

On Travelling with a Notebook

Freya Stark

In her book *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Joan Didion includes a chapter entitled "On Keeping a Notebook." In it she states that the function of her journal is not to keep an accurate factual record but to help her "remember what it was to be me." One might expect her journal to be full of abstract speculation and vague soul-searching. Instead, what she actually puts in her notebook is very concrete. She sketches in snatches of

conversation, scenes she has witnessed, even a recipe for sauerkraut—things that will trigger in her memory many years later a full perception of a whole era in her life.

In this penchant for the concrete, Didion would agree with the author of this essay, Freya Stark. Both use their journals as a storehouse of material for possible future use. The question that concerns every journal keeper, however, is *what kind* of material should one store? After opening with an anecdote that illustrates her own highly selective method of journal writing, Stark argues that "One's own sensations and emotions should be left out, while the *causes* that produced them are carefully identified. These are usually small concrete facts not particularly spectacular in themselves, and a single word . . . may recall them."

I was walking, when the first Cyprus crisis was at its height, among the narrow byways that hug the Athens Acropolis, when three or four very small boys came round a comer and asked me where I belonged, naming one country after another. Having exhausted all they could think of, they looked at me with horror when I said, "*Anglia*," English. The eldest reached for a stone and they all in chorus cried, "*Kyprus*." Not knowing any Greek with which to argue, I took the first historic name that came into my mind and said, "Pericles." The classic bond held. "Themistocles" one little boy responded, and I added "Alcibiades" for good measure. The little group instantly adopted me and shepherded me through all the dangers of their fellows, just out from school. This is years ago now and I had forgotten the episode until I happened to read the single word *Anglia* in a notebook of that day and the whole picture with its fierce gay little figures and the Acropolis hanging above them came back into my mind. The notebook, with its single word, had saved it from total oblivion.

A pen and a notebook and a reasonable amount of discrimination will change a journey from a mere annual into a perennial, its pleasures and pains renewable at will.

The keeping of a regular diary is difficult and apt in most lives to be dull as it plods through good and bad at one even pace. But the art of the notebook is selective.

One's own sensations and emotions should be left out, while the *causes* that produced them are carefully identified. These are usually small concrete facts not particularly spectacular in themselves, and a single word, as we have seen, may recall them. In describing Venice or Athens for instance, it is useless to record the rapture: no mere mention can renew it: but the cause—some shimmer of light or shadow, some splash of the flat-prowed gondola as its crest turns a corner, or a sudden vignette, or the Greeks reading their morning papers in the theatre of Dionysius—such concrete glimpses produced the delight in the first place and can recapture it in the notebook's pages. Colours, odours (good or bad), even apparently irrelevant details like the time of day, are far more evocative than a record of feelings, which represent the writer and not the scene and are, usually, a mere embarrassment in later reading.

I have notes for instance of the Persian tribes moving to their summer pastures under the great tombs of their kings at Naksh-i-Rustum: the tumult of goats, camels and horses, the women's black turbans, the clanking of cooking-pots tied to the saddle, and some effect of dust and distance are jotted down; and the remembrance of that wide freedom, the immensity of the background in space and time, come back automatically with the mention of the sights that caused them.

A painter once told me how important it is in a quick sketch that the few details one has time for should be put in with particular care; far from being less precise they should be more so, or the illusion of reality will fail. The same rule applies to notebook jottings. A painter like Edward Lear shows the same awareness in his diary as in his sketches, where the details of light and colour for which he had no time are scribbled in pencil at the side.

In poetry the process is fundamentally the same, but is worked out more completely with the harmony of words. The everyday traveller's notebook stops short of this process: it is intended for himself alone, it touches a chord already familiar to him, and therefore need not concern itself with the facilities of language: it is reminiscent, not creative, and can be brief and quite unreadable. With a little practice in selection, a very few lines will hold the gist of a whole day's journey; and the writing of them is much less of a labour than one would suppose.

You can amuse yourself too by reversing the process when you are reading. Pick out of any particular description the concrete things the author must have seen and remembered: they have an immediate and convincing authenticity. The psalmist's hills in the mirage of noon that "skip like lambs"—have we not seen them at the deserts' edges?—or Keats's musk rose "the murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves."

From things seen and remembered the fancy soars into the abstract and wanders beyond the notebook's scope—though sometimes even there a simile or image may well be recorded: "wine-dark" one may fancy the young Homer writing, on some Aegean headland while his sight still held. No confines to the human thought have yet been recorded. But the notebook is not the patrimony only of the thinker: it is an "Open Sesame" for every holiday traveller who learns to select his adjectives carefully and pack them compactly, so that at any odd moment he may recapture the spell of his days.