

'Diaries', by Adam Smyth (Balliol College, Oxford University)
for *Oxford Handbook of English Prose, 1640-1714*,
ed. Nicholas McDowell and Henry Power

Better to keep two chronicles? One of definite matters like bean salad, the other
of broodings.

Harry Mathews, *The Journalist* (1997).¹

In one of the richest recent meditations on the diary as genre, practice, and theoretical problem, Philippe Lejeune acknowledges the difficulty of offering a single, stable definition of the textual form we associate, perhaps too easily, with Samuel Pepys, John Evelyn, Elizabeth Mordaunt, Elias Ashmole, Samuel Jeake, Elizabeth Freke, Ralph Josselin, Roger Lowe, Anne Clifford, Nehemiah Wallington, and many others. The closest Lejeune comes to a definition is 'a series of dated traces [série de traces datées]', but he prefers instead to itemise the diary's potential formal traits, approaching genre through the accumulation of tendencies: 'Discontinuous. Full of gaps. Allusive ... Redundant ... repetitive... Non-narrative'. We might add others. The diary is often (but not always) written close to the events described, in contrast to the retrospective gaze of the autobiographer, and certainly diaries generally create the *effect* of an immediacy of composition. The diary is written, inevitably, with other readers in mind (at the very least, God and the writer's future self), sometimes including family or community members, but is not generally composed with the prospect of wide, printed circulation, and generally works with the expectation or rhetoric (if not the fact) of private composition and consumption.²

Each of these traits could be subject to debate, so if it's hard to say what a diary is, can we say what it is like? The diary, Lejeune suggests, is 'a piece of lacework, a sport'; it is a kind of rhythm, both in its 'internal morphology' of themes and form, and in the external process of its composition. The diary is like 'musical

improvisation', requiring 'both mastery of a technique and immediate acceptance of the unknown.' The diary is 'antifiction' (Lejeune's neologism), written with no knowledge of where and when it will end: 'a daunting face-off with time', 'a dream of defeating death'. The diary is 'made up of more empty space than filled'. It is a sculpture, given 'form by removing nine-tenths of its material', and 'a silhouette in a sketchbook with three pencil strokes.'³

Why is the diary hard to pin-down? In the seventeenth century, this sense of evasiveness plays out on the level of terminology, as the noun 'diary' (the *OED*'s first usage date of 1581 in fact overlooks several earlier texts)⁴ jostles with an array of other descriptors, including memorial, journal, daybook, diurnal, diet-book, calendar, and ephemeris. This fluidity of terminology tells us something important about the way that the diary was protean, and was often entangled with other genres of writing: the line between diary and commonplace book, miscellany, or recipe collection, for example, is not always easy to draw, and in fact that generic crossing-over was a particular feature of life-writing at this time (so we need to notice it, and not approach it as a problem). Readers who study the diary need to attend to these rhetorical and even literary qualities - the diary's overlappings with other forms; its own conventions; its mechanisms of persuasion - rather than using the diary as a neutral historical document, as a window on to a moment. This chapter will keep this generic messiness in mind by working with an expansive sense of form, both in terms of genre and materiality.⁵

The rise in forms of self-representation more generally, and in the diary in particular, can be attributed to a range of factors: Protestantism's emphasis on the individual, in terms of his or her relationship with God, and the injunction to turn within and search for signs of redemption; the 'heightened sense of history and self-consciousness' that the extraordinary events of the Civil War

induced;⁶ the boom in print culture and the rise of literacy rates, particularly in the later seventeenth century, which meant individuals had before them, suddenly, many more models for imagining experience, life, and self; the growth in the 1620s of corantos – weekly pamphlets of foreign news, precursors to newspapers, printed abroad – and then in mid-century with titles such as *Mercurius Aulicus* and *Mercurius Britannicus*, texts which disseminated in print frequent, regular, chronological accounts of the present; the growth of experimental science and an attention to the particular, material conditions of experience; the spread of systems of financial accounting which encouraged a broader interest in recording transactions, and in ‘setting things to rights’, to use Pepys’s exacting phrase.⁷

For Lejeune, and for many other critics, the diary is a form associated with a modernity that begins in the late eighteenth century, but this version of literary history effaces the diary’s lively earlier presence. Oxford diarist, antiquarian, historian, and man of controversy Anthony Wood (1632-95) – or, as he tried to style himself in his later writing, Anthony à Wood – presents, contextualised in relation to other writers, an excellent test case for a study of the form. This is partly because of the web of life-writing texts Wood left behind (including a diary, a long run of annotated almanacs, and an autobiography), but also because Wood thought carefully (and occasionally deeply) about the relationship between writing, memory and life.⁸ Wood was certainly not by instinct a theoretician – he would have recoiled from the term – but the intense hostility his writings induced, particularly his mountainous catalogue of bookish Oxford lives, *Athenae Oxonienses* (1691-2), caused Wood to reflect on the kind of work he was doing, and to offer a series of justifications of the ways lives might be recorded and be made to endure.

