



Donald Morrill

An Industrious Enchantment

You open your late Aunt Charlotte's bottom desk drawer and find there two sheaves of manuscript, one her unpublished novel or collection of verse, the other her journal. Which would you read first? And which would you read if you only had time or opportunity for one?

Most of us would choose the latter, I think, for good literary, and non-literary, reasons. Ask anyone what makes a diary, or journal, literature and most likely you'll be told . . . well, the quality of the writing . . . and perhaps as an afterthought: The writer. And most of the literary criteria then offered in elaboration will serve equally well for describing the aesthetic virtues of fiction or poetry. That's because those aesthetic qualities originate in those genres, which have no other things to purvey in the pleasure trade, no other means to claim our attention and justify their existence.

But a journal—and letters, too, in their own way—comes into being under an altogether different, and crucial, understanding with contingency. It starts anywhere, commencing from the brink of 'never having been,' and it remains on the cusp of 'nothing more'—until it founders at any moment or halts, most often without conclusion. It's unjustified, formally organic, if not technically boundless then potentially vast and inchoate by powers of ten and, despite the classification systems of scholarly explainers, a singular artifact; and it's first of all not a 'work' . . . but an apparatus, an instrument for an outpouring of occasions, for a faith (or faithlessness) enacted and a betrayal inscribed. Home to the crux, the crisis, the reversal . . . to the vision, the reckoning, the search . . . habit, subterfuge, practice, refuge,

workshop, playground, deception; it's a display of stamina and urge, perhaps a type of substance abuse, spurred by an industrious enchantment.



A journal is automatically authentic, even if it seems a strained attempt to present an idealized or desired self. It demonstrates being in time. The life is made into an emblem (a pageant of emblems) to gain standing, separated for awhile, from the general vanishing. The manuscript is the object of this activity, and its form arises, if anywhere, in the cadence of its maker's application. The writing itself is always an event, a train of events, as it is not in fiction and very rarely in poetry. Thus, the poignancies of the journal's white spaces. And the preeminent business of the journal's focus, its patterns of preoccupation, what it notices (which is how we presume to know its author). The journal may have revisions but no drafts, and it cannot help but reveal. Its openings haunt. It lets anything in—and almost nothing. Nearly everything escapes it, and it gives as many second chances as the writer is willing to pursue. It always plots against its maker—it's only plot, really—and no more than when she has something to hide. It shows how she enslaves herself and her imagination. Sooner or later it must mortify her.

By these lights, a fiction is flat. Even if composed over twenty years, it seems to have written itself in a moment. It doesn't occur, doesn't allow us to witness the phrases instructing the writer about the plenitude of existence, nor the sentences, in their shapes, becoming relics of motions and the paragraphs, bits of chronological bone. How much a vividly rendered scene or reflection provide the illusion that the journal is capturing reality!—as though details compel existence to crowd in and pay attention to the enormities between entries. If fiction or the poem can make us feel less alone in time, the journal, or diary, invite us to feel even more admitted to otherness, to the reputed privacy of one.



Aunt Charlotte's journal, your parent's, your lover's. The tender little books begun by a child. . . or those taken on by dark days, going finally blank with the mustering out of the army, returning from mission, coming at last ashore, getting well and checking out. The great artist's diary, the public figure's, the criminal's. Each is a performance—a performed privacy, perhaps—for no more than the immediate audience, the diarist herself . . . and maybe her future self. Perhaps her future self and another.

How much does she reread as he goes, how much does she add or delete? She talks to herself, to another, to no one in particular; she plays with words, enjoys a tone. Typically mentioned are the maladies and bodily functions, moods (usually dire), quick exchanges of dialogue (witty, one hopes), audacious generalizations about places and people (again, witty, one hopes) and gossip. Perhaps she's trying to make herself enviable to herself or, like those Puritans of old, trying to elect herself behind her own back. But even in chronicling her creative struggles, she's documenting more and other.

We readers seek in this the tang of the real and the confirmation of an illusion. We're delighted by a journal's prescience and its reassurances that others are extraordinary, or banal and twee. By instructing us in another's solitude, it confirms our bereftness and the glory of our self-absorption. We can also forget ourselves in someone else's suffering, in their incredible historic circumstances. We can ask ourselves what we would do in their shoes, which may be like asking no one.

Or perhaps we read on because the journal doesn't ask much of us, ostensibly—only that we pay more attention to its silences and leaps. How little a person changes in a year or two, or three—yet there's room for the sudden conversion and for contradiction.

That said, the journal with literary qualities urges us to rehearse better the dress of our thought, to perceive more and consider these perceptions for the register, and abjure petite problem-making and solving, flower-sniffing despair, the *Me* poisoned by uninspired leisure, polisher of official feelings.

These are confidences, but also confidences from the language to us, that may well exclude the author.



Intrusion is inherent in all this, built into the journal's very nature. Its maker knows that its originating exclusivity, and the purposes stemming therefrom, will be violated, if it survives. And that's where the literary comes in, if it comes in at all. Literature is determined by strangers. In the end, it's their possession, if anyone's. The "violation" of making the journal public leads to the possible transmutation of its status into literature. Its intimate functions must be superseded by helping strangers abide in the credible while partaking of those literary qualities we all know so well. By definition, such private operations and agendas don't exist in fiction and poetry. When reading a diary we are always reading invaded text (and, if published, one that has been dispossessed of its original integrity and character through editing, excerpting, the elimination of dates and such). The reader's incursion (even if sought out—hired out, as it were, by an author publishing multiple volumes while alive) is part of the native interest. Such never occurs in fiction and poetry. These genres have no contingency to witness. There's no outside to the text, of which we, the readers, are a part and a participant.

So back to that drawer. Whatever your choice, Aunt Charlotte's journal has always had a future, a potential doubled life. Her novel or poetry book—no. Even more than the journal, fiction and poetry are unjustifiable. A diary has existential standing; Aunt Charlotte was here, and if it is boring, well then, that's that. But a dull novel or poem insults everyone's interest. Her fiction may find its way to publication, or not. It may be forgotten; it may be mislaid, tossed out, even destroyed, but that journal—almost never! Not knowingly. By its very nature, it's always been waiting—even in fear—for its second reader, the invader. However circumscribed, however neglected or obscure, its afterlife is a public life. It waits for that, just as its blank page once sat before dear Aunt Charlotte, waiting for her to explain herself, imperious as the unburdened can be. Just as it could be nothing, in the end, without her.