Introduction

The concept of online diaries and weblogs usually arouses mild disbelief among listeners, for whom the mere idea sounds oxymoronic. In social representations, diaries are first and foremost intimate writings and making them available online therefore appears to raise intractable privacy issues; diaries are believed to be basically private documents that should never get public exposure. As we shall see in the following study, literary critics as well as social scientists have largely put such notions to rest, but the whole undertaking seems to many to smack of exhibitionism, or even worse, to be plainly irrelevant. Still, and with utter disregard for the scepticism evinced by many, self-representational writing flourishes on the Internet under a variety of guises, creating or re-creating a wide array of forms of self-expression, and begging for explanations rather than bafflement, condescension and offhand dismissal. Describing these forms and discovering the functions of personal narratives online, will therefore be one of the major foci of the present study. The second aspect of this work has to do with the affinities between American civilization and diary writing, more particularly in the nineteenth century. However, one of my basic theoretical assumptions is that, for all their apparent and sometimes actual novelty, online diaries and weblogs are but the latest avatars in the long history of self-representational writing. The analysis of online diary – and weblog-writing will accordingly begin with a study of the historical development of the form.

1. Definitions

Literary historians tend to have widely divergent views as to the starting-point and the scope of the history of self-representational writing. For Georges Gusdorf, personal narratives start with the
invention of writing. For him, “the very first man who set out to speak and write his name inaugurated a new mode of human presence in the world. Beginning with the very first one, any inscription is an inscription of the self, the signature of an individual who tacks himself onto Nature, thus affording himself room to reflect upon and to transmute its meaning” (Gusdorf 1991a: 22).1 In another poetic expression of the same idea, Gusdorf writes that the invention of writing marks the passage from pre-history to history. “Writing enables direct access to the consciousness of individuals; we can hope to see the world through their eyes as reflected in their writing. ‘A mirror in ink’ in Michel Beaujour’s words [...] enabling a transfer from the inside to the outside” (Gusdorf 1991b: 12).2

Gusdorf bases his views on the monumental study published by Georg Misch in 1907,3 whose initial four volumes started with Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome and ended with medieval Europe. Younger disciples then carried on his life’s work and studied the history of autobiography from the Renaissance and up to the Enlightenment (Gusdorf 1991a: 19). This tradition considers a large variety of texts to be variants of self-representational writing: “life stories, letters, assorted confessions” (Gusdorf 1991a: 20);4 even ‘to do’ lists, appointment books, as well as account books and curricula vitae are all seen as inscriptions of the self, albeit described as “the lowest degree of self-representational writing, […] peripheral to the person’s private reality” (Gusdorf 1991a: 23).5

Gusdorf’s 1948 doctoral dissertation, started while he was a prisoner of war and completed under the guidance of French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, marked the beginning of his lifelong

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1 “Le premier homme qui prend la parole pour dire et écrire son nom inaugure une nouvelle modalité de la présence de l’homme dans le monde. Toute écriture à partir de la première, est écriture de soi, signature d’un individu qui s’ajoute à la nature, se donnant ainsi la possibilité d’en redoubler en esprit et d’en transfigurer les significations”. Emphasis in the text. My translation; unless indicated otherwise, all subsequent translations will be mine.


4 “récits de vie, lettres confidences variées”.

5 “ces carnets […] se maintiennent à la périphérie de l’actualité intime de la personne”.

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dedication to the study of personal narratives. This early work, combined with a subsequent 1956 article, was tucked away in an obscure volume written mostly in German to honor the memory of German scholar Franz Neubert (Gusdorf 1956: 106-123). Yet it set the stage for widespread interest in the study of self-representational writing in France, and spawned a long line of students and disciples in the English-speaking world as well.

Unsurprisingly, however, the literary criticism of the seventies and eighties began the deconstruction of the edifice patiently erected by the instigator of the new field of study, much to his displeasure and even rage. In his later work, Gusdorf literally seethes with anger against the new developments in the field, and the chief target of his contempt is Philippe Lejeune’s vision of the history and of the nature of the genre. Indeed Lejeune tightens the definition of the genre on the one hand, and on the other hand ascribes to Jean-Jacques Rousseau the role of initiator of the modern form of self-representational writing.

To Gusdorf, this is a gross misinterpretation as well as an unacceptable restriction of the field to France only. He lists the various bibliographies itemizing the accumulation of diaries, confessions and journals in Germany, Britain and America (Gusdorf 1991a: 56-60). He also shows that the English tradition definitely influenced Rousseau’s work, not only because he was acquainted with Bunyan’s autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666), through his Dutch publisher, but also because in 1766, he had met Boswell, who had kept a diary since 1762 (Gusdorf 1991a: 76).6 Gusdorf accordingly does not shy away from berating Lejeune for his alleged ignorance on numerous occasions. Deriding him for his inability to read German and more particularly Misch’s works, Gusdorf points out that the latter’s four-volume history, combined with the three-volume continuation written by his followers, still stops far short of what Lejeune sees as a watershed for modern self-representational writing, i.e. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*, published in 1782 and 1789.7 To Gusdorf, this proves beyond any shadow of a doubt that Lejeune’s periodization is irredeemably wrong.

