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Online Diaries: Towards a Structural Approach[1]

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Online diaries are at once thoroughly familiar and intensely new. Their publication on the Internet may be seen as upholding a long tradition in self-representational writing even as information technology modifies the forms and functions of such texts. Studying online diaries from a literary standpoint may therefore shed light on the development of new forms of writing, and contribute to assessing the extent of this transformation and its meaning. At the same time, viewing online diaries as primary sources may afford insight into the mores of ordinary people in contemporary America. Focusing on anonymous American diarists makes it possible to explore how this contemporary social practice reflects the transformations of the heartland in present-day America, how ordinary women and men, average Americans, make sense of their society and can be seen as representative of American culture, while at the same time engaging in the most personal kind of writing.

Online diaries became widespread in or around 1995: as the number of households connected to the network increased throughout the United States, diaries were posted on individual homepages mostly by programmers or computer scientists. These early diaries, many of which are still extant, reproduced the stark simplicity of a notebook's layout, with black print on a white background. Gradually, however, plain HTML coding was supplemented by the use of all the tools the Internet afforded, be it graphics, pictures, video or audio files. Still, online diaries could be posted only by those who had at least minimal skills in web design.[2]

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[1] An early draft of this paper was delivered at the colloquium *Internet and Literature: New Forms of Electronic Writing*, Université Paris IV-Sorbonne, 15–16 March 2002. It is part of a larger scale, ongoing research project about American self-representational writing on the Internet, to be published under the title *The Mirror and the Veil: An Overview of American Online Diaries and Blogs* (Amsterdam and New-York: Rodopi, 2005).

[2] Hyper Text Mark Up Language, the publishing language of the World Wide Web.

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This changed with two further developments: first, around 1997, Internet providers started offering free space for homepages. They gave the public several pre-set models making it possible to upload text and pictures. The personal web page was thus made accessible to the non-technologically minded and could become a space for one's daily musings. The second major development was that of weblogs.[3] Weblogs started out as lists of annotated links to other sites, progressively expanding to include the author's thoughts on a variety of topics as well as rants about current events. The real breakthrough, however, occurred when several companies offered a ready-made blank frame on which one could type whatever one wanted. The frame was then uploaded by the company, which also offered to create a site for free if needed. The technological knowledge requirement was thus completely bypassed. All and sundry could now post their thoughts on the Internet without possessing any coding or web designing skills. In the process, the word that had been coined to refer to the new kind of writing underwent a transformation. Some either mistakenly or humorously pronounced it [wi: -blog], thus coining the verb "to blog". In a similar process of familiarization through abbreviation, "webloggers" became known as "bloggers", while the genre evolved into fully fledged online diaries, updated daily at the very least, and often two or three times a day.

The practice of keeping an online diary is now so widespread that many diarists belong to nets or webrings or weblog rings.[4] Examples abound, making exhaustiveness impossible, but providing enough samples for the researcher eager to find out how the Internet takes hold of, adapts or transforms the age-old practice of journal writing beyond recognition. To do so, I will examine the structural features of online diaries. I will then attempt to define in what ways Internet diaries, while hardly restricted to America, are indeed a quintessentially American phenomenon. Finally, I propose to define in what way online diaries renegotiate the public/private dichotomy.

The sample under examination in this study consists of twelve diaries, all written by Americans, two of whom were born abroad – Carolyn Burke in Canada and Mary Anne in Sri Lanka. The twelve diarists being observed here are equally divided between women and men and except for Mary Anne, who publishes erotica while finishing her dissertation, none of them is a

[3] Rebecca Blood, "Weblogs: A History and a Perspective," http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html. Accessed 15 Feb. 2002.

[4] Diarist.net http://www.diarist.net/; Fem-Mass *The Personal Websites of the Female Masses* http://www.grownmencry.com/mijo/Femmass.html; Houston's blog http://h-townblogs.blogspot.com/; Open Pages http://www.hedgehog.net/op/. Websites accessed Oct. 2001 and *seq.*

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writer by trade. In addition to this sample, the present study also rests on the observation of several diarists' webrings containing literally thousands of diaries. As my primary purpose in the present paper is structure rather than content, I have chosen to narrow my focus and examine a limited number of instances. Structural approaches by definition transcend the individual yet provide tools for the analysis of individual cases. The same theoretical choice has led me to disregard the largely formal distinction between blogs and diaries to focus on the underlying features they share.

