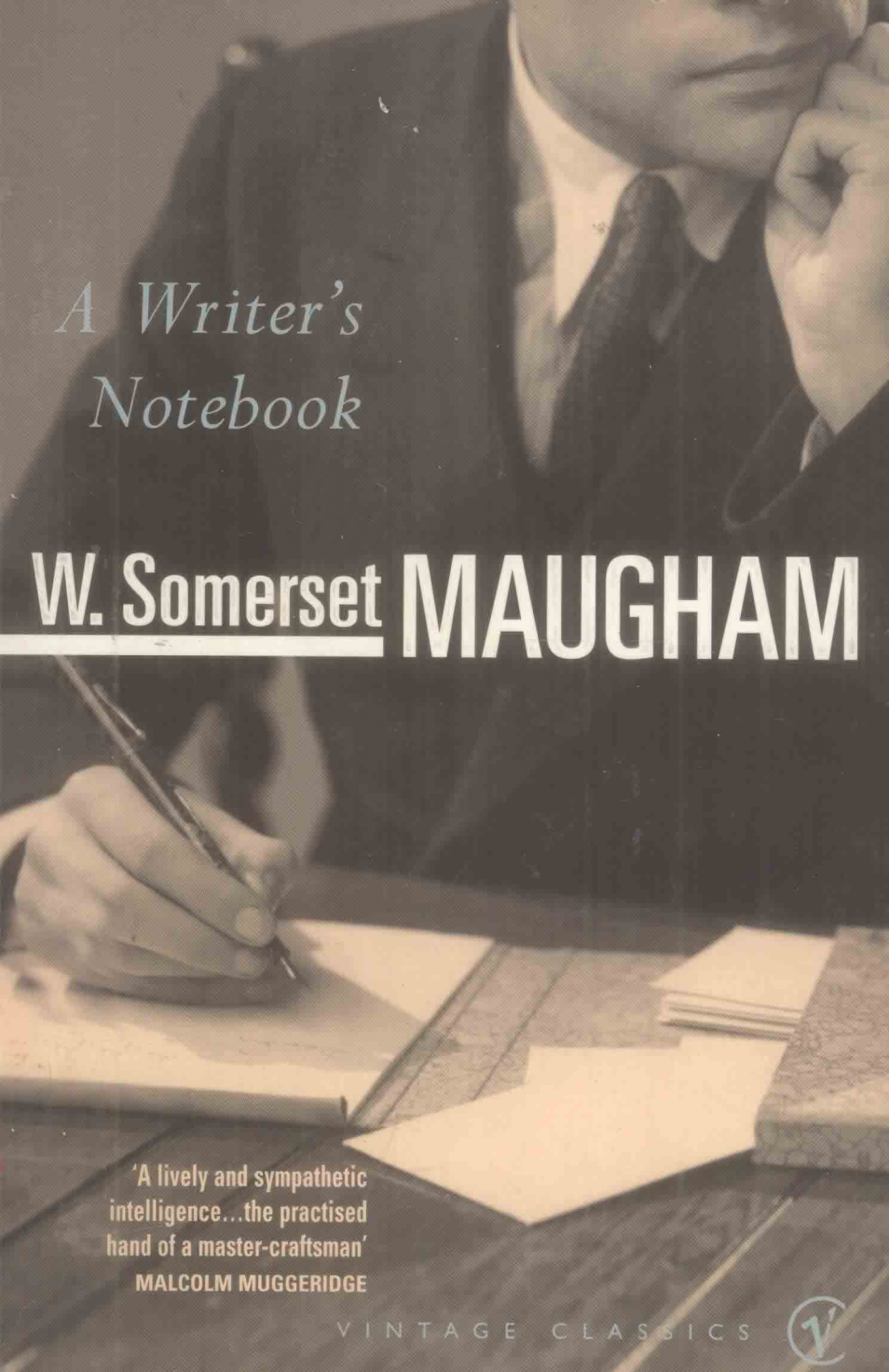
A Writer's Notebook
W. Somerset MAUGHAM
'A lively and sympathetic intelligence...the practised hand of a master-craftsman'
MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE
VINTAGE CLASSICS

