WRITING AND REALITY

A Study of Modern British Diary Fiction

Andrew Hassam

Contributions to the Study of World Literature,
Number 47

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Writing and Reality: Contexts

> The thing that he was about to do was to open a diary. This was not illegal (nothing was illegal, since there were no longer any laws), but if detected it was reasonably certain that it would be punished by death, or at least by twenty-five years in a forced-labour camp. Winston fitted a nib into the penholder and sucked it to get the grease off. The pen was an archaic instrument, seldom used even for signatures, and he had procured one, furtively and with some difficulty, simply because of a feeling that the beautiful creamy paper deserved to be written on with a real nib instead of being scratched with an ink-pencil. Actually he was not used to writing by hand. Apart from very short notes, it was usual to dictate everything into the speakwrite, which was of course impossible for his present purpose. He dipped the pen into the ink and then faltered for just a second. A tremor had gone through his bowels. To mark the paper was the decisive act. In small clumsy letters he wrote:
>
> April 4th, 1984
>
> (Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 9)

Few, I imagine, would deny the present-day relevance of Winston Smith's act of subversion; political prisoners throughout the world continue to risk their lives by similar acts. But in one respect, Winston Smith (or perhaps more correctly George Orwell) would be envied by British writers today. What he writes is of less impor-

tance than the act of writing: "To mark the paper was the decisive act." In a society in which pen and paper are almost impossible to obtain, in a society in which all written records are those rewritten by the state, and in a society that manipulates thought by enforcing a state-controlled language, Winston Smith has merely to write down a possibly inaccurate date and already he has made a stand on the side of intellectual freedom: in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the idea of keeping a diary is a breach of Doublethink. Yet in a society that openly proclaims intellectual freedom and grants everyone the means to keep a diary, few will commence a diary with trembling bowels. What makes the modern fictive diarist hesitate is not so much fear of the Secret Police as a loss of belief in the connection between writing and reality, between text and the world. The prohibitions hanging over Winston Smith reinforce his belief that it is possible to write the truth, but, in a post-Saussurean world, it is no longer possible to believe quite so readily in the diary as documentary. Diary writing has lost its innocence.

If *Nineteen Eighty-Four* comes out of events of the 1930s and the 1940s, the violent political events of the 1950s in Eastern Europe provoked a new generation of left-wing British writers into taking up for themselves the Orwellian issue of individual freedom versus state coercion. Both Doris Lessing and John Berger used the diary like Orwell as a benchmark for individual freedom, but in both cases diary writing comes to be seen ultimately as an evasion of social responsibility. It may be a necessary step toward freedom, but it has to be relinquished in the face of political events. In Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962), the diarist Anna Wulf explores the reality of her own life by keeping four separate notebooks. For her, the pressure of world events and political upheaval pose a threat to the very notion of individuality, and it is only after she has gone beyond words, gone beyond writing and come face to face with the terror underlying reality that she can overcome her sense of disintegration. Having testified to this experience in a single notebook, the Golden Notebook itself, Anna gives up diary writing, indeed she gives away her notebook, and reengages with society.

John Berger's *A Painter of Our Time* (1958) is a similar testament to the individual under stress by the political events of the 1950s, and, like Lessing's Anna Wulf, Berger's exiled Hungarian painter–diarist in the end must abandon his diary and return to social action, in his case to the Hungary of 1956. In both of these works, diary writing may accurately portray contemporary reality, may

indeed act as an agent by which the diarist clarifies his or her own position, yet keeping a diary does not itself represent, as it does in Orwell, an act of political defiance. The diary has become too much of a refuge for a private, evasive self, too self-indulgent; for political action and a fuller sense of social responsibility, the diarist must pass into a world beyond the diary.

Put in the context of Lessing and Berger, Malcolm Lowry's "Through the Panama" (written largely in the early 1950s though not published until 1961) seems to epitomize this sterile self-indulgence since its main concern seems to be the shifting identity of the diarist who may or may not be Sigbjørn Wilderness, Martin Trumbaugh, or indeed Lowry himself. This introversion is matched by the technique of framing texts within texts, a technique that not only exceeds the very possibilities of the diary itself but questions the fundamental distinction between fact and fiction. Writing becomes a way of creating several alternative and conflicting realities without establishing any coherent dominant reality. If Orwell retains a belief in the ability of the diary to record reality, and Lessing and Berger retain this belief despite a growing unease about the innocence of language, Lowry abandons this belief altogether; selfhood dissolves and with it the possibility of political action.