A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF ONLINE DIARIES

A structural approach is one way of laying the groundwork for an aesthetic study of websites going beyond the individual characteristics of each to ascertain the features common to all. Such a treatment necessarily implies that content will be, if not overlooked, at least downplayed. The close textual analysis of individual diaries is hardly compatible with the identification of these writings' fundamental structures, which is the main focus of the present study.

Four such structural features can be identified and of these, the first one, accumulation, can be said to be the one characteristic all websites, be they political or commercial, have in common.[5] The additional characteristics are open-endedness, self-reflexivity and co-production.

Accumulation

Accumulation refers to the fact that text no longer is the only mode of expression for online diarists, who use the full gamut of media available to writers. Although text still remains the major medium in early diaries, more recent diaries include pictures of the writers as in Bunt Sign's diary or Terri's diary, pictures of pets, of the view out of the window (Bunt Sign), of the desk they write on (Shmuel), or wedding pictures.[6] Drawings and friezes representing leaves, flowers, insects such as ladybugs or bees, reminiscent of the notebooks with lock and key traditionally given to girls to write their diary in

[5] Viviane Serfaty, "Showdown on the Internet: Al Gore's and George Bush's Campaign 2000 Websites," in *L'Internet en politique, des Etats-Unis à l'Europe*, ed., Viviane Serfaty (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2002), 79.

[6] A sampling of early diaries can be consulted on *The Online Diary History Project*, http://www.diaryhistoryproject.com/recollections/1995_01_03.htm; see also Bunt Sign's Diary http://www.buntsign.com/index.html; Terri's Diary, *Footnotes*, http://www.secraterri.com; Shmuel's Diary http://www.babeltower.org/soapbox/blog/; Houston blogs http://h-townblogs.blogspot.com/. Websites accessed Nov. 2001 and *seq*.

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also show up regularly on both men's and women's sites.[7] Less frequently but significantly, the diarist's voice can be heard on audio files.[8] Advertisements for software or in some cases for sponsors can be found at the bottom of the page. All of the diaries, even the most plainly designed, include hypertext links to various sites, to other diaries, to fiction written by the author and to a seemingly infinite number of texts, generating an impression of boundless content, so that the form of diaries is driven by technology.[9]

Accumulation strategies seem to be typical of Internet sites, apparently out of sheer joy and enthusiasm about the technological feats made possible by the Internet. This drive towards comprehensiveness, however, points to several layers of meaning. Accumulation first meets the need for exhaustivity felt by diary writers. Eager as they are to disclose themselves to the full and aware at the same time of the Sisyphean impossibility of the task, they multiply the angles of approach and attempt all-inclusiveness. As a result, they keep accumulating details about an event or a state of mind, coming back to the same point and trying to unravel its meaning, no matter how minute it might seem, piling up photographs upon drawings, using punctuation erratically in an attempt at enhancing its expressiveness.

Accumulation of information through the use of different media is also an attempt at creating a rounded character, in Forsterian terms, as opposed to the flat bi-dimensionality and rigid order imposed by print on a blank page.[10] Diaries thus endeavour to produce a complex, multi-faceted fictional self or *persona*, a point I shall return to in more detail in the following section.

Further, the accumulation of different media made possible by diaries frees them from the constraints of form and style, which leads to absolute freedom of representation and to the destabilization of a unified vision of personality. Online diaries provide a space in which to accumulate signs so that daily life and states of mind can unfold in all their chaotic complexity. The accumulation of signs counters the comforting simplifications of everyday life to point to the radical singularity, the absolute uniqueness and the endless complexity of a given individual.

In addition, the reader or viewer must perceive and make sense of disparate data provided through diverse media (print, photographs, videos,

[7] http://www.inu.org/alewife/index.htm; http://ladybug.notsweet.net/. Websites accessed Feb. 2002 and *seq*.

