell's reign, were firmly wrong. He dismissed *The Rivals* and found *A Midsummer Night's Dream* "the most insipid ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life."

Page one of Pepys' diary starts by telling us that his wife Elizabeth has resumed her menses, thus disappointing their hope for a child. In the same paragraph he reports the indecision among General Monke, Admiral Lawson, the Rump Parliament and supporters of Charles II as to succession to rule. He shows that his diary will be a hodge podge of unexplained comments on what seizes his attention.

Pepys is most human when putting down Elizabeth, or finding other women. "I see that she is confirmed . . . that all that I do is by design . . . and the doing of [repairs] and anything else in the house is but to find her employment to keep her within and from minding her own pleasure. In which, though I am sorry to see she

minds it, is true enough to a great degree." Again "We fell very foul; and I do find she doth keep very bad remembrances of my former unkindnesses to her, and doth mightily complain of her want of money and liberty; which I will rather hear and bear the complaint of than grant the contrary." Again "I did strike her over her left eye such a blow as the poor wretch did cry out and was in great pain; but her spirit was such as to endeavour to bite and scratch me." Pepys promptly "made her leave crying, and sent for butter and parsley, and [made] friends presently with one another". He was abashed that the people of the house observed her black eye. Pepys did not justify his actions; he admired his wife for fighting back and refusing the role of victim.

A great pursuer of other women, from wives of tradesmen to young paid companions in his expanding household, Pepys was finally caught by Elizabeth: "My wife, coming upstairs suddenly, did find me imbracing [Deb] con my hand sub su coats. . . I was at a wonderful loss upon it, and the girl also; and I endeavored to put it off, but my wife was struck mute and grew angry, and as her voice came to her, grew quite out of order." After attacking Pepys with hot tongues, Elizabeth had him stay home with her in the evenings, reading. (This did not last.) Pepys admitted all to his diary, and intended that others should read it.

Robert Louis Stevenson saw Pepys as an "unparalleled figure in the annals of mankind" for three reasons: ". . . first, because he was a man known to his contemporaries in a halo of almost historical pomp, and to his remote descendants with an indecent familiarity, like a tap-room comrade; second, because he has outstripped all competitors in . . . a conscious honesty about himself; and third, because, being in many ways a very ordinary person, he has yet placed himself

before the public eye with such a fullness and such an intimacy of detail as might be envied by a genius like Montaigne." "There never was a man nearer to being an artist, who yet was not one." Pepys was too extroverted to be an artist: he was a great observer and commentator. He lacked an inner life, lived close to the surface, and readily forgave himself, convinced that temptation had best be indulged immediately in order to get on with work. The volumes of Pepys' diary reside in a special library at Magdalene College, Cambridge, lovingly leatherbound as when Pepys willed them to his alma mater. His shorthand has long been translated into English prose. It was never intended to prevent us from knowing his uninhibited self.

Surely among us this evening there are diarists. I am one, for the past twenty years. Why did we begin? What categories enfold us? I consider myself a chronicler, (not a creator, traveler, apologist, pilgrim, or prisoner), with a bit of confessor thrown in. I am not so honest with myself as Pepys. Do we ever reread our writing? I did, in part, for this essay. Is our writing both a compulsion and a satisfaction? If we prefer not to be published, who are we writing for? The conventional answer is one's grandchildren, when they are grown, and our immediate circle, which we skewer with our pens, is history. Here am I, October 9, 2000:

"I feel the hot breath of extinction on the back of my neck these days. There are too many reminders - weakness in the legs clambering out of the bathtub, periodic arrhythmias, lying awake at 3:00 AM wondering what I have accomplished in life, contemplating the effort it would take to move out of this house to a smaller, more secure dwelling. So today I sat down and figured out a new

will " . . . "The Chit Chat Club met tonight at the City Bar and Grill, a block from Pacific Bell Park on Third Street. Nineteen of us were present. Buzz Thompson, professor of law at Stanford gave a paper on *The Tragedy of the Commons*, pointing out how public and private interests deplete our common resources selfishly, while paying lip service to conservation. He referred to fishing, the use of ground water, and the pollution/warming of the atmosphere. He was pessimistic about solutions. The paper was well done, but it certainly viewed man as irrational in preferring short term convenience to longer term gains. The legal model of the 'reasonable man' is being replaced by a less flattering psychological model."

There are racier entries, but this bland blend of private and public concerns will have to conclude this essay.

Richmond Prescott
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