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The uses and enchantments of the writer's notebook

Abstract:

This paper examines the writer's notebook to ask: why does it persist as such an effective generative tool? Drawing primarily on the work of Michael Taussig and Roland Barthes, while focusing on the ways in which writers have themselves described their experience of using journals, it examines the notebook as a remarkably polyvalent and talismanic text. In its first part it explores the difference, often strongly marked by writers, between the journal and diary, arguing that it is exactly the notebook's 'album'-like quality of fragmentation and interchangeability, which bothered Barthes, that creates its value for writers. In its second half, it examines the different discursive or formal strands typically found within the notebook: its 'extractive realist' (Gibson 2009) techniques for briefly recording the 'real' in ways that transform it for creative use; its curation of quotes, which descends from the Renaissance commonplace book, as a means of professional self-fashioning; and its appeal as a physical object representing an enchanted promise of creativity. It concludes that the notebook's longevity and energy derive from the constant juxtaposition of these often-contradictory elements, which create the ongoing quality of 'something else' that writers so often remark upon.

Biographical note:

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A 'placenta'. A 'bed of detail'. A 'seedbed', a 'second brain', 'a workshop for the writer's soul'. A 'fetish', a 'tip of the iceberg' or 'dry tinder' [1]. These are descriptions writers have used to convey the function and generative power of their notebooks. The writer's notebook is 'not strictly a form or a genre', as the editors of *The Poet's Notebook: Excerpts from the*

Notebooks of Contemporary American Poets point out (Kuusisto et al 1995: xiv). Its definition and functions are slippery and sometimes paradoxical: a notebook will frequently incorporate multiple strands of spontaneous runs of prose, fragments of anticipated new work, recorded speech or observation, curated quotations, analysis of work habits, exhortation of an authorial self and even, though rarely, diaristic entries. Yet it is precisely this looseness and multimodality that make the notebook a worthy object of study.

Dustin Illingworth notes that the staid words 'journal' and 'notebook' mask the wild energy of the notebook, with its 'interbred' and 'inextricable' elements, at once elegant and violent, and its capacity to be both 'supremely meditative and utterly marginal' (Illingworth 2016). As a writer who has kept notebooks for over two decades I am fascinated by the notebook as a hybrid and contradictory space, valuable for its qualities of spontaneity, experimentation and fragmentation, and an often compulsive discipline with deep roots in past textual practices. Although notebooks do not constitute a genre, I am fascinated by their similarities. Comparing my own, generated spontaneously as part of my own working life, to other writers', it is striking and affirming to observe many formal resemblances. As the quotes at the beginning of this essay suggest, writers also speak in remarkably similar ways about their notebooks, cherishing them for their gloriously impure mishmash of generic elements, their existence outside the formal barriers of public utterance, and their fecund generative qualities. Like these other writers, I regard my notebooks as a necessary alternate working space to my finished work. And like them, I also observe a quality of aura, or shadow, around my notebooks, which, along with their unique power as both material and quasi-magical objects, endows them with a dynamic energy that exceeds what I write within them.

While the diary form has been examined as a 'capacious hold-all' (Paperno 2004: 571), the writer's notebook is surely even more expansive and multivalent – yet I am unaware of anyone, apart from Michael Taussig, who has attempted to analyse its supple magic. In this essay I will explore the writer's notebook as a unique type of text which derives its meaning from what is written in it but also in the way writers use and regard it. Because of this focus on their formal similarities and uses I will not provide a close textual analysis of writers' notebooks, or try to discern their quality as published or publishable texts; while this would be a rich source for further study, I am not interested in the large body of creative writing texts that instruct aspiring writers on the art of journal-keeping. Instead, drawing on a range of professional writers' notebooks and extracts – and particularly on authors' descriptions of their uses – my goal is to tease out these contradictory functions and to think about how journals serve us as writers through their staging of creative tensions.

In keeping with the nature of the notebook, this essay is conceived of as an 'Album' (Barthes 2001b: 492), in which each of its sections celebrates a different function or discursive strand of the notebook, without attempting to reconcile them. Nevertheless, in identifying the ways in which the notebook 'inhabits and fills out hallowed ground between meditation and production' (Taussig c2011: 9), I hope to go some way towards answering another question that hovers over this essay: why does this form, which is in some ways so old-fashioned,

persist as such an enduring and originative part of so many writers' practice, including my own?

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The notebook is the place where we encounter the 'immediate, provisional, and searching presence of the writer' (Kuusisto et al 1995: xiv). Yet many writers make a quite forceful distinction between the self-revelatory practice of the diary – the regular chronicling of events and thoughts, which we perhaps associate most strongly with the private self – and the notebook, a more loose assemblage distinguished by its ongoing openness and spontaneity. In her essay 'On Keeping a Notebook' (1974), Joan Didion most famously describes the role of the diary as a factual record of what she has been doing or thinking; a discipline that she admits eludes her. 'When I have tried dutifully to record a day's events,' she writes, 'boredom has so overcome me that the results are mysterious at best' (Didion 1974: 115). Her notebook, on the other hand, is 'an indiscriminate and erratic assemblage with meaning only for its maker' (117). This private or coded quality, and the brevity of its entries – "That woman Estelle ... is partly the reason why George Sharp and I are separated today." *Dirty crepe-de-Chine wrapper, hotel bar, Wilmington RR, 9:45 a.m. August Monday morning*' (113) – also distinguishes it from the more polished or writerly journal, which Didion describes as a 'structural conceit for binding together a series of graceful *pensées*' (117).