[8] "Honors and Multimedia". *Shmuel's Soapbox*, http://www.babeltower.org/soapbox/0300/031800.html.

[9] http://www.mamohanraj.com/Diary/diary.html; http://carolyn.org/writings.html. Websites accessed Dec. 2001 and *seq*.

[10] E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963, orig. pub. 1927), 75.

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audio files), in an ongoing process of interpretation and construction of meaning. Yet, no matter how dissimilar the sources may be, each piece of information bolsters every other piece and conveys mutually reinforcing information. Accumulation thus creates density and texture. Signs are piled upon signs and their very multiplicity is conducive to the production of meaning. Accumulation thus fulfils the all-important function of immersing the viewer into the world picture of the diary writer and requiring him to interpret the material provided him. This is the first, albeit minimal, aspect of the interactivity characterizing online diaries. It is a bid for "total participation", in which reading is akin to "the active appropriation of the Other."[11]

Closure versus open-endedness

Two sorts of diaries can be found on the Net: some are limited to a pre-set period of time, such as *Charlie's Daily Web*, which was planned to last for exactly a year and stopped at the appointed time, or Carolyn Burke's diary which was posted from 1995 to 2001. Other diaries actually started in the 1970s in the traditional way, were coded into HTML and uploaded online, and are still regularly updated, like Terri's *Footnotes* or *Jimsjournal* [sic], among many others.[12] These two forms reproduce the traditional distinction between autobiography and diary writing.

From their very inception, autobiographies encompass their own ending, because they mean to show the reader the author's progress from some point back in time to the time of writing itself.[13] The enunciative pattern is thus comparable to a loop and is characterized by circularity and closure. Autobiographical self-representation also displays many of the features of self-justification and self-creation.[14] Autobiographies are essentially public

[11] Julia Kristeva, *Sémiotiké: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), 120.

[12] Jimsjournal [sic] started in 1996; Carolyn Burke's Journal started in 1995 and is now offline. Both are part of the *Online Diary History Project:* http://www.diaryhistoryproject.com/; Terri's Diary, *Footnotes*; Charlie's Daily Web http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/9652/report.html. Websites accessed December 2001 and *seq.*

[13] Philippe Lejeune, «Comment finissent les journauxin» in *Genèses du 'je' manuscrits et autobiographie*, ed., Philippe Lejeune, Catherine Viollet (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2000), 213.

[14] Nadine Kuperty-Tsur, ed., *Ecriture de soi et argumentation: rhétorique et modèles de l'autoreprésentation. Actes du colloque de l'Université de Tel-Aviv, 3–5 mai 1998* (Caen: Presses Universitaires de Caen, 2000), 9; Gustave Gusdorf, «Conditions et limites de l'autobiographie,» *Formen der Selbstdarstellung: Festgabe für Fritz Neuber* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1956) 106–23; James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 22–23.

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documents for which *The Confessions of St Augustine* can be said to have provided both a model and a foundation.[15]

Diaries, by contrast, are basically open-ended; they are usually started with no clear idea of the time when they are going to end. Linearity is the distinguishing feature of their enunciative pattern, through the inclusion of a date and of rigorously chronological entries. Self-representation in diaries also differs markedly, veering more towards self-expression than the production of a consistent, unified version of oneself: in this case as well, open-endedness is the rule. In addition, diaries being ostensibly private texts, they can be seen as a means to think through the seam between the private and the public self and, as such, they are more attuned to contemporary uncertainties about the self. Ever since Gusdorf's groundbreaking 1956 essay, studies of self-representational writing have rested on the assumption that the selves which emerge in diaries come into being through the writing process itself and hence do not necessarily reflect the writer's actual experience. Diaries thus construct a fiction of self.[16]

This distinction becomes more nebulous on the Internet because the continuing online presence of these texts gives rise to phenomena such as a discussion list, for Carolyn Burke's diary, or messages in a guest book or plain e-mail messages, all of which afford finite texts a degree of open-endedness.[17] The autobiographical genre fades into the diaristic genre, in a process of hybridization often observable on the Internet.

