

Personal diary (the)

Philippe Lejeune

Sam Ferguson (trad.)

Unlike letters, which always have an addressee and which, with the help of their rhetorical content, fairly quickly made the transition from the status of ordinary writing to that of an *œuvre*, the diary remained for a long time quite separate from the literary field and personal expression. Its practice goes back to the very origins of writing and the calendar : a minimal definition would be a *series of dated traces*. It is an aide-mémoire noted on a day to day basis : a record of data, a simple archive. It first gathered, in ancient times, the collective memory of states, administration, or commerce, on more or less transient supports, wax tablets or papyrus. Its history has two principal aspects, which are more or less related : the change in material supports, and the change in the domains in which it was used. Until the Renaissance, all diaries were collective and public, and very few have survived from this early period. Neither the daily examination of one's conscience promoted in Greco-Roman civilisation, from Pythagorus to Marcus Aurelius, nor Christian confession adopted this form.

From the 'private'…

At the end of the Middle Ages, the conditions gradually emerged that would make a *personal* diary possible. In the sixteenth century, the arrival of paper in Europe finally provided a durable and practical support for ordinary writings, while the invention of the mechanical clock, which was one of the origins of industrial civilisation, gradually overturned people's relation to time and raised the possibility of using writing to manage one's time. From this point the history of the diary is one of a progressive privatisation, individualisation, and finally interiorisation of a form that was previously collective and

public. Businesses and families started to act like states in miniature, keeping their own accounts, recording their daily history, passing on their archives. In the modern period in France, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, a huge 'paper memory' developed, undertaken by private citizens in a more or less collective context : family books or *livres de raison* kept by the head of the family, chronicles of national or local life kept by bit players in that history, travel accounts (these were the only ones to be published, rewritten from diaries which were themselves often not conserved), but also the reading notes and working papers of intellectuals and writers, and records of letters sent and received (copies of letters), which were thereby transformed into a sort of diary. In France, unlike in predominantly Protestant parts of Europe (England, Germany), Catholic religion acted more as an inhibitor than a catalyst for this general movement of daily inscription. One exception was the diary of spiritual experience, whereas the regular practice of a diary for examining one's conscience was discouraged, since it was suspected of leading to self-indulgence : one must not 'preen' oneself. Very few long daily diaries have survived from this period : those of Gilles de Gouberville (1521–1578), a Norman squire, and Jean Héroard (1551–1628), doctor to Louis XIII, seen to be exceptions : they are meticulous diaries, recording hour by hour, for years on end, the exercise of a profession rather than of a person's experiences, but they are nonetheless the surviving remnants of a practice that was encouraged and presumably quite widespread.

… to the 'interior'

Around the middle of the eighteenth century, from the 1760s onwards, the practice of the diary started to undergo a process of personalisation. The individual was no longer only the writer of the diary, but became the diary's subject and addressee as well. The diary then accommodated concerns about health, the management of one's time, the expression of affects (friendship, love, conflict), personal reflections, and deliberation about projects : it became the 'logbook' of the individual. As a corollary to this development, the idea emerged of the diary as being secret, in opposition to the 'public' character of the printed newspaper, which appeared in the seventeenth century (the French language refers to both the diary and the newspaper by the word 'journal'). Long before Benjamin Constant, diarists such as Philippe de Noircarmes (in 1775–1777), Rétif de la Bretonne (from 1785), and Alexandre Brongniart (1796) wished to protect their diary from the curiosity of their close acquaintances, whether by means of locks, codes, or written warnings. At the same time as the diary was becoming individualised, it was also becoming feminised (just as epistolary writing had done in the previous generation), and it entered the domains of education and literature. Parents and educators now kept diaries of their children's education, and particularly encouraged their daughters to keep a diary from

their first communion onwards, to improve their morality and their written style : this led to the diary taking on a feminine association over the course of the nineteenth century which continues to the present, where we still find the practice of giving little girls diaries with locks on them. Also from this time the diary was able to become a workshop for the creation of an *œuvre*, or even to take the place of an *œuvre*, as it did for Jospeh Joubert, or become a laboratory of psychological research, as it did for Maine de Biran. The fact remains that this proliferation of the personal diary from the 1760s onwards took place without reference to any previous model (each diarist forged their own path in their own way), nor with any thought of a subsequent publication : no personal diary had been published.

Towards literature

The diary was still in a state of innocence, at the threshold of literature. It would remain in this state more or less up to the point when the first posthumous publications, in the middle of the nineteenth century (particularly those of Eugénie and Maurice de Guérin in 1862), would challenge the idea that the diary, being incapable of composition (it is written without knowledge of how the text will end), without style (it is forbidden to edit it), and devoted to banal statements, cannot become an *œuvre*. Over the course of the nineteenth century, as well as the tradition of keeping diaries that accompany an activity of creation while themselves keeping hidden (such as those of Michelet or Delacroix), some writers conceived of their diaries from the outset as diary-*œuvres*, either in the form of testimony (Victor Hugo's *Choses vues* [*Things Seen*] and the Goncourt brothers' *Mémoires de la vie littéraire* [*Memoirs of Literary Life*]), or in the form of introspection (Amiel, Marie Bashkirtseff). The diary's entry into the literary realm was facilitated and legitimised by the parallel development of the diary novel (a novel written in the form of a diary), which emphasised the diary's fragmentary, allusive, repetitive writing while incorporating it in a classical narrative form with a beginning, middle, and end. The year 1887, which saw the publication (albeit abridged) of diaries by Marie Bashkirtseff (who had died in 1884) and the Goncourt brothers (published by Edmond de Goncourt, who was still alive), marked a turning point in the history of the 'intimate' diary : from this point it was in the public sphere and was the subject of disputes between its supporters (Anatole France) and its enemies (Ferdinand de Brunetière's essay of 1888, 'La Littérature personnelle' ['Personal Literature'], which attacked the diary's insignificance and indecency). With the publication of diaries by Stendhal, Benjamin Constant, and others in the following years, the diary henceforth appeared to be a real genre, lending itself to the endeavours of young people wishing to make their own entry into literature (André Gide, Pierre Louÿs).