In a recent interview with author John Freeman, Helen Garner similarly dismisses the diary (a place to get rid of 'something that's making you unhappy' [qtd in Freeman 2016]) as being a less spacious and generous form than the notebook. Looking back at diaries she had written before 1980, Garner found 'a consciousness that was repellent to me' (qtd in Freeman 2016). 'I was ashamed of myself,' she tells Freeman (2016). 'I thought, *Jesus, you're such a whinger*' (qtd in Freeman 2016). By contrast, in an earlier interview Garner described the small notebook she carried with her everywhere as a repository of:

little crumbs that I pick up from everywhere. Recipes. Titles. Things that I overhear in the street. Quotes from what I'm reading. Details of people's appearance that I happen to notice. That kind of thing. (qtd in Grenville & Woolfe 1993: 61)

Although she used separate notebooks for developing the five main characters of her novel *The Children's Bach* (1984), Garner distinguished them from this general notebook, which was both driven and joyfully purposeless. She kept this notebook

without any particular aim except that I can't bear to let things get past me... Small things are so fascinating and precious that I can't bear to let them go. So I write them down as they strike me. (qtd in Grenville & Woolfe 1993: 61)

Later in the interview she also observed that her notebook was the repository for 'that part of yourself which is not amenable to organisation or routine or even conscious control' (qtd in Grenville & Woolfe 1993: 62), although the assiduousness of her note-keeping might seem to contradict this statement.

Similar disavowals of the diary as daily chronicle are made by the authors in *The Poet's Notebook*, a book of excerpts from the notebooks of contemporary American poets. Each has written a small introduction to the excerpts they have provided – yet finding a term that fits their working books proves challenging. Marvin Bell thinks of diaries disparagingly as 'the writings of someone awaiting rescue' (qtd in Kuusisto et al 1995: 3); however, he prefers the word 'journal' for his 'prose spillover' because it sounds more 'helpless and private' than 'notebook' with its 'civic and civil' connotations (3). In black-and-red bound notebooks from the People's Republic of China, Rita Dove records 'anything interesting enough to stop me in my tracks' (qtd in Kuusisto et al 1995: 13), which might include 'the slump of a pair of shoulders in a crowd, a newspaper entry, a recipe, "chewy" words like *ragamuffin* or *Maurice*' (13). JD McClatchy describes his notebook as a 'recipe' and the journal as the '*plat du jour*', while expressing a preference for a third 'commonplace book', a 'ledger of envies and delights' in which he 'scribbles consistently' (qtd in Kuusisto et al 1995: 153). For Donald Justice, a notebook is 'for jotting down unfinished ideas' (qtd in Kuusisto et al 1995: 110). He goes on to speculate that there may even be a kind of idea that is a 'notebook idea' (qtd in Kuusisto et al 1995: 110). Such ideas 'may in fact have their own charm, their own seductiveness, just as the fragments of unfinished poems sometimes do' (qtd in Kuusisto et al 1995: 110).

As well as stressing their unfinished and ongoing qualities, writers' descriptions of their notebooks are often distinguished by the contradictory accounts they give of their pleasures. On the one hand, the notebook is a place of freedom and spontaneity – even to write 'shit' as writer and creative writing teacher Natalie Goldberg notes in her manual for writers, *Writing Down the Bones* (1986: 18). On the other hand, authors often express a level of *drivenness* about keeping a notebook, which appears to still require discipline – though of a different nature than the diary. Like Garner, Didion confesses that her urge to write things down as they strike her is 'compulsive' (1974: 114). 'Keepers of private notebooks,' she observes, 'are a different breed altogether, lonely and resistant rearrangers of things, anxious malcontents, children afflicted apparently at birth with some presentiment of loss' (114).

However, it is important to note that for some writers, maintaining such distinct terminologies is not so necessary. Susan Sontag wrote about the diaries kept by other authors, such as Cesare Pavese and Albert Camus, in *Against Interpretation* (2001) as well as keeping almost a hundred herself, using the terms journal, diary and notebook interchangeably (Maunsell 2011: 4). Nor did she exclude diaristic functions from her own journal, having developed early on a vision of it as a place of self-assessment and self-interrogation: a kind of intellectual autobiography, in which a writer, over her career, could build up a persona. (She disliked Camus's published *Notebooks* because they were not self-revelatory.) Nevertheless,

Sontag's own 'diaries' were not the coherent daily chronicles this might lead us to expect, but 'unusually multivalent texts' (Maunsell 2011: 2), consisting of the loose, staccato and heterogenous: lists of slang and planned reading, excerpts from work she admired, titles for projects, scraps of memory, commands to herself, ideas for stories and even small moments of meta-reflection on the diary or journal form. While her journal recorded her actual, daily life she noted it also 'offer[ed] an alternative to it' (Sontag 2008 167). Sontag's purposeful sense of her journal as (at least in part) a tool for practising the writerly persona distinguishes it from the diary, seeming to draw it into the loose definition I have established of the notebook as a heterogeneous, fragmented and multi-stranded text.