It is precisely this open-endedness which gives online self-representational writing its fascinating, sometimes even addictive quality. The reader's interest is kept up by the discontinuity and the irregularity inherent to daily entries, as well as by the constantly deferred promise of an ending, of closure. Open-endedness is both a defining feature of online diaries and one of the reasons for their success.

In addition, online diaries are characterized by dialectics of stability and motion. The linear chronological entries over months or years, the excruciatingly detailed descriptions of the trivia of everyday life or the painful soul-searching engaged in day in, day out provide a space for stability, fixity

[15] William C. Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 32.

[16] Gusdorf; John Paul Eakin ed., *American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); Shari Benstock ed., *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Simon Harel, *Le récit de soi* (Montréal: XYZ Editeur, 1997).

[17] This discussion list contains 136 messages and stopped being active in Sept. 2001. http://groups.yahoo.com/group/clburke/messages. Accessed Feb. 2002.

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even. Yet the fixed framework set up in this way allows each diarist a space of freedom in which to write using the first-person singular, the pronoun "I." As diarists write "I," they have to work out a definition of self that is the very first step towards self-transformation, open-ended and potentially infinite. The writing process itself creates this space of redefinition, and this is compounded by a practice common to all Internet diaries, a link to the entry of the year before ("One year ago") or to the following years ("One year from now"). The two devices – flashback and foreshadowing – provide both the reader and the writer of diaries with a long-term vision and with a sense of perspective. Looking back, the road travelled can be measured, the self-transformation or lack of it can be gauged – and the fragmentation of life into a myriad trivia can be bypassed and transmuted into a narrative of selfhood, an archaeological reconstruction of the "I."

Self-Reflexivity

Self-reflexivity takes two forms: commentaries about the Internet, and commentaries about diary-writing itself. Each one of the writers marvels at the vistas of opportunity opened by the Internet for "community-building" or for achieving world peace.[18] Such remarks – deemed utopian by the very people making them – bespeak an awareness of the modernity of the Net. Online diarists perceive themselves as pioneers, consciously engaging in the development of a new set of practices. This is why they feel the need to think through both the Internet's future and their own online experience. Self-reflexivity about the Internet is thus a means of joining a fellowship of cutting-edge practitioners of a cutting-edge art; it functions on a collective level.

Self-reflexivity also functions on a far more individual level. Throughout the various diaries under examination, the writers all ask themselves why they have taken up diary writing. They feel the need to justify their involvement into this practice, probably because it no longer has the religious and/or cultural justifications it used to have in the past. When a practice loses the social backing it once had, it requires some sort of validation, if only to avoid the charge of narcissism or plain vanity. Online diarists need to think about their writing even while they project themselves into it. Self-reflexivity thus enables both writing and the critical distanciation from that writing which is crucial to the slow construction of meaning diarists are engaged in.

[18] Carolyn Burke http://carolyn.org/Page6.html. Accessed Feb. 2002; Mary Anne's *Ongoing, Erratic Diary* http://www.mamohanraj.com/Diary/whyjourn.html. Accessed Feb. 2002 and *seq.*

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The answers provided by diarists when attempting to unravel their motivations vary in form but hardly ever in content and constitute an intricate meta-discourse. The flip "Why not?" (Shmuel, Mary-Anne) is always followed by a more elaborate attempt at making the author's intentions clear. Ladybug, for instance, is maintaining a long-distance relationship and wants to "let her boy-friend into her little garden of thoughts and feelings and observations."[19] She is highly aware of the public nature of her writings and she accordingly constructs a narrative that has very little to do with her inner being; her text is an eminently social activity. Miriam similarly writes about "business travel … restaurants in Boulder, Colorado, random factoids, the deaths of obscure celebrities."[20] It is only indirectly, when she lists her life's goals, for instance, that she attempts more than a purely descriptive entry.[21]