Public or private ?

The next step was for the writer to publish their own journal in serial form, as it was being written, thereby combining the practice of private writing initiated in the eighteenth century with the regular publication of the newspaper initiated in the seventeenth century. This was the case for Léon Bloy from the 1890s, for André Gide (sporadically, until he gathered most of his diary in a publication in Gallimard's 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade' series in 1939), for Julien Green (more regularly), and now for Renaud Camus, who since 1987 has published his diary for each year with a short delay. Is publication compatible with the 'intimate' quality of the diary, and does it necessarily involve self-censorship ? There is no doubt that the best way to write freely is to publish posthumously. The diaries of Henri-Pierre Roché and Helen Hessel, Jehan-Rictus (153 unpublished volumes), the 'Journal particulier' ['Private diary'] of Paul Léautaud (in the process of being published), are good examples of the use of this freedom, both to write freely about others and to reveal one's own sex life. Posthumous publication, since it offers a certain guarantee of sincerity, also contributes to the value of the comparative readings that have now become possible between the various diaries surrounding André Gide and the *Nouvelle Revue française* in the inter-War period : diaries by Charles Du Bos, Roger Martin du Gard, Maria van Rysselberghe, Eugène Dabit, Pierre Hébrard. Louis Guilloux, and many others. Today, in contrast to posthumous publication, which creates an insurmountable distance between diarist and reader, and gives a certain advantage to the latter (the reader alone knows how the story ends), the phenomenon of instant publication on the Internet brings the diarist and reader into such close proximity that they almost collide. For the first time, a diary can be read almost at the moment when it is written, with the same ignorance of the future, and also for the first time, the reader can post comments in response. This triple-hybrid of diary, correspondence, and publication produces, in the urgency of the present moment, a new type of frenzied sociability, which one might wish to escape by taking shelter… in the solitude of the notebook.

A universal practice, a modest artistic *œuvre*

While the diary became a literary genre (even if it is still considered only a minor genre), it is also a practice, which became gradually more democratic and widespread throughout the whole French population from the nineteenth century, as educational standards improved. For adolescents, it is particularly associated with girls, but from adulthood it concerns both sexes equally. In some cases, although this is rare, a diary is kept over a whole lifetime. More often, a diary is kept at a time of crisis, an ordeal, illness, political engagement, or war (thousands of diaries were kept in the trenches of the

First World War). It can also accompany a favourite activity (diaries of education, travel, reading, gardening…) or a work of creation (writers' diaries of their literary writing, artists' sketchbooks). In every case, the diary is not only a text : the choice of material support (notebooks or loose sheets of paper), methods and variations in writing over time or according to one's mood, the inclusion of drawings or sketches, ornaments and photographs, attached documents, letters, or various objects, all of these establish the unicity of the moment and the person, and make the diary, in its own way, into a unique artistic *œuvre*, certainly a modest one, but truly *personal*.

Bibliographie

Braud Michel, *La Forme des jours : Pour une poétique du journal personnel*, Paris, Seuil, 2006.

Didier Béatrice, *Le Journal intime*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1976.

Girard Alain, *Le Journal intime*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1963.

Gusdorf Georges, *Lignes de vie*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1990, vol. 2.

Lejeune Philippe, *Aux origines du journal personnel : France, 1750-1815*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2016.

Lejeune Philippe and Catherine Bogaert, *Un journal à soi : Histoire d'une pratique*, Paris, Textuel, 2003.

Leleu Michèle, *Les Journaux intimes*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1952.

Pachet Pierre, *Les Baromètres de l'âme. Naissance du journal intime*, Paris, Hachette, 2001.

Simonet-Tenant Françoise, *Journal personnel et correspondance (1785-1939) ou les affinités electives*, Louvain-la-Neuve, Academia-Bruylant, 2010.

Simonet-Tenant Françoise, *Le Journal intime : Genre littéraire et écriture ordinaire*, Paris, Téraèdre, 2004.

Pour citer cet article :

Philippe Lejeune, « Personal diary (the) », trad. Sam Ferguson de l'article « Journal personnel » (*Dictionnaire de l'autobiographie*, dir. F. Simonet-Tenant avec la collab. de M. Braud, J.-L. Jeannelle, P. Lejeune et V. Montémont, Paris, Champion, 2017, p. 457-460), dans *EcriSoi*, « Dictionnaire en ligne », 2021, URL : `https://ecrisoi.univ-rouen.fr/bibliotheques/dictionnaires/668d2a3f499d390012456c05`, page consultée le 2 novembre 2026.