Franz Kafka's attempt in 1910 to draw a fundamental distinction between his 'diary' and his notebook for fiction is helpful in trying to establish the dance of subjectivities that distinguishes the two private forms, diary and notebook, from one another (1988, 2016). Within a year, Kafka found he couldn't maintain the separation, crossing the border into fiction in his diary before he was able to observe the boundary; a movement Stanley Corngold describes in suggestively generative terms as one 'from self-questioning to self-combustion' (2004: 30). Kafka's response was to vow to not give up his diary: 'I must hold on here,' he wrote:

it is the only place I can. I would gladly explain the feeling of happiness which, like now, I have within me from time to time. It is really something effervescent ... that fills me completely with a light, pleasant quiver. (qtd in Corngold 2004: 19)

And yet one might argue that a diary in which reflective writing that carries the 'dead weight of the empirical subject' (as Corngold puts it) mixes with increasingly complex stabs at fiction, is perhaps no longer a diary but a notebook. The tremulous happiness and fizz that Kafka found within its pages may lie in the coexistence of private and more polished voices: existing precisely because of, rather than in spite of, the notebook's gloriously impure form.

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I have, I realise, only once glimpsed the inside of a close writer friend's notebook; it felt strangely intimate, in the context of writing this essay, to even ask a writer friend of twenty-five years if he kept one. Certainly, when I show PowerPoints of the two notebooks I kept while writing my novel, *The Service of Clouds* (1997), to my classes, with their fragments of dialogue, diagrams, quotations, and questions to myself, I feel oddly exposed – and I would never share the pages from my general notebooks, even though they contain no diaristic entries. Perhaps for this reason it is actually quite difficult, without descending into the archives, to find writers' notebooks in a raw state. In putting together this essay, I have had to rely primarily on two publications: *Making Stories*, in which Australian writers discuss drafting their novels, while sometimes providing small sections from their notebooks; and *The Poet's Notebook*. And, of course, my own bound notebooks and online writing diaries, in which – in their strange enjambments of quotes, scraps of remembered speech and

observation, and brief visions illuminating planned or future work – I find surprising, and often comforting, correspondences with those of these other writers.

The utility and power of the notebook derives for many writers from the fact that it is never intended for publication. 'I wrote these notes for myself only,' Lisel Mueller remarks, 'whether they are of value to anyone else, I can't say' (qtd in Kuusisto et al 1995: 212). There are exceptions, of course. Sontag clearly envisaged her diaries as semi-public documents from an early age. Late in his life, John Cheever began to envisage publishing his journals and approached his family to seek their blessing; while his journal entries rarely refer to the passage of public life, they are remarkable for their coherence and lack of fragmentation, as if Cheever had this public audience in mind – at the very least unconsciously – throughout his writing life. In an Australian context, one can read, edited into published form, the journal entries of Helen Garner, Murray Bail and (in novelised form) Beverley Farmer, though it is hard to know how distant these are from the originals.

Yet the question of whether the author at least unconsciously anticipates a readership beyond his or her own private use hovers constantly over the notebook and how it should be read, as it does over the diary. For Roland Barthes, in 'On Gide and His Journal' (first published in 1942) and 'Deliberation' (first published in 1979), the question of an implied reader is paramount. Barthes worried over whether Gide's journal was of sufficient quality and coherence to be classified as a complete 'Work': could it stand on its own if one didn't already have 'an initial curiosity as to the man?' (Barthes 2001a: 3). Barthes also read Gide's journal for what it revealed about the writer's oeuvre. Combing the journal for statements that would throw light on Gide's published work, Barthes was also inclined to take Gide at his word when he pronounced that he was only working on his books in order because he couldn't write them all at once. For Barthes, this was evidence of Gide's fully formed genius. Yet a broader textual or strategic reading (which I am attempting in this essay) might regard Gide's statement as a discursive convention that occurs repeatedly in writers' notebooks, in which authors attempt to articulate and make visible something about their own processes or writing lives to themselves ('The thought of joy must be my constant preoccupation'; 'Emerson, to be read only in the morning') (Gide 2000: 32; 33). Reading Gide's journals after first reading Barthes, it is surprising to discover how gloriously fragmentary and slippery they are: a mix of quotes, aphorisms, writerly posturing and self-review, and commentary on works read; how close they are, in their abutting of threads, to other writers' working notebooks.