Other diaries are less clear-cut. Thus Mary Anne also starts out by saying that she is keeping a diary so that her acquaintances and family will be able to keep up with her, thus relieving her of the chore of correspondence. A few lines down, however, she admits to editing the journal quite a bit; she refrains from overly personal details, yet has been helped get over rough patches in her life by readers and by her own writings. Finally she acknowledges the fact that as a writer, she has "a desire to be known and understood and speak [her] truth and have others listening, responding, touched."[22] Another English literature major and budding writer, Shmuel, finds the experience valuable to "work out a few philosophical and psychological issues" and hopes that "having an audience will keep [him] going."[23] These excerpts all illustrate the same need to justify and validate diary writing, perhaps to evade the inescapable realization that "any meditation about everyday life ends up in a perception of meaninglessness."[24] The feeling of vacuity must therefore be transcended both for the writer and the implied or actual reader.

An additional aspect of this meta discourse is the writers' awareness of the kinship between diary writing and fiction. Terri thus states that her journal is "a hybrid of observation and perception … detail and overview … disclosure and omission. I don't tell you everything, in other words. I don't think I have to. And not everything I *do* tell you is 100% factual,

[19] http://ladybug.notsweet.net/archives/2001_05.php. Accessed Feb. 2002.
[20] http://www.areasofunrest.net/faq.html. Accessed Feb. 2002.
[21] http://www.areasofunrest.net/lifelist.html. Accessed Feb. 2002.
[22] http://www.mamohanraj.com/Diary/whyjourn.html. Accessed Feb. 2002.
[23] http://www.babeltower.org/soapbox/why.html. Accessed Feb. 2002.
[24] Sophie de Mijolla-Mellor, «Survivre à son passé» in *L'autobiographie: VIès rencontres psychanalytiques d'Aix en Provence 1987* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1990), 104. My translation.

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100% of the time. … there is literal account of fact … and there is gentle manipulation of fact for the sake of art."[25]

This statement pinpoints the chasm between diaristic narratives and the raw rendering of day-to-day experience. All of the diarists are aware of the fictionalization process implicit in any kind of personal writing and at the same time have a post-modern awareness of previous diaries, journals they borrow from more or less consciously. Self-reflexivity is a function of the modern use of intertextuality, i.e. the inclusion, in one's own writing, of the whole of the existing literary models. Online diaries are the re-presentation of inner spaces as well as of the self-consciousness of the post-modern writer, for whom writing primarily is an exploration of the system of signs constituting language.

Co-production

In past centuries, diaries were ostensibly private, even though a reader or fictional addressee was always surmised or at least implied. Indeed, whenever a diary writer edits or otherwise revises entries, "these superficially private writings become unmistakably public documents, intended for an external readership."[26] Moreover, all of them provide enough background to help the reader identify the various characters interacting with the diary writer, thus contextualizing each entry.

Readership is an important issue for all the diary writers in our sample. All of them include a link to their mailbox and avowedly relish responses from readers. All diaries feature a "Notify List," in which the diarist offers to e-mail readers whenever a new entry is uploaded. Weblogs push interactivity even further by including an answer button that automatically records and adds up the number of comments to any given entry. Readers can thus see at a glance which entries have aroused the most interest. Terri expresses a general feeling when she writes in her introduction: "I crave feedback, I live for feedback …"[27]

What all of this points to is that where traditional diaries were written for an implied, ideal reader, online diaries explicitly search for an audience and in so doing, turn themselves into a collaborative project. The interactions between writer and audience turn the diary into a process of co-production

[25] Terri's Diary, *Footnotes*; emphasis in the text. Accessed Feb. 2002.

[26] Lynn Z. Bloom, "I Write for Myself and Strangers," in Suzanne L. Bunkers and Cynthia A. Huff, eds., *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women's Diaries* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 23.

[27] Terri's Diary.

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and co-enunciation.[28] Not only is diary writing a creation, reading diaries is a creative process which interweaves with and modifies the diary itself, making it the centre of a collective production of meaning. This meaning takes the form of fictionalization of the self and of the events in the writer's daily life. Diary writers create themselves as the central characters in a fictional theatre populated by a large supporting cast of minor characters and of readers. The fiction thus created is essentially interactive and as such, thoroughly renews the art of the diary by turning it into a collaborative effort.