Central to so much seventeenth- and eighteenth-century diary writing was the process of transferring text between different

book forms: the movement and revision of notes about a life, from an initial and usually brief register, most commonly in the blank pages or spaces of a printed almanac, towards a fuller, more sustained narrative. Many life-writing texts from the period, including texts we could recognise as diaries, were produced in this way: the tireless and prolific Warwickshire antiquarian Sir William Dugdale, for example, kept annotated almanacs for most of his life: 50 heavily annotated volumes survive from 1626, when Dugdale was 21, until his death in 1686, and there may have been more.⁹ This mass of information subsequently fed into Dugdale's many writing projects, including *Monasticon Anglicanum* (1655), *The Antiquities of Warwickshire* (1656), *A Short View of the Late Troubles in England* (1681), and also his own brief autobiography, later enlarged by Anthony Wood.¹⁰ Such a working method unravels the assumption that diaries are spontaneous, artless transcriptions of lived reality, suggesting instead the work of careful stages of revision: which is not to suggest they were false or disingenuous, but rather that they were more complicated and more literary in nature than critics often assume.¹¹ Critics seeking to raid diaries for nuggets of artless historical fact often neglect the complex compositional scaffolding within which diaries come into being.

In the production of his diaries, Wood adheres to this writing-through-revision paradigm: making notes first in what scholars call his 'almanac diaries' from 1657 to the year of his death in 1695; then returning to revise this material into a first-person narrative in manuscript quarto of 63 pages, covering 1632-1660, a text Wood titled 'The Diarie of the Life of Anthony à Wood Historiographer and Antiquarie of the most famous Universitie of Oxford' (British Library MS Harley 5409); and then in turn revising this account to produce 'Secretum Antonii' (Bodleian MS Tanner 102), 69 pages of manuscript folio of Wood's life, now conveying in a detached third person a more sober account of a life, largely stripped of what Wood called 'exploits' or 'frolicks', and covering 1632-1672.

Wood's most sustained form of annotation was the insertion of handwritten notes of his activities on pages bound opposite the almanac's printed monthly calendar.¹² In part because of the fullness of Wood's 'Diarie' and 'Secretum Antonii', the annotated almanacs have received little analysis, but these staccato records are, as so often in the diary culture of the time, a crucial first stage in the construction of Wood's daily self. The notes are overwhelmingly financial in nature, in the sense that the majority of actions noted have a monetary value attached: this was the dominant variable for inclusion, and, since Wood's later, fuller diary and autobiography grew out of the almanac annotations, financial expense might be said to be one structuring paradigm for Wood's sense of self. Even activities that we would not classify as primarily financial (such as a visit to a church to examine the monuments) were logged and had a rationale as expenses ('the 3 day: giuen to the porter of Mag: Coll: to see the chappell - 6d - 0').¹³

The principal topics of annotation, and thus the main coordinates of Wood's diary-self, are as follows:

1. a bibliographical economy: the purchase, binding, borrowing and lending of books ('to Beckford for binding of Camden's remains - 6d - 0')
2. reading notes ('I began ^{^to} Read Lelands Collections: Bib: Bod')
3. theatre visits ('in y^e morn: a comedy called a mad world my masters - 0 - 6d - 0 in ye afternoon, a comedy called ye milkmaids - 0 - 6d')
4. reforms to his home ('This month of feb: 1659. I set up my chimney w^{ch} cost me about 20^s. as also y^e Window in my study')
5. money lent to individuals
6. social life, usually centred on a tavern ('spent at y^e merem: Tau: wth Jo: Drope -1s—1d—0')

7. music, participation in ensembles ('the 13 and 20 I plaid at the musick Schole')
8. visits to churches and colleges
9. expenses at barber, cobbler, tailor, often bundled under the catch-all category 'spent'
10. health of self, especially notes of 'vomits' or purges
11. deaths of friends, acquaintances, figures of renown, often struck through indicating transfer to another text ('old Mr Sterne chaplain of New Coll: died & was buried in y^e cloister of y^e same Coll').¹⁴

Wood maintains these central topics and this mode of diary-as-annotation across his five decades of almanac use. His records have certain striking material features, too: some contain gaps for names and dates to be added subsequently; there are glued-in smaller sheets with handwritten lists such as 'Fellowes of Lyncn y^t left their fellowship for non-conformity';¹⁵ and parts of, and sometimes whole, pages have been torn out, leaving fragments or stubs. Such moments, when the note-taking strains against the coherence of the book, are representative of an important tension in diary-writing: that is, between writing that is contained within a single bound book, and writing that occurs across loose sheets and manifold sites; between a written selfhood that is bounded, possessed of some sense of material and conceptual unity (it is a thing which can be located between two covers), and a sprawling written selfhood that is less bibliographically policed. Lejeune organises this tension into an opposition between continuous and discontinuous writing, between the bound book and the loose sheet, but in fact almanacs are powerful and therefore frequent sites for diary-writing in part because they constitute that apparently impossible bibliographical object, the never-ending notebook; the book that becomes, upon completion, part of a longer run of books.¹⁶ Wood opens each year's diary notes with a record of

End of Excerpt

This is the accepted manuscript version of the article. In keeping with the publisher's self-archiving policy¹, up to 25% of this version is permitted in an institutional repository. The final version is available online from Oxford University Press.

¹ <https://academic.oup.com/pages/authoring/books/author-reuse-and-self-archiving>