When Barthes turns his attention to his own practice, he confesses – like Didion and Garner – that he cannot keep a diary. However, he fares no better with keeping a journal because, while he enjoys the initial spontaneity of writing 'unfettered raw material' (Barthes 2001b: 479), he finds, on rereading it, that the writing has 'spoiled' (479) like some delicate foodstuff that 'becomes unappetising from one day to the next' (479). Barthes's inability to escape the consciousness that he is always already writing for others and posterity defuses his

journal's usefulness so that he is haunted constantly by the question of whether it is 'worth the trouble' (Barthes 2001b: 480, original emphasis).

The reasons Barthes gives for his disappointment are nevertheless helpful in illuminating the ways in which notebooks can function positively for writers for whom they are an essential part of their private process. Without a public mission, Barthes writes, his journal is a 'discourse' ('a kind of written word according to a special code') and not a text (Barthes 2001b: 491). As an 'Album' and not a 'Work', its entries are interchangeable and '*infinitely suppressible*' (Barthes 2001b: 492). I would suggest that it is exactly this paradoxical formality (there are codes that must be observed) and openness (it is interchangeable and lacks direction) that constitute the notebook's potent magic.

This album-like quality, without the looming consciousness or necessary order of a finished Work, may be why so many writers observe that thumbing idly through the notebook is part of a ritual for jump-starting other writing. For Rita Dove, 'a small stack of notebooks is always at the ready for browsing. For me, it all begins with a notebook: it is the well I dip into for that first, clear drink' (qtd in Kuusisto et al 1995: 13). The notebook pages' detachment from a finished Work and from a defined writing self, allowing them to be leafed through, can spark creativity in a way that writing already embedded in a Work might not. A fugitive quality, linked to its paradoxical and mercurial nature, can be part of the creative pleasure of the notebook. 'From time to time I finger through [my notebooks],' Alice Fulton writes, 'wondering, What did I mean by that?' (qtd in Kuusisto et al 1995: 65).

The notebook's form, made up of attractively browsable and recombinable discourses, also helps further distinguish this useful private working text from a diary. In 1998, the French scholar of autobiography, Philippe Lejeune issued a call-out to readers of the *Magazine Littéraire* to write to him about their private diaries. Lejeune observed that the terms the forty-seven correspondents – 'ordinary' citizens rather than writers – used to describe them added up to a 'sort of poem':

Breath – the breath of life – flowing water – island – sheltered harbour – mirror – shattered mosaic – way-markers – laboratory – spinal column – crutch – safety-railing – magic ritual – crooning chant, litany – pen-pusher's occupation – message in a bottle – outlet – digestion – shitting – water-closet – cesspool – pus – masturbation – drug – cigarette – bomb – radioactivity – body – mummies – withered flowers – herbarium. (2009: 37)

If this is a 'poem', it's one that quickly degenerates into metaphors of closure, corruption and death. While one has to wonder whether the correspondents' self-selection from among readers of a literary journal or even certain aspects of the national temperament skewed Lejeune's sample, it is fascinating to observe how strikingly different these often negative descriptions are from the professional writers' descriptions of their notebooks with which I opened this essay. Half of Lejeune's correspondents characterised diary-keeping as a form of

wasteful, even excretive activity; others envisaged a certain level of containment or closure in their metaphors (harbour, mirror, island, safety-railing, message in a bottle) including the ultimate closure of desiccation or death (mummies, withered flowers, herbarium). By contrast, professional writers' metaphors for their notebooks as 'seedbeds' or 'wombs' suggest the notebook's vital importance as a space, freed from the diary's work of 'tracking the self in time' (Paperno 2004: 271), that is almost infinitely creative, productive, potential and ongoing; whose contents, under the right conditions, might burst into life or flame.

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How do authors themselves account for the generative quality of their notebooks? In contrast to the more fulsome diary, many relish the notebook's capacity to capture details in a compact way that not only allows them to be recalled but also expanded or enlivened. Revisiting the gnomic three-line entry in her notebook that begins "'That woman Estelle"...' (Didion 1974: 113), Didion traces the way in which it prompts an extraordinary rush of extra-textual detail. The location, she remembers, was a bar across from the Pennsylvania Railway Station in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1960 or 1961; the woman in the crepe-de-Chine wrapper, who had come down from her room above the bar for a beer, had separated from George that morning; the bartender was mopping the floor; a cat lay in a patch of sunlight cast through the open door – while another girl at the end of the bar, Didion herself, was also separating from the man beside her because of another woman. That girl, Didion, who was heading to lunch in New York, was wearing a plaid dress from Peck and Peck with its hem coming down; she was thinking about the empty nights ahead of her and wishing she had a safety pin and that she could talk to this other woman to 'compare Estelles' (113). In *Making Stories*, Helen Garner similarly recalled how a brief entry about a couple of 'heavy guys' (qtd in Grenville & Woolfe 1993: 62) she used to see sitting in a Darlington café allowed her to retrieve the mood that would imbue her story, 'A Vigil' in her novel *Cosmo Cosmolino*.