Co-production also points to the suffering caused by the difficulty of constructing oneself as a unified person.[29] The feedback of readers is therefore required in order to reinforce the sense of the diarist's own identity. Each response to an entry gives diarists confirmation of their own existence. Identity construction is thus grounded in "inter-subjectivity" and is no longer confined to interiority.[30]

THE AMERICAN QUEST FOR SELF

The fascination with online diaries, while not only an American phenomenon, nevertheless appears to have elective affinities with some traits of American culture, both in terms of sheer numbers and because the social practice of diary-writing harks back to deeply entrenched undercurrents in American culture. The results of a Google search for online diaries written in French shows that the ratio to diaries written in English is of one to roughly 36.5, with an overwhelming majority of North Americans.[31] The largest diarists' webring thus lists 4,734 diaries written in the United States as opposed to 405 diaries originating from the United Kingdom and 28 from France.[32] An obvious explanation for this situation is suggested by the vastly superior number of American households connected to the Internet. Current estimates put Internet access at 60 percent of all households in the United

[28] Kirsten Foot and Steve Schneider, "Online Action: In the US 2000 Political Campaign," in Serfaty, ed., *L'Internet*, 23; Marie-Françoise Chanfrault-Duchet, "Textualization of the Self and Gender-Identity in the Life-Story," in Cosslett et al., eds., *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods* (London: Routledge, 2000), 62.

[29] De Mijolla-Mellor, 112.

[30] John E. Jackson, "Mythes du sujet: à propos de l'autobiographie et de la cure analytique," in *L'autobiographie: VIès rencontres psychanalytiques d'Aix en Provence 1987* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1990), 140.

[31] The search for diaries in French used the keywords "journaux intimes" and restricted the search to France; the search engine retrieved 5,890 items. For a search using the keywords "online diaries" and conducted on the entire Web, the search engine retrieved 210,000 items. Search conducted on 27 Dec. 2002.

[32] Source: Diarist.Net Registry. http://www.diarist.net/registry/. Accessed 27 Dec. 2002.

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States, totalling 149 million users, as compared to 33 million British users, while French Internet users add up to a mere 11 million.[33] Such widespread access accounts for an ever more sophisticated use of the Internet in the USA, according to a survey carried out in March 2002 by the Pew Internet and American Life Project detailing daily Internet activities. The survey shows that one percent of all American users "create a web log or 'blog' that others can read online."[34]

Yet familiarity with technology and with the Internet, while a prerequisite, still provides only a surface explanation and falls far short of accounting for the phenomenon of online diaries and their success in the United States. A deeper set of causes, having to do with the American philosophical tradition, may underlie the rise of the blogging phenomenon which may be seen as a direct offshoot of Transcendentalism. Emerson's philosophy of the individual has been shown to be essential to the development and articulation of the American construct of national identity, turning Transcendentalism into the most far-reaching intellectual movement of the nineteenth century.[35] Two of Emerson's essays, "Self-Reliance" and "The American Scholar," are especially relevant to online diary-writing.

"Self-Reliance," Emerson's 1841 essay, charts the difficulty human beings come up against when attempting to create themselves as subjects:

> Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs. … Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world.[36]

When contrasting conformity to self-reliance, Emerson insists on the persistence of conflict within the subject between authority, conformity and self-creation, even while affirming the need for self-creation. Emerson therefore institutes the creation of the self as the locus of a tug-of-war between

[33] Source: Cyberatlas. *Global Online Populations*. March 2002. http://cyberatlas.internet.com/big_picture/geographics/article/0,1323,5911_151151,00.html. Accessed 27 Dec. 2002.

[34] Source: *The Pew Internet and American Life Project*. http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/chart.asp?img=Daily_A6.htm. Accessed 27 Dec. 2002.

[35] Sandra Laugier, "Emerson: penser l'ordinaire," *Revue française d'études américaines* **91** (2002) 57.