Yet placing Lowry alongside Lessing highlights similarities as well as differences. In the way that Lowry's diarist is an amalgam of conflicting identities, so too is Lessing's Anna Wulf. And given that both diarists are also novelists, the discussion of identity is also a discussion of the dividing line between reality and art, fact and fiction. Both Lowry and Lessing use the diary strategy self-reflexively to examine the referential status of writing generally, and, while Lessing diverges from Lowry in arguing for a reality beyond words, such a position depends ultimately on a humanism she has apparently rejected and which cannot be demonstrated within the text. On the other hand, while Lowry and/or his diarist may be criticized for self-indulgence, the move beyond realism into the labyrinths of textuality has proved one of the most radical changes in the form of the novel in the twentieth-century, and one that Lessing, and indeed Berger, was not able to ignore.

The problem that emerges from the argument so far is, can the diary novel be used to discuss the relationship between writing and reality without saying either that there is no objective reality (Lowry) or that reality exists only beyond the text (Lessing)? In other words, where Lowry suggests that writing is a narcissistic conjuring with realities, both Lessing and Berger see diary writing

only as a prelude to an active engagement with reality. In all three cases, writing is intransitive, is divorced from social action. An attempt to bridge the gap between Lowry and Lessing and justify writing as an Orwellian engagement with political reality can be seen in the 1960s and early 1970s in the work of B. S. Johnson.

Johnson was part of a group of young British writers working in London who looked toward Joyce and Beckett for a form of the novel which matched modern reality rather than to what they saw as an ossified nineteenth-century realism. In other words, in rejecting the literary practices of the cultural élite, they were consciously rejecting the values behind those practices. Johnson attempted to demonstrate the underlying chaos of reality by destroying the coherence of a realism that represented order and control. This ultimately posed unresolvable epistemological problems since it is impossible to demonstrate the chaos behind language using any form of signification; in any case, Johnson's aleatory strategies were always carefully contrived to allow his protagonists and his readers to come to the correct conclusions. Yet despite his deep suspicion of language, not only did Johnson not opt for Lessing's strategy of separating language from social action, he questioned the way the traditional realist creation of meaning through writing worked against the socially underprivileged. The realist novel was for Johnson the mouthpiece of the 1950s' cultural and political establishment, and, to the degree that realism endorsed the values of a political hierarchy, his view of writing as a way of manipulating thought is close to Orwell's: the privileging of certain types of discourse reinforce material power relationships; or as Johnson would have it, the establishment created a fiction (the realist novel) to be read as truth. Whereas in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the writing of a diary is a subversive act against the endorsed language of the state, for Johnson, writing the experimental novel is an act of sabotage against a cultural and ideological élite. In *Travelling People* (1963), Johnson used the diary form along with letters, film scripts, and the authorial interruptions borrowed from the eighteenth-century novel to demonstrate the conventionality of realism and the discursive construction of reality; it is not possible to say which of the discourses is closer to reality since they gain their meaning by a differential relation to the other discourses. And in *Trawl* (1966), Johnson uses the periodicity of the diary form to represent a socially displaced working-class consciousness grappling to find the real meaning of events yet never quite overcoming the conventional discursive structuring of the chaos of reality.

Ann Quin and Eva Figes were both members of Johnson's circle in the late 1960s and, like Johnson, they used the diary strategy to examine the textuality of reality and, by implication, the cultural relativity of a humanist concept of self existing beyond discourse. Ann Quin's two novels that use the diary format, *Three* (1966) and *Passages* (1969), are particularly useful in that they show clearly the North American influence on the younger British writers of the time, the diaries representing the surrealism of contemporary reality seen from a mystically dispersed consciousness that became a hallmark of the so-called drug-culture. On the other hand, the challenge these British writers posed to the social realism of the traditional British novel also owed much to European influences—Beckett had already pursued the narrative imperatives of the diary form in *Malone Dies* (1951; translated 1956), and the influence of two of the most celebrated diary novels of the twentieth century, Sartre's *Nausea* (1938; translated 1949) and Michel Butor's *Passing Time* (1957; translated 1961), cannot be overlooked. Indeed, the influence of *Nausea* can be seen earlier in both *The Golden Notebook* and John Fowles's first published novel, *The Collector* (1963), half of which is in the form of a diary; both novels clearly take up the existentialist implications of diary writing.