A notebook seems to encourage a shorthand process of storing certain details that will prompt further details later. Using a notebook, Garner stated, was not about learning to be more observant, but about helping 'to remember in detail what I notice' (qtd in Grenville & Woolfe 1993: 62). Trying to account for the 'rush of memory' (62) such entries could trigger, Garner suggested that the process touched on TS Eliot's 'objective correlative' – 'an image or a detail that summons up in a rush a whole attendant mood, or vibe' (qtd in Grenville & Woolfe 1993: 62). We might think of this acquired skill as a kind of 'extractive realism' similar to the haiku, in which whole systems of reality are expressed into partial or essential details (Gibson 2009) for a future writing self. Authors' observations in their notebooks are often noticeably terse and gnomic, such as those made by Murray Bail in the journal he kept as a young man in London: 'The smell of plumbers. Unlike anything above the earth' (1989: 21); 'Morning toast and these English towns: unfortunately related' (16). In the haiku's three concise lines, Ross Gibson suggests, messy existence is reduced to an 'essence'; a refined set of organised elements and shaping influences hold a larger world intensified and poised to act

as a 'startling trigger' to a mind 'primed to receive what lies beneath the surface' (Gibson 2009).

Yet the notebook's particular practice of attention and notation also appears to sit in a generative space between accurate recording and an anticipated future text. Like Garner, authors often take pains to define the notebook as more than a simple *aide-mémoire*, remarking on how the notes recorded inside it produce a surplus of associations – some of which might not have even been apparent at the time. Author and anthropologist Michael Taussig describes in almost mystical terms the way his notebooks transform the everyday:

into an underwater world in which things on the surface become transformed, rich, and strange. The notes in a notebook are what has been picked at and plundered from an underworld. They are of another order of reality altogether. (Taussig c2011: 4)

In trying to distinguish the notebook's 'Phantom' quality from the diary, Taussig suggests that its form – 'ungrammatical jottings and staccato burps and hiccups' (c2011: 11) – amplifies the shadow quality that Barthes was able to very occasionally find in the interstices of his diary. The notebook formalises the interstices of notation because it lies at the outer reaches of both language and order, representing 'the chance pole of a collection, rather than the design pole' (11). It is, almost impossibly, 'all interstices', 'like having an unconscious without a conscious' (11). Quoting WB Yeats, Taussig suggests that the use of blank space surrounding such entries is a self-conscious technique that further formalises casualness: 'To keep these notes natural and useful to me I must keep one note from leading on to another' (quoted in Taussig c2011: 11).

Too much detail, on the other hand, can be inimical to the creative process. Garner notes that she felt a debt early in her career to recording exactly what happened in her notebooks and incorporating these notes into her fiction. Writing *The Children's Bach*, she was 'sort of hooked on detail – I mean anxiously and obsessively collecting detail to use' (qtd in Grenville & Woolfe 1993: 62), but by the time the interview took place she didn't feel any more 'that I need to be so terribly exact, so precise in what I write down – like a good little girl taking neat dictation' (62). As her practice matured she became better at using her notebook:

I'm more likely now to take a stab at the right note, so that when I read it afterwards the same note will sound again, and remind me of a whole sequence of events, or moods. I think I'm learning to trust myself more, and not to be so anxious about getting it right on the spot. (qtd in Grenville & Woolfe 1993: 62)

The novelist Joan London described a similar process of evolution. 'I used to have big heavy notebooks,' London told interviewer Charlotte Wood, in which she kept quotes or thoughts or ideas for narrative and characters, 'and I used to write and write in them' (qtd in Wood 2016: 253). But now, she said:

I only want to catch them very lightly. I've got lighter and lighter. I get these notepads that you can buy for a dollar each. I've got pieces of paper ... pinned up or stuck on the wall or lying in little stacks everywhere. (qtd in Wood 2016: 253)

Within the notebook, a precise kind of memory system coexists with the partial transformation of the material to make it compatible with the writer's personal imaginary. Looking at her entry about Estelle, Didion writes that she has written it to remember – but 'exactly what was it I wanted to remember? How much of it actually happened? Did any of it?' (1974: 114). Similarly, she finds herself thinking of an entry about eating cracked crab on the day her father came home from Detroit in 1945, when she was ten. She was too young, she believes, to have been able to remember the crab. It must be an invention.

And yet it is precisely that fictitious crab ... that makes me see that afternoon all over again, a home movie run all too often, the father bearing gifts, the child weeping, an exercise of family love or guilt. Or that is what it was to me. (Didion 1974: 115)

Didion appears to be making a claim for the notebook's ability to encode erroneous detail to capture an 'ecstatic truth': a fabrication that is sometimes, as filmmaker Werner Herzog claims, able to produce 'an illumination, an ecstatic flash' (Herzog 2010: 7) that the 'merely factual' is not (1). Slippage between the real and unreal may account for the notebook's mysterious, amplified 'shadow' quality.