[36] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays: First Series*. Project Gutenberg. http://www.ibiblio.org/gutenberg/etext01/1srwe10.txt. Accessed 28 Dec. 2002.

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opposites, having nothing to do with an ideal self but rather being a constant process of becoming.[37]

The philosophical trajectory charted by Emerson and encompassed in the concept of self-reliance finds direct expression in diaristic practices which attempt to construct a consistent though ever-evolving version of self through the painstaking analysis of the writer's inner life as well as through a description of the most mundane aspects of everyday life. The necessary grounding of self-creation in the trivial derives from another Emerson text, "The American Scholar," an 1837 address to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge:

> Instead of the sublime and beautiful; the near, the low, the common, was explored and poetized. That, which had been negligently trodden under foot by those who were harnessing and provisioning themselves for long journeys into far countries, is suddenly found to be richer than all foreign parts. The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time. It is a great stride. It is a sign, – is it not? of new vigor, when the extremities are made active, when currents of warm life run into the hands and the feet. I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provencal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds.[38]

Emerson asserts how the familiar, the trivial, the commonplace are precisely what gives access to the essential reality of humanity. Through the investigation of the minute events of everyday life, the reality common to all may emerge and lay the foundation for a new community. Because private events, no matter how outwardly insignificant, lay the groundwork for self-creation, they rightfully deserve the diarist's and the public's attention. The very dailiness of one's experience provides the basis for the construction of self.

The stark contrast between European culture and day-to-day American experience evidenced in this passage shows how Emerson attempts to sketch the outlines of a specifically American art grounded in the ordinary and the commonplace.[39] The construction of American culture rests on a break with and a redefinition of the European cultural heritage.[40] In this context, the quest for self online diaries illustrate can be seen as an aspect of the wider

[37] Elise Domenach, "La reprise sceptique du cogito cartésien et la *self-reliance* chez Emerson," *Revue française d'études américaines* **91** (2002), 98; Stanley Cavell, "Being Odd, Getting Even," in Stephen Mulhall, ed., *The Cavell Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 302.

[38] Ralph Waldo Emerson. "The American Scholar." http://www.emersoncentral.com/amscholar.htm. Accessed 28 Dec. 2002.

[39] Laugier, 45.

[40] Pamela J. Schirmeister, *Less Legible Meanings: Between Poetry and Philosophy in the Work of Emerson* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

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American quest to ground value in the individual and to issue a declaration of independence from conformity and external rules – in other words, the American quest for self-reliance.

PUBLICIZING THE INTIMATE: THE VEIL AND THE LOOKING-GLASS

The contemporary appetite for intimate disclosure is not only a recent phenomenon. It can be said to date back at least as far as the pre-Romantic era and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*.[41] The divide between public and private selves is negotiated differently in different societies at different historical periods. Contemporary media and the Internet merely emphasize an age-old trend and compel us to re-think this divide. In the case of online diaries, publicizing the intimate meets two purposes, a social one and another, individual one.

Making one's diary public from the outset might condemn the writer to rigid adherence to social codes. Being completely transparent to others, being subjected to maximum visibility can lead to so strong an internalization of social conventions that writers can textualize nothing but the most conventional feelings, actions or thoughts.[42] This indeed happens in those diaries expressly written to provide onlookers with a record of daily activities. Each entry displays nothing but a socially acceptable version of the self devoid of any controversial or negative aspect. The prevailing blandness of such diaries points to the harshness of the obligation to conform on the one hand, but also to the fact that a diary by no means necessarily entails self-disclosure or a re-negotiation of privacy. Such diaries merely secularize the religious diary young girls had to keep in the nineteenth century and show to their parents on a daily basis as evidence of their religious purity.[43] They act as metonymies for the self in society and hence do not attempt anything but a record of the trivia from which daily life is made.

