**Notes on the Danger of Notebooks**

By *Kay Ryan*

【1】*Memory is only necessary for those who insist upon novelty*, I wrote on a small piece of paper as a note to myself some weeks ago, beginning to think about the danger of notebooks. Now I don’t quite know what I meant. By memory I probably meant notebooks, documents kept in order to hold onto thoughts and experiences, documents intended to create an exomemory like an exoskeleton—notebooks as a shell to protect us from loss. I no longer know exactly what I meant by my epigram at the moment I was writing it to my future self; I have lost it in spite of itself. I imagine that it was an intense and provocative idea at the time, welding many loose stars into a single constellation. Otherwise I wouldn’t have jotted it down. Also I must have believed I would know what I meant later. This is an interesting idea: Notes such as mine are actually promissory notes—when I write them to myself, I can enjoy the feeling that I have something wonderful to express, but I don’t have to spell it out yet. The balloon payment lies far off in the future. This is a nice thing about notes, this promising feeling they give us with no work.

【2】But for the purposes of stimulating or focusing thoughts, anything else works just as well as a note. All you really need is a little nick to the brain. Everyone has experienced this: When you are hungry, everything starts smelling good; when you have an idea, everything collaborates. In short, notes are no more *useful* than the words on a matchbook—to the prepared mind. Because thinking wants only the tiniest bit of novelty, the tiniest little bit of new per old. Our novelty-obsessed culture disturbs the new-to-old ratio in our minds and therefore makes it almost impossible to think. It is because people are so in the grip of this novelty that they feel the desperate need to keep notebooks against loss; they are convinced they have so much to lose. If people were doing the same thing over and over, rocked in the meditative arms of repetition, they could have some real fun.

【3】Real fun reminds me of the fun-loving British poet Stevie Smith, who celebrated the novelty-free life. Well, not quite novelty-free; it is a great pleasure to say no (“*Le Plaisir aristocratique de déplaire*”) though you must also occasionally say yes, “or you will turn into an Oblomov. He stayed in bed all day and was robbed by his servants. There was little enjoyment there.” A great celebrator of the “regular habits” which “sweeten simplicity,” she says, “In the middle of every morning I leave the kitchen and have a glass of sherry with Aunt. I can only say that *this is glorious*.” And because of her life of regular habits, the rare interruption is almost hallucinogenic. She reports seeing *The Trojan Women* on a friend’s television. She is nearly undone with amusement at the hash it makes of Euripides: “What an earthshaking joke this is. Yet, if my life was not simple, if I looked at television all the time, I might have missed it.”

【4】Memory as a job, as a notebook to be kept, is only necessary for those who insist upon novelty. If you delight in habit as Stevie Smith did, if it is your pleasure to do things in the same way without inviting change, you don’t have to write much down. And when things do change, as they will even without invitation, then you will really notice the change. Your memory will be deep, quiet, undifferentiated as a pool. Change will enter and twist like a drop of ink, the tiniest bit of new per old.

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