For a notebook to be generative, it may not even have to be opened and reread: the act of having consigned thoughts and detail to its pages can be enough. For Garner, the process of having written something down, even years ago, fixes it in her mind so that one day it will pop into her mind 'exactly when I need it' (qtd in Grenville & Woolfe 1993: 63). This reinforces the notebook's value in existing independently of any implied reader or any notion of the finished Work. When Wood observes that London doesn't keep her notes carefully ordered, London answers: 'No. I want them to be caught on the wing, not to be treasured' (qtd in Wood 2016: 253). She doesn't reread old notebooks because she wants to save her 'main energy for the work' (253).

For Taussig, the sheer existence of the notebook turns it into an 'enchanted' object. (Taussig c. 2011: 9) 'Simply knowing it is there,' he writes, 'provides the armature of truth, of the "this happened", which, like a rock climber's crampons, allows you to scale great heights' (Taussig c2011: 9). Taussig's metaphor of an 'armature' (an open framework for a sculpture but also an organ such as thorns) is echoed by other writers who use similar images of scaffolding or platforming. It suggests an additional, empowering quality about the way a notebook arms the writer to deal with the 'real', perhaps even before it is opened. While the notebook is in some ways a mnemonic structure – supplying or consigning to memory details in such a way that they are 'activated' for their use in a potential work – it can also be considered as a kind of potential form, the ghostly promise or foundation of more formal imaginative work that may take place later. 'I don't invent a book out of thin air,' Garner told

her interviewers in *Making Stories* (qtd in Grenville & Woolfe 1993: 61). 'I need ... a bed of detail ... before I can start to make something up' (qtd in Grenville & Woolfe 1993: 61). 'Working notebooks are reassuring,' Alice Fulton concurs, 'because it's easier to start from something rather than nothing' (qtd in Kuusisto et al 1995: 43). The notebook may also act as an 'armature' or defensive structure because it stages what we do in the deepest writing process: it anticipates and rehearses the more mysterious process of imagination itself.

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Leafing through my own notebooks, it is fascinating to see the presence of a distinctive 'style' of noticing: an aesthetic or ideological consistency. But is this something that I bring to the notebook, through my unconscious, or something that the notebook, as a discipline, has shaped? For all the lip service that we authors give to our notebooks as places where we can be spontaneous or uninhibited – to give vent, as the poet Anselm Hollo writes, to 'indefensible utterances' (qtd in Kuusisto et al 1995: 89) – the notebook or journal may also operate as the kind of 'technology of thought' envisaged by Michel Foucault: a set of techniques allowing the individual to effect a certain number of operations on his or her own body, soul, thoughts, conduct and way of being to achieve self-transformation in order to attain 'a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality' (Foucault 1988: 18). Does the notebook create a homogenising attitude to what I read, see and feel? And do I – in this private practice – conjure a *professional* self?

One of the strands that characterise the notebook is its sporadic use as a commonplace book: a curated selection of quotes taken from books read. The 'commonplace book' originated in the Renaissance, when school pupils were taught to select 'passages of interest for the rhetorical turns of phrase, the dialectical arguments, or the factual information' (Blair 1992: 541). The pupils contained and then copy the passages out in a special notebook, 'grouping them under appropriate headings to facilitate later retrieval and use, notably in composing prose of [their] own' (Blair 1992: 541). Along with quotes, pupils were instructed to record 'a wide range of *realia* or interesting bits of general information sorted under appropriate subject headings according to the topics and themes addressed' (Blair 1992: 542). As Desiderius Erasmus's rhetoric manual *Copia: Foundations of the Abundant Style* (1512) became a bestseller in Europe, students would depend on their commonplace books to furnish the abundance of material good writing required.

It is astonishing to think a practice that William Shakespeare and Michel de Montaigne relied upon has survived over five centuries. In the eighteenth century, John Locke would popularise a new indexing system for the commonplace books educated people were still using to record and annotate readings (along with miscellaneous material from recipes to pressed flowers). EM Forster would begin writing his *Commonplace Book* directly after the publication of *A Passage to India*, and it was, as one reviewer noted, 'at least as much diary, journal, letter, workbook, notebook, as it is an anthology of useful suggestive passages' (Cole

1970: 276). In 1970, WH Auden would publish an alphabetically arranged collection of quotes as *A Certain World*, which he called a 'sort of autobiography' (Cole 1970: 276).

Although Foucault did not write specifically about commonplace books, his analysis of their precursors, the ancient Greeks' *hupomnemata*: 'notebooks' of things read, thought, and felt, as a means of 'shaping the self' (Foucault 1997: 211), allows us to glimpse an even older genealogy for the strands of quotations in writers' notebooks. For Foucault, the interest of *hupomnemata* lay in the way they performed an opposite function to intimate journals. Having no confessional intent to bring forth the hidden depths of the soul, they acted instead as a kind of intellectual exoskeleton (or armature) intended to form and improve the thoughts of the writer, collecting the already-said 'for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self' (Foucault 1997: 208). The *hupomnemata*, Foucault emphasises, were not merely memory supports but vital frameworks for exercises, which, as Seneca insisted, must be 'planted in' the soul to form part of ourselves (Foucault 1997: 210) in order to establish as 'adequate and accomplished' (211) a relationship with the self as possible. This 'regular and deliberate practice of the disparate', Foucault noted, '[did] not rule out unification', which 'must be established in the writer himself' (212, 213).