In America, the influence of Sartre can be seen much earlier in Saul Bellow's first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944), where the hero experiences the "nausea" of an existentialist freedom in the period between resigning from his job and joining the army. But in contrast to the British experience, the diary form was not used during the 1960s and early 1970s by the experimental novelists. Diary novels continued to be written by notable American writers—witness Alison Lurie's *Real People* (1969) and John Updike's *A Month of Sundays* (1975)—but such novels did not radically question the diary's formal realism or its ability to transcribe a knowable reality; in the case of Lurie and Updike, the diary form is used to show that self-deception lies in the diarist and not in the world the diarist transcribes. Of the foremost American exponents of anti-realism in the 1960s and early 1970s, and one thinks here of such figures as John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, William Burroughs, Richard Brautigan, and Kurt Vonnegut, only Vonnegut in *Mother Night* (1961) made extended use of the diary format, a cultural difference from the British experience still to be explained.

By the later 1970s and with the advent in Britain of structuralist thinking, the possibility had been widely established through a systematic body of cultural theory that reality was not something that

existed beyond the text but that it existed discursively, that it was relative and depended on the way in which a culture organized its discourses. This model then became a means by which writers like Eva Figes could explore the revitalized issue of women in society. In some ways works such as Eva Figes' *Nelly's Version* (1977) and Emma Tennant's *The Bad Sister* (1978) still contain within them the problematic that B. S. Johnson fought with, the degree to which an attack on realism could also be an attack on social inequality; in other words, the diary novel would seem to have to accept that realism accurately represents (an unjust) social reality and is more than a cultural convention. Nevertheless, by associating realism with a patriarchal view of the world, both Figes and Tennant are able to use the conventionality of realism to make a social point: in Figes, realism is undercut from within, the novel first accepting then rejecting the codes of realism, such as the discrete nature of characters (female characters merge) and the effacing of textuality (the novel itself appears within the novel); in Tennant, the realism of a (male) editorial frame fails to make sense of and contain the alternative female reality depicted by the diary within the frame.

British diary fiction in the 1980s, along with other areas of cultural production, has reacted against the formal experimentalism of the 1950s and 1960s and in so doing has moved back toward the tradition of realism. To be sure, Doris Lessing has produced a second work of diary fiction, *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1984), yet while it repeats certain themes of *The Golden Notebook* it lacks their demonic stylistic force. And in the case of two other innovative writers of the 1950s, Iris Murdoch and William Golding, though both have, like Lessing, produced later works in the form of diary fiction, the fact that *The Sea, The Sea* (1978) and *Rites of Passage* (1980) both won the Booker McConnell prize suggests that neither poses a radical challenge to the sensibilities of the literary establishment. With regard to the other noted works of British diary fiction of the last decade, neither Robert Nye's *The Voyage of the Destiny* (1982) nor Margaret Forster's *Private Papers* (1986) can claim to represent a new departure for the novel to the same degree as earlier diary novels by Johnson, Quin, and Figes, all writers of the same generation as Nye and Forster.

In this general climate, few of the writers to have established themselves in the last ten years have written diary fiction. The exception is Jane Rogers with *The Ice Is Singing* (1987), a work that explores such contemporary concerns as child abuse, the women's movement, and care of the elderly, yet which in its analysis of the

relationship between writing and reality, to my mind, disappointingly echoes first *The Golden Notebook* and then B. S. Johnson. Its final strategy, that of abandoning the diary for life itself, would seem therefore to leave the field free to a resurgent social realism and a belief in the freedom of the individual, marking the end of radical attempts since Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to question not only how free the individual may be but to challenge the very way in which the structure of society depends upon an unchallengeable, natural reality. If this indeed is the case, then the current formal conservatism of diary fiction makes Winston Smith's act of rebellious diary writing more pertinent than ever.

Initially, at least, the importance of post-war British diary fiction rests on the canonical status of those British writers who have used the diary form in their fiction. Works by Lessing, Golding, Murdoch, Lowry, and Fowles are an important enough body of British fiction even without adding to the list works by B. S. Johnson, Eva Figes, Robert Nye, and Emma Tennant. The fact, therefore, that all these writers should write works in the form of a diary is of itself a strong argument in favour of taking a specific look at modern British diary fiction. And it should not be forgotten that the two greatest influences on British fiction in the twentieth century, Joyce and Beckett, also toyed with the diary form: Joyce prefigured the interior monologue of *Ulysses* (1922) and thence the extreme textuality of *Finnegans Wake* (1939) in the diary sections at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916); Beckett's dismantling of the diary form in *Malone Dies* has already been mentioned.