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Preface

The *Journal* of Jules Renard is one of the minor masterpieces of French literature. He wrote three or four one-act plays, which were neither very good nor very bad; they neither amuse you much nor move you much, but when well acted they can be sat through without ennui. He wrote several novels, of which one, *Poil de Carotte*, was very successful. It is the story of his own childhood, the story of a little uncouth boy whose harsh and unnatural mother leads him a wretched life. Renard's method of writing, without ornament, without emphasis, heightens the pathos of the dreadful tale, and the poor lad's sufferings, mitigated by no pale ray of hope, are heartrending. You laugh wryly at his clumsy efforts to ingratiate himself with that demon of a woman and you feel his humiliations, you resent his unmerited punishments, as though they were your own. It would be an ill-conditioned person who did not feel his blood boil at the infliction of such malignant cruelty. It is not a book that you can easily forget.

Jules Renard's other novels are of no great consequence. They are either fragments of autobiography or are compiled from the careful notes he took of people with whom he was thrown into close contact, and can hardly be counted as novels at all. He was so devoid of the creative power that one wonders why he ever became a writer. He had no invention to heighten the point of an incident or even to give a pattern to his acute observations. He collected facts; but a novel cannot be made of facts alone; in themselves they are dead things. Their use is to develop an idea or illustrate a theme, and the novelist not only has the right to change them to suit his purpose, to stress them or leave them in shadow, but is under the necessity

of doing so. It is true that Jules Renard had his theories; he asserted that his object was merely to state, leaving the reader to write his own novel, as it were, on the data presented to him, and that to attempt to do anything else was literary fudge. But I am always suspicious of a novelist's theories; I have never known them to be anything other than a justification of his own shortcomings. So a writer who has no gift for the contrivance of a plausible story will tell you that story-telling is the least important part of the novelist's equipment, and if he is devoid of humour he will moan that humour is the death of fiction. In order to give the glow of life to brute fact it must be transmuted by passion, and so the only good novel Jules Renard wrote was when the passion of self-pity and the hatred he felt for his mother charged his recollections of his unhappy childhood with venom.

I surmise that he would be already forgotten but for the publication after his death of the diary that he kept assiduously for twenty years. It is a remarkable work. He knew a number of persons who were important in the literary and theatrical world of his day, actors like Sarah Bernhardt and Lucien Guitry, authors like Rostand and Capus, and he relates his various encounters with them with an admirable but caustic vivacity. Here his keen powers of observation were of service to him. But though his portraits have verisimilitude, and the lively conversation of those clever people has an authentic ring, you must have, perhaps, some knowledge of the world of Paris in the last few years of the nineteenth century and the first few years of the twentieth, either personal knowledge or knowledge by hearsay, really to appreciate these parts of the journal. His fellow writers were indignant when the work was issued and they discovered with what acrimony he had written of them. The picture he paints of the literary life of his day is savage. They say dog does not bite dog. That is not true of men of letters in France. In England, I think, men of letters bother but little with one another. They do not live in one another's pockets

as French authors do; they meet, indeed, infrequently, and then as likely as not by chance. I remember one author saying to me years ago: 'I prefer to live with my raw material.' They do not even read one another very much. On one occasion, an American critic came to England to interview a number of distinguished writers on the state of English literature, and gave up his project when he discovered that a very eminent novelist, the first one he saw, had never read a single book of Kipling's. English writers judge their fellow craftsmen; one they will tell you is pretty good, another they will say is no great shakes, but their enthusiasm for the former seldom reaches fever-heat, and their disesteem for the latter is manifested rather by indifference than by detraction. They do not particularly envy someone else's success, and when it is obviously unmerited, it moves them to laughter rather than to wrath. I think English authors are self-centred. They are, perhaps, as vain as any others, but their vanity is satisfied by the appreciation of a private circle. They are not inordinately affected by adverse criticism, and with one or two exceptions do not go out of their way to ingratiate themselves with the reviewers. They live and let live.