Following Foucault, Ignacio Siles makes a case for early blogs as technologies that 'crystallised a set of practices of the self' (Siles 2012: 415) in order to constitute a new type of identity: that of the digital citizen. In the late 1990s a group of users created the 'weblog' (later, 'blog'). Explicitly rejecting older technologies of the self, especially diary writing, these bloggers preferred 'to reveal an oblique view of the self' (415) through what we might think of as digital commonplace books: constantly updated lists of links and quotations related to technology, the internet, and web design. Through the discipline of careful curation and annotation, they believed they could achieve self-transformation, discovering their own tastes and creative selves. As one put it, the 'cumulative effect [was] smartening' (416). Although public, these blogs anticipated contemporary creative writing textbooks which formalise the practice and codes of daily notebook keeping to reinforce a writerly identity, such as Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* (1994), and its accompanying workbook (2006) and 'morning pages' journal (2010), or Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* (1986), with its advice on writing down 'first thoughts' (7). The 'commonplace' strand of the notebook can thus be understood as a practice of assembling a plenitude of material that extends all the way back to the Greco-Roman era, but also a discipline through which we both form and come to know ourselves as writers.

The notebook also allows us to recognise reading and thinking *as work*. As Garner notes, 'it shows you that even when you think you are idle, just walking around and gazing at the world, you are actually working quite hard' (qtd in Grenville & Woolfe 1993: 62). It is striking how often writers' notebooks contain messages or exhortations from the writer to his or her writing self. 'This new writing: I want it to be an interweaving of visual images – more open, loose and rich, and free of angst', Beverley Farmer wrote (1990: 3). 'And if I keep a notebook this time as I go, it will grow side by side with the stories, like the placenta and the

baby in the womb' (3). While Cheever spent part of his time exploring his soul in his journal, we also find passages in which he summons future work through creative visualisation: 'and I think now of the months that I have longed to write a story that will be fine, that will be singing, that will have in it all kinds of lights and pleasures' (Cheever 2010: 39), and, 'What I am determined to get away from are set pieces, closed things, shut paragraphs' (96). Susan Sontag, in her journal, even listed her faults: 'I have a wider range as a human being than as a writer. (With some writers it's the opposite.) Only a fraction of me is available to be turned into art' (Sontag 2012: 9). Instead of reading these statements as revelations of the writer's inner self, we can understand them, through Foucault, as both discourses and practices demanded by the notebook to reinforce a professional writerly identity.

As much as writers' notebooks appear to offer the opportunity for free self-expression, they are also, at the same time, lifelong exercises in the 'art of living' acquired by *askēsis* or the 'training of the self by oneself', which Foucault traced back to ancient Greco-Roman culture (Foucault, 1997: 208). As Benjamin H Cheever, in his introduction to his father's collected journals, would observe, the miniature loose-leaf notebooks, which were workbooks for his fiction, 'were also the workbooks for his life' (Cheever 2010: xix).

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As Taussig's description of the notebook as a 'fetish, an object we hold so dear as to seem possessed by spiritual power' (Taussig c2011: 5) suggests, its efficacy may derive not only from the content recorded in its pages but also from its existence as a portable, emotionally laden, *physical* object. It is striking how many authors, myself included, take an almost superstitious pleasure in keeping bound notebooks rather than, or in addition to, computer files. Few writers approach the preciousness of English author Bruce Chatwin: his leather satchel, modelled on one owned by the French actor Jean-Louis Barrault and commissioned from an English saddler, contained his treasured *carnets moleskines*, black oilcloth-bound notebooks he would purchase from a *papeterie* in the Rue de l'Ancienne-Comédie in Paris. But most of us take sensual pleasure in a favourite type or brand of notebook. Walter Benjamin's blue book, for example, had 'the same colours as a certain pretty Chinese porcelain: its blue glaze is in the leather, its white in the paper and its green in the stitching' (Taussig c2011: 6).

For Taussig, the 'fetish' quality of the notebook lies in its 'world-historical joust between gift and commodity' (Taussig c2011: 7). The notebook, which often sits against the warmth of the author's body, also exists on the threshold of the market: an instrument of research that is also fetishised by its owner, object and more-than-object that also stands in for 'thought, experience, history, and writing' (9). This complicated relationship between notebook and market is embodied by the Moleskine phenomenon. In 1997, prompted by Chatwin's complaint that he could no longer source his notebooks, a small Milanese publisher, Modo&Modo, revived them as the Moleskine (which also became the company name); by 2014, more than seventeen million of these iconic notebooks were selling annually. By

successfully franchising its 'more-than-object' quality, through the association with Chatwin, the Moleskine became synonymous with creativity:

[A] product that not only worked well as functional tool, but that told a story about you, even if you never wrote on a single page. Like a Patagonia jacket or a Toyota Prius, it projected someone's values, interests, and dreams, even if those were divorced from the reality of their lives. (Sax 2018)

It became a 'mindstyle' product, according to Moleskine's CEO and the Interbrand CSO, whose 'aura ... transcended the object itself' (Berni & Ricca 2017).