The most fascinating diaries move beyond the social self to give the reader/viewer a glimpse of the depths. They meet the deep-set human desire for transparency deriving from the realization that communicating the immediacy of one's own experience is impossible to achieve once childhood has been left behind.[44] The consequence of such incommunicability is closure in the opacity of self, while the desire for unity with the Other turns

[41] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les confessions* (Paris: Garnier, 1964; orig. pub. 1788).
[42] Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 236.
[43] Philippe Lejeune, *Le moi des demoiselles: Enquête sur le journal de jeune fille* (Paris: Seuil, 1993).
[44] Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: la transparence et l'obstacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 19.

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into a desire for instantaneous understanding, going together with the fantasy of a Golden Age: a mythical beginning where unity ruled, where no veil whatsoever came between one and the Other.

In the diaries attempting a representation of the inner processes of the self, the existence of a private domain is simultaneously posited and violated, as the boundaries of what can be revealed are thrust further back. Interestingly, some diarists provide their actual names, like Miriam H. Nadel, in *Areas of Unrest*. Such diary-writers consciously offer themselves for scrutiny and in so doing they both create a new version of themselves and enrol others into collaborating in the endeavour. They attempt to alter the rules governing social communication by blurring or pushing back the boundaries of what can be disclosed, and what has to be withheld from others.[45] In other words, privacy is acknowledged, but only so as to be invaded and reshaped into something else. This is achieved by means of the complex apparatus of the computer.

The technological set-up required for Internet access includes a computer screen, operating as a paradoxical, twofold metaphor, that of a veil and that of a looking glass. The literal function of a screen is precisely to conceal and as a result of this perception, all kinds of highly controversial discourses are freely displayed on the Net. The screen seemingly offers a protection against the gaze of others, enabling each diary writer to disclose intimate thoughts and deeds, thus attempting to achieve transparency and breaking the taboo of opacity regulating social relationships. The screen, which mediates Internet access, thus establishes a dialectical relationship between disclosure and secrecy, between transparency and opacity.[46] There is of course no such thing as private content on the Internet; the pretence of privacy is *de facto* shattered to pieces, since anyone can gain access to any site, yet the diarists feel protected by the very size of the Internet.

How then can we account for the fact that the screen, which functions metaphorically as a veiling device, actually seems to enable diary writers to violate the codes of opacity instead of locking them into solipsism? The paradox lies in the invisibility seemingly enjoyed on the Internet by both writers and readers. Thanks to the screen, diarists feel they can write about their innermost feelings without fearing identification and humiliation, readers feel they can inconspicuously observe others and derive power from that knowledge. "Making oneself invisible means one no longer is a mere

[45] Philippe Lejeune, *«Cher écran»: journal personnel, ordinateur, Internet* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 422.

[46] Viviane Serfaty, *L'Internet, l'imaginaire, le politique: perspective comparatiste sur quelques aspects du réseau en France, en Grande-Bretagne, aux Etats-Unis* (Thèse de doctorat: Université de Paris 7, 1999), 223.

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transparency anyone can see through, but that one has turned into a gaze that no taboo can stop."[47] The screen seems to allow diary-writers and readers both a symbolic re-appropriation of social space and the violation of social codes – a violation whose power derives from the persistence in real life of the taboo broken in a virtual space. Without the prohibition of intimate disclosure, there would be no transgression. The prohibition therefore is constitutive of the meaning of self-revelation on the Internet.

The screen can thus be said to function as a connecting space between the diary-writer and society. The computer screen is not only a device which keeps others at a distance but it is also a symbolic space where dreams and fantasies can be projected. These identity and personality fragments indeed spotlight some areas of the self, but the very action of bringing something to light renders other areas even more opaque, so that the screen is transformed into a looking-glass onto which diary-writers project the signifiers of their identity in an ongoing process of self-destruction and reconstruction.

The screen thus plays the part of the Other, of the ideal Other, because it is, in and of itself, empty and can thus be endowed with a plurality of meanings. It does not demand reciprocity, but only functions as a mirror of the self. And it is through such a mirror that the private self can move beyond the limits imposed by social codes and connect with others in virtual space. The readers of online diaries all become mirrors for diary writers, reflecting and commenting on their every thought, and hence providing a social space in which the private self can be deployed and reconnect with the social self.

[47] Starobinski, 302. My translation.

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