Things are very different in France. There the literary life is a merciless conflict in which one gives violent battle to another, in which one clique attacks another clique, in which you must be always on your guard against the gins and snares of your enemies, and in which, indeed, you can never be quite sure that a friend will not knife you in the back. It is all against all, and, as in some forms of wrestling, anything is allowed. It is a life of bitterness, envy and treachery, of malice and hatred. I think there are reasons for this. One, of course, is that the French take literature much more seriously than we do, a book matters to them as it never matters to us, and they are prepared to wrangle over general principles with a vehemence that leaves us amazed – and tickled, for we cannot get it out of our heads that there is something

comic in taking art so seriously. Then, political and religious matters have a way of getting themselves entangled with literature in France, and an author will see his book furiously assailed, not because it is a bad book, but because he is a Protestant, a nationalist, a communist or what not. Much of this is praiseworthy. It is well that a writer should think not only that the book he himself is writing is important, but that the books other people are writing are important too. It is well that authors, at least, should think that books really mean something, and that their influence is salutary, in which case they must be defended, or harmful, in which case they must be attacked. Books can't matter much if their authors themselves don't think they matter. It is because in France they think they matter so much that they take sides so fiercely.

There is one practice common to French authors that has always caused me astonishment, and that is their practice of reading their works to one another, either when they are in process of writing them, or when they have finished them. In England writers sometimes send their unpublished works to fellow craftsmen for criticism, by which they mean praise, for rash is the author who makes any serious objections to another's manuscript; he will only offend, and his criticism will not be listened to; but I cannot believe that any English author would submit himself to the excruciating boredom of sitting for hours while a fellow novelist read him his latest work. In France it seems to be an understood thing that he should, and what is stranger, even eminent writers will often rewrite much of their work on the strength of the criticism they may have thus received. No less a person than Flaubert acknowledges that he did so as a result of Turgenev's remarks, and you can gather from André Gide's *Journal* that he has often profited in the same way. It has puzzled me; and the explanation that I have offered to myself is that the French, because writing is an honourable profession (which it has never been in England), often

adopt it without having any marked creative power; their keen intelligence, their sound education and their background of an age-long culture enable them to produce work of a high standard, but it is the result of resolution, industry and a well-stored, clever brain rather than of an urge to create, and so criticism, the opinions of well-intentioned persons, can be of considerable use. But I should be surprised to learn that the great producers, of whom Balzac is the most eminent example, put themselves to this trouble. They wrote because they had to, and having written, thought only of what they were going to write next. The practice proves, of course, that French authors are prepared to take an immense deal of trouble to make their works as perfect as may be, and that, sensitive as they are, they have less self-complacency than many of their English fellow craftsmen.

There is another reason why the antagonisms of authors in France are more envenomed than in England; their public is too small to support their great number: we have a public of two hundred millions; they have one of forty. There is plenty of room for every English writer; you may never have heard of him, but if he has any gift at all, in any direction, he can earn an adequate income. He is not very rich, but then he would never have adopted the profession of letters if riches had been his object. He acquires in time his body of faithful readers, and since in order to get the publishers' advertisements the papers are obliged to give a good deal of space to reviews, he is accorded a sufficient amount of attention in the public Press. He can afford to look upon other writers without envy. But in France few writers can make a living by writing novels; unless they have private means or some other occupation that enables them to provide for their needs, they are forced to resort to journalism. There are not enough book-buyers to go round, and the success of one author can greatly attenuate the success of another. It is a struggle to get known; it is a struggle to hold one's place in the public esteem. This results in frantic efforts