This is, on the one hand, a typical example of the ways in which a global capitalist economy has continuously found ways to commodify artistic identity and practice. And yet the Moleskine enterprise, in its explicit branding, is useful in stripping the writer's notebook of its innocence as a wholly free or unconscious space. We may not write notebooks for others, but do we carry and preserve them, at least in part, as magic or enchanted advertisements of our creativity: our right to write? Their 'talismanic' function may extend to reinforcing our identity as members of a writing tribe. Conducting writing workshops, I used to be asked frequently what kind of notebook I used (I confess: handmade books from Florence early on, replaced by newsagency red-and-black Chinese notebooks), which would set off animated discussion of stationery and pens; although I've noticed more recently that this excitement is more likely to adhere to writing software like Scrivener and Endnote.

Nevertheless, after successfully creating an initial target audience of 'global nomads' (Sax 2015), Moleskine would establish itself within a few years among a quite different class of user: MIT students and academics, entrepreneurs, and 'other tech-industry fish', who valued it for its analog efficiency (Sax 2015). For these users, the small size and self-containment of the black notebook were tools for fighting 'vast time sucks' (Sax 2015) of even the most heralded productivity advances of the digital era, which often involve a new learning curve or exist a 'mere finger-swipe away' from online distractions (Sax 2015). This reminds us that the notebook has held on for so long as a tool for writers because it is so efficient: a portable, distraction-less, user-friendly, nurturing, and multi-functional technology that is yet to be entirely superseded. At the same time, the notebook is a distinctly modern and forward-looking form. Its 'interchangeability', which so troubled Barthes, perhaps even anticipated the lyric forms or recombinant narratives of fragments 'composed of bits, fragments, collagistically compiled and accumulated' (Menkedick 2014) that have surged in popularity over the last decade. It is also perfectly suited to a present in which 'Life ... – standing on a street corner, channel surfing, trying to navigate the Web – flies at us in bright splinters' (Shields 2010: 113).

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In writing this essay, my main aim has been to examine the many functions the notebook performs for writers, including myself. The writer's notebook is a form whose value rests, I

suggest, in its wonderful impurity; on the competing impulses it channels and the productive energy these generate between them.

The album-like notebook frees the voice from the Work and the public persona while, at the same time, its formal and discursive conventions, some of which date back to ancient systems, shape a homogenous self. The notebook acts as an efficient memory system, while also performing a partial creative transformation in the way details are recorded. As a physical object, it is both a powerful personal talisman and public declaration of professional membership. Sontag captured this alchemy well when she observed in her journal that, within its pages, 'I do not just express myself more openly than I could to any other person; I create myself' (2008: 164).

I have considered these strands and functions separately, without trying to account for the ways in which they interact, beyond noting that it is the juxtaposition and jostling of different discourses, functions within an interchangeable or album-like spaciousness that make it such a rich, creatively effervescent form. While it is perhaps the function of another essay to try to account for the ways in which these strands play off each other critic Edward Colless offers us the terminology to begin to capture this constant dynamism, in his analysis of Barthes' understanding of 'fragments' and 'excerpts', which Colless names, more poetically, 'scraps' and 'stumps' (Colless 1995: 34). For Barthes, Colless notes, to write in fragments (or scraps) is to write only 'beginnings' (Barthes 1977: 94), scattering oneself, as Barthes puts it, 'on the perimeter of a circle' (Barthes 1977: 93), while an excerpt (or stump) is the integral part of a whole: a studied selection extracted by quotation.

Perhaps the elusive magic that the notebook performs is to create a form in which 'scraps' and 'stumps' sit next to one another but also, even more magically, in which its contents can be both 'scraps' and 'stumps' at the same time; the fragments the writer records in the journal are also potentially excerpts from a potential and as-yet-unwritten Work of the future. This constantly unsettled quality – moving between inside and outside of itself — may also account for the notebook's ongoing energy – the magical 'something more' that Taussig describes (Taussig c2011: 7). '[T]he thought of so many opposing impulses sleeping peacefully face-to-face when the book is shut,' poet James Merrill observes, 'remains oddly satisfying' (qtd in Kuusisto et al 1995: 190).

Notes

[1] The quotes at the beginning of this essay are from, respectively: Beverley Farmer (1990: 3); Helen Garner (Grenville & Woolfe 1993: 61); XJ Kennedy and Cynthia Macdonald (Kuusisto et al 1995: 121; 164); Susan Sontag (2001: 41); Rita Dove and Marvin Bell (Kuusisto et al 1995: 13; 3); and Michael Taussig (c2011: 10).

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