But what I would also argue is that, for two main reasons, it is not just coincidence these writers have all toyed with diary fiction. The first reason is that writing diary fiction, unlike writing novels which efface their own textuality, allows writers to interrogate something intrinsic to the novel, the novel as writing. What these writers have done by foregrounding the textuality of the novel is to interrogate the relationship between their writing and the reality it aims to represent. In this sense, writing about writing, the self-reflexive novel, has not proved as sterile as many would contend and is an attempt to highlight writing as a cultural and social practice. Thus Patricia Waugh is able to argue that through metafiction, "far from 'dying,' the novel has reached a mature recognition of its existence as *writing*, which can only ensure its continued viability in and relevance to a contemporary world which is similarly beginning to gain awareness of precisely how its values and practices are constructed and legitimized" (p. 19). The mention of

legitimization situates Waugh's study within the broad project of cultural criticism, concerned less with the valorization of good literature than with the way in which all forms of discourse operate to transmit or to challenge cultural values. The diary novel, it seems to me, by placing a nonfiction form within quotations, as it were, is well placed to challenge the assumptions lying behind writing as a direct representation of a natural reality.

This leads on to the second reason why diary fiction has played such a leading role in post-war British fiction. The nonfiction diary, at least since Pepys was decoded and appropriated in 1825, has been invested with a whole host of dominant cultural values. The diary has come to encompass the first or leading term in a number of cultural oppositions: conscience/ideology; private/public; sincerity/convention; the individual/the mob; immediacy/artificiality; spontaneity/repression; formlessness/artifice; empiricism/theory; truth/dogma. The diary in Western culture has developed from the historical chronicle, through private *aide-mémoire*, through puritan confession, through romantic autobiography, to the *journal intime* and the dream diary of psychoanalytic self-discovery. Written in private for the diarist's eyes alone, the diary has accumulated in its development a range of specific cultural values centered on the concept of a unique and essentially rational human subject.

It is because of its investment with the values of a dominant ideology that, in a period of rapid social change since the Second World War, the diary has acted as a focus for cultural introspection. My task, therefore, is to examine through an interrogation of the diary as discourse the ways in which modern British diary fiction has questioned cultural values, has questioned the way the diary has been used to legitimate certain cultural values. To this end and rather than giving an amplified chronological survey, I shall be concentrating on specific areas of contestation: facticity, history, autobiography, and gender. The following two chapters act as a necessary theoretical prelude to this project and may be omitted in a first reading should the reader be impatient to engage with my analysis of the texts themselves: Chapter 2 discusses the issues involved in normative attempts to define the nonfiction diary, to police its boundaries, and to invest the diary form with cultural values, while Chapter 3 considers the broader issue of how cultural distinctions between fact and fiction interact with formal distinctions between the nonfiction and the fictive diary. Chapter 4 deals with the commonsense assumption that the diary records the raw material of reality and examines how this assumption depends on a

fundamentally unstable relationship between different types of discourse. Chapter 5 deals with the diary as historical chronicle and, in the light of contemporary historiography, considers the ways in which modern diary novels have undermined the objectivity of the discourse of history and negotiated the meaning of public events. Chapter 6 looks at how diary fiction has contested the autobiographical assumptions behind diary writing, the diary as the sanctuary of a discrete narratorial selfhood, and offers instead a selfhood that is the result of a dialectic between different subject positions. In Chapter 7, I consider a spectrum of modern treatments of the oldest type of European diary fiction, the fictive sea journal, to show the degrees to which writers are prepared to question cultural values through their treatment of the diary as document; and, in Chapter 8, I consider the ways in which the cultural association of women with diaries has been appropriated by women writers to reappraise the representation of female identity and the way in which gender differences are literally written into the structure of society. In the concluding chapter, I offer an overview of the range of formal strategies used by modern British diary fiction to interrogate the cultural relationship between discourses.

From the preceding, it can be seen that this study has a dual focus. First, to the degree that it is a study of diary fiction it aims to outline the possibilities opened by developments in British writing over the last thirty years or so. It thus pays most attention to works that question the traditional codes of realism through a modernist use of a deep and an often arbitrary symbolic structure but also and more particularly through a postmodern preoccupation with the text as writing, what I have already referred to as the textuality of reality. In other words, the present study will itself privilege the self-referential, experimental text over works of literary realism on the understanding that their interrogation of the diary is necessarily an interrogation of the humanist assumptions concerning the notion of a self beyond discourse that are invested in the diary.

It is, of course, arguable that even traditional realist diary fiction is preoccupied with writing and its problematic relationship to reality because the diary itself is a written text; diary novels are always implicated as writing. Yet for my purposes I would want to make a distinction between the problems of transcribing a reality the meaning of which is assumed to exist independently of the writing and the realization that written discourses are a social practice which actively constitute reality. In other words, the problem I am