to attract the benevolent attention of critics, and it is to the effect their reviews may have that must be ascribed the anxiety felt even by authors of reputation when they know that a notice is to appear in such and such a paper, and their fury when it is not a good one. It is true that criticism carries greater weight in France than it does in England. Certain critics are so influential that they can make or mar a book. Though every person of culture in the world reads French, and French books are read not only in Paris, it is only the opinion of Paris, of its writers, its critics, its intelligent public, that the French author really cares about. It is because literary ambition is centred in that one place that it is the scene of so much strife and heart-burning. And it is because the financial rewards of authorship are so small that there is so much eagerness, so much scheming to win the prizes that are every year awarded to certain books, or to enter into one or other of the academies which not only set an honourable seal on a career but increase an author's market value. But there are few prizes for the aspiring writer, few vacancies in the academies for the established one. Not many people know how much bitterness, how much bargaining, how much intrigue goes to the awarding of a prize or the election of a candidate.

But, of course, there are authors in France who are indifferent to money and scornful of honours, and since the French are a generous people, these authors are rewarded with the unqualified respect of all. That is why, indeed, certain writers who, judged by any reasonable standards, are evidently of no great consequence enjoy, especially among the young, a reputation that is incomprehensible to the foreigner. For unfortunately talent and originality do not always attend nobility of character.

Jules Renard was very honest, and he does not draw a pretty picture of himself in his *Journal*. He was malignant, cold, selfish, narrow, envious and ungrateful. His only redeeming feature was his love for his wife; she is the only person in all these volumes of whom he consistently

speaks with kindness. He was immensely susceptible to any fancied affront, and his vanity was outrageous. He had neither charity nor good will. He splashes with his angry contempt everything he doesn't understand, and the possibility never occurs to him that if he doesn't the fault may lie in himself. He was odious, incapable of a generous gesture, and almost incapable of a generous emotion. But for all that the *Journal* is wonderfully good reading. It is extremely amusing. It is witty and subtle and often wise. It is a notebook kept for the purposes of his calling by a professional writer who passionately sought truth, purity of style and perfection of language. As a writer no one could have been more conscientious. Jules Renard jotted down neat retorts and clever phrases, epigrams, things seen, the sayings of people and the look of them, descriptions of scenery, effects of sunshine and shadow, everything, in short, that could be of use to him when he sat down to write for publication; and in several cases, as we know, when he had collected sufficient data he strung them together into a more or less connected narrative and made a book of them. To a writer this is the most interesting part of these volumes; you are taken into an author's workshop and shown what materials he thought worth gathering, and how he gathered them. It is not to the point that he lacked the capacity to make better use of them.

I forget who it was who said that every author should keep a notebook, but should take care never to refer to it. If you understand this properly, I think there is truth in it. By making a note of something that strikes you, you separate it from the incessant stream of impressions that crowd across the mental eye, and perhaps fix it in your memory. All of us have had good ideas or vivid sensations that we thought would one day come in useful, but which, because we were too lazy to write them down, have entirely escaped us. When you know you are going to make a note of something, you look at it more attentively than you otherwise would, and in the process of

doing so the words are borne in upon you that will give it its private place in reality. The danger of using notes is that you find yourself inclined to rely on them, and so lose the even and natural flow of your writing which comes from allowing the unconscious that full activity which is somewhat pompously known as inspiration. You are also inclined to drag in your jottings whether they fit in or not. I have heard that Walter Pater used to make abundant notes on his reading and reflection and put them into appropriate pigeon-holes, and when he had enough on a certain subject, fit them together and write an essay. If this is true, it may account for the rather cramped feeling one has when one reads him. This may be why his style has neither swing nor vigour. For my part, I think to keep copious notes is an excellent practice, and I can only regret that a natural indolence has prevented me from exercising it more diligently. They cannot fail to be of service if they are used with intelligence and discretion.

It is because Jules Renard's *Journal* in this respect so pleasantly engaged my attention that I have ventured to collect my own notes and offer them to the perusal of my fellow writers. I hasten to state that mine are not nearly so interesting as his. They are much more interrupted. There were many years in which I never kept notes at all. They do not pretend to be a journal; I never wrote anything about my meetings with interesting or famous people. I am sorry that I didn't. It would doubtless have made the following pages more amusing if I had recorded my conversations with the many and distinguished writers, painters, actors and politicians I have known more or less intimately. It never occurred to me to do so. I never made a note of anything that I did not think would be useful to me at one time or another in my work, and though, especially in the early notebooks, I jotted down all kinds of thoughts and emotions of a personal nature, it was only with the intention of ascribing them sooner or later to the creatures of my invention. I meant my

notebooks to be a storehouse of materials for future use and nothing else.

As I grew older and more aware of my intentions, I used my notebooks less to record my private opinions, and more to put down while still fresh my impressions of such persons and places as seemed likely to be of service to me for the particular purpose I had in view at the moment. Indeed, on one occasion, when I went to China, vaguely thinking that I might write a book upon my travels, my notes were so copious that I abandoned the project and published them as they were. These, of course, I have omitted from this volume. I have likewise omitted everything I have elsewhere made use of, and if I have left in a phrase or two here and there that a diligent reader of my works recalls, it is not because I am so pleased with it that I want to repeat it, but from inadvertence. On one or two occasions, however, I have deliberately left in the facts that I noted down at the time and that gave me the idea for a story or novel, thinking it might entertain the reader who chanced to remember one or the other, to see on what materials I devised a more elaborate piece. I have never claimed to create anything out of nothing; I have always needed an incident or a character as a starting point, but I have exercised imagination, invention and a sense of the dramatic to make it something of my own.

My early notebooks were largely filled with pages of dialogue for plays that I never wrote, and these, because I thought they could interest no one, I have also left out, but I have not left out a considerable number of remarks and reflections that seem to me now exaggerated and foolish. They are the expression of a very young man's reaction to real life, or what he thought was such, and to liberty, after the sheltered and confined existence, perverted by fond fancies and the reading of novels, which was natural to a boy in the class in which I was born; and they are the expression of his revolt from the ideas and conventions of the environment in which he had

been brought up. I think I should have been dishonest with the reader if I had suppressed them. My first notebook is dated 1892; I was then eighteen. I have no wish to make myself out more sensible than I was. I was ignorant, ingenuous, enthusiastic and callow.

My notebooks amounted to fifteen stoutish volumes, but by omitting so much, as I have above described, I have reduced them to one no longer than many a novel. I hope the reader will accept this as a sufficient excuse for its publication. I do not publish it because I am so arrogant as to suppose that my every word deserves to be perpetuated. I publish it because I am interested in the technique of literary production and in the process of creation, and if such a volume as this by some other author came into my hands I should turn to it with avidity. By some happy chance what interests me seems to interest a great many other people; I could never have expected it, and I have never ceased to be surprised at it; but it may be that what has happened so often before will happen again, and some persons may be found who will discover here and there in the following pages something to interest them. I should have looked upon it as an impertinence to publish such a book when I was in the full flow of my literary activity; it would have seemed to claim an importance for myself which would have been offensive to my fellow writers; but now I am an old man, I can be no one's rival, for I have retired from the hurly-burly and ensconced myself not uncomfortably on the shelf. Any ambition I may have had has long since been satisfied. I contend with none not because none is worth my strife, but because I have said my say and I am well pleased to let others occupy my small place in the world of letters. I have done what I wanted to do and now silence becomes me. I am told that in these days you are quickly forgotten if you do not by some new work keep your name before the public, and I have little doubt that it is true. Well, I am prepared for that. When my obituary

notice at last appears in *The Times*, and they say: 'What, I thought he died years ago,' my ghost will gently chuckle.

1892

In this year I entered the Medical School of St. Thomas's Hospital. I spent five years there. I carefully set down the dates on which I started my first notebooks, and these dates will, I hope, serve as an extenuation of their contents. My later notebooks are undated, indeed many of my notes were scribbled on a scrap of paper or the back of an envelope, and I have had to determine when they were written by their subject matter. It may be that here and there I am a year or two out; I do not think it is of any consequence.

Considering how foolishly people act and how pleasantly they prattle, perhaps it would be better for the world if they talked more and did less.

Music-hall songs provide the dull with wit, just as proverbs provide them with wisdom.

Good luck always brings merit, but merit very seldom brings good luck.

Maxims of the Vicar.

A parson is paid to preach, not to practise.

Only ask those people to stay with you or to dine with you, who can ask you in return.

'Do unto others as you would they should do unto you.' An excellent maxim – for others.

He always answered the contentions of the temperance people by saying that 'God has ordered us to make use of the things of this world,' and he exemplified his reply by keeping himself well supplied with whisky and liqueurs, which, however, he kept carefully locked up in the sideboard. 'It is not good for all people to drink spirits,' he said, 'in fact it is a sin to put temptation in their way;

and besides, they would not appreciate them at their true value.'

These observations fell from the lips of my uncle who was Vicar of Whitstable; I took them seriously, but looking back on them now I am inclined to think that he was exercising at my expense a humour which I never suspected him of possessing.

Reading does not make a man wise; it only makes him learned.

Respectability is the cloak under which fools cover their stupidity.

No action is in itself good or bad, but only such according to convention.

An old maid is always poor. When a spinster is rich she is an unmarried woman of a certain age.

Genius should use mediocrity as ink wherewith to write its name in the annals of the world.

Genius is talent provided with ideals.

Genius starves while talent wears purple and fine linen.

The man of genius of to-day will in fifty years' time be in most cases no more than a man of talent.

A visit to a picture gallery with a friend is, perhaps, the severest test you can put him to. Most people, on going to a gallery, leave politeness and courtesy, with their umbrellas and sticks, at the door. They step in stripped of their veneer, and display their dispositions in all their nakedness. Then you will find them dogmatic and arrogant, flippant and foolish, impatient of contradiction and even of difference of opinion. Neither do they then seek to hide their opinion of you; for the most part it is a very unfavourable one.

The man who in these conditions listens tolerantly to your opinion and allows that you may be as right as he, is a friend indeed.

But, first of all, are you perfectly convinced of my friendship, are you so assured of it that I may speak to you of the most personal subject?

Certainly, my dear boy, a heart as true as yours has the right to say the most unpleasant things. Go on.

Brooks. He is a man under the middle size, broad and sturdy and well-shaped; with a beautiful head, a good nose, and a broad, high forehead; but his face, clean-shaven, narrows down to a pointed chin; his eyes are pale blue, slightly expressionless; his mouth is large and his lips are thick and sensual; his hair is curly but getting thin; and he wears it long. He has a look of refinement and a romantic air.

When he went up to Cambridge he got into a set of men with money and of sporting tastes, among whom his intelligence was deemed exceptional; an opinion which was shared by his tutor and the master of his college. He ate his dinners and read for the Bar. He took a second class. When he went to London, he dressed at an expensive tailor's, kept a mistress, was elected to the Reform, which friends made him join under the impression that he had in him the makings of a politician. His friends were reading men, and he went through a course of English classics in a light amateurish manner. He admired George Meredith and was scornful of the three-volume novel. He became a diligent reader of the weekly sixpennies, of the literary monthlies and the quarterlies. He went a good deal to the theatre and to the opera. Other evenings he spent either in a friend's room or at some old-fashioned inn, drinking whisky and smoking, discussing far into the night life and death, fate, Christianity, books and politics. He read Newman, and was impressed by him, and the Roman Catholicism which he found at Brompton intensely attracted him. Then he fell ill and, on recovering, went to Germany. Here he met people whose pursuits and predilections were different from those of his former companions. He began to learn German, and with this object, read the German classics. He added an admiration of Goethe to his old admiration of Meredith and Newman. On going to Italy for a short holiday, he fell in