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6 Boswell’s *Journal* was long considered to be lost before being eventually discovered in the nineteenth century. It was then published in eighteen volumes from 1928 to 1934.
7 See for instance Gusdorf 1991a: 30: “certains frères ignorantis”, i.e. “some ignoramuses”; see also Gusdorf 1991a: 55: “Or cette œuvre savante, demeurée inachevée, s’arrête en fait avant le point origine considéré par Lejeune comme le commencement du commencement, le ‘milieu du XVIIIe siècle’. Interrogé sur ce point au moins bizarre, notre auteur répond qu’il ne lit pas l’allemand, comme si cela...
This Homeric and somewhat one-sided controversy – for Lejeune seems to have responded to these attacks with perfect restraint – has a bearing on the present study, inasmuch as online diaries may be said to represent but the latest avatar in the long history of self-inscription. To identify the historical roots of online diaristic writing and to try and discover its structural features, it is essential to position ourselves and take a stand on two distinct strands in this argument, the reason why diaries are written on the one hand, and the definition of diaristic writing on the other hand.

1.1. Religion, reason, desire

The ancestry of contemporary self-representational writing may be traced back to three major sources, each linked to a different tradition: Catholicism; English Puritanism; Libertines. Plutarch’s Parallel Lives, recounting the lives of great men, as well as the Roman practise of writing one’s autobiography under the canonical title De propria sua vita, served as models for the religious and philosophical introspection carried out by St Augustine or St Theresa, who modified the pattern in their turn. The Catholic tradition may indeed be said to start with St Augustine’s Confessions in the fifth century A.D., highlighting his spiritual journey and written for the edification of his contemporaries and of future generations. Other works using the first-person singular within Catholicism abound, two of the most famous such texts being St Theresa of Avila’s El Libro de Sua Vida, and John Henry Newman’s Apologia Pro Vita Sua in England, in the nineteenth century (Olney 1981: 28).

Seventeenth century England, shaken by political and religious upheavals, “forced people to search within themselves for compensations to the dismemberment of the outside world” (Gusdorf 1991a: 212). Bunyan’s autobiography, Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners (1666), may thus be said to constitute the second line of...

8 For this insight on Libertines I am indebted to Jean Fabre’s oral comments transcribed in Georges Gusdorf 1975: 998.
9 “L’urgence des motivations politiques et religieuses superposées à ce surgissement de possibilités neuves oblige les hommes à chercher en eux-mêmes des compensations au démembrement du monde extérieur”.

l’autorisait à rejeter dans le néant tout ce qui a été écrit dans cet idiome”, i. e.: “in fact, this learned, still unfinished work [i.e. Misch’s], ends before the landmark considered by Lejeune to be the beginning of all beginnings, the middle of the 18th century. Asked about this bizarre quirk, to say the least, our author answers he cannot read German, as if that allowed him to cast into nothingness whatever was written in that language”.

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ancestry for self-representational writing. The Puritan journals were a requirement of religious self-discipline. Like the seventeenth century Quietist journals, they recounted a spiritual journey towards personal salvation. Self-representational writing plays an all-important part in this process, as an exercise in self-scrutiny and interpretation of everyday life events and experiences (Gusdorf 1991b: 445). In such texts, faith is exposed to the slings and arrows of the individual’s experience of it, and the fear of being bereft of grace is permanent. The Puritan journal often is therefore an account of anxious and tortured journeys through the uncertainties of the soul (Gusdorf 1975: 988). But then again, the mere fact of becoming aware of one’s fall from grace and of praying for its return amounts to an act of faith in the power of the self to rise from the slough of despond (Gusdorf 1991b: 445). Perhaps this is the reason why, from then on and well into the twentieth century, this inner sanctum became the supreme locus legitimizing all human actions and relations (Gueissaz 1995: 83), while at the same time seeking to contain within strict limits any disorderly emotions (Gueissaz 1995: 95).

In the seventeenth century, books of the self were also written by Libertines, whose philosophical views opposed the absolute power of kings and therefore incurred their wrath. This was paradoxically made possible by the very rise of absolutism itself which, by positing a law imposed on public behavior while remaining indifferent or neutral towards private behavior, instituted a separation between the private and the public self. Libertines thus displayed extreme freedom in their thinking and writings, while conforming strictly to the mores of their contemporaries in their public lives (Haroche 1995). The simultaneously scandalous and self-serving nature of such writings irritated contemporary critics. Interestingly, when Rousseau’s *Confessions* were first published, Diderot disparagingly compared him to Cardano, whose *De Vita Propria* was widely read in the sixteenth and seventeenth century (Gusdorf 1975: 998). While far from being a philosophical Libertine, since he lived in the sixteenth century, his autobiography caused much outrage because Cardano did not flinch from listing, with seeming candor, his character flaws, his eccentricities and quirks, and his sinful actions (Wolff 1991). Such unabashed forthrightness could easily pass for self-vindication and was accordingly as widely berated as the book was widely read.

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10 During the debate that followed Gusdorf’s talk, Jean Fabre related Diderot’s appraisal of Rousseau: “un impudent, un Cardan”.
The first two strands briefly described here – Catholicism and Puritanism – placed writings of the self under the aegis of religion. Then the philosophical Libertines, followed by Enlightenment philosophers, placed them under the aegis of Reason by developing the concept of an inner space devoted to internal deliberation, thus beginning the long secularization process of the form. Samuel Pepys’ diary, written between 1660 and 1669, is one of the landmarks of this evolution. The institution of a private space, where thought could roam freely, accelerated the paradigm shift that led the individual from the situation of being under the sway of religion to the situation of an individual fondly supposed to be ruled by reason in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Then a new paradigm shift occurred. Even though his work undeniably stemmed from a long tradition, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s posthumously published *Confessions* did indeed mark the beginning of modernity inasmuch as the autobiographer appeared to be ruled neither by religion nor by reason, but by desire. The notion of the individual, already largely put in place by religious thinking, was even further secularized and asserted its independence from and opposition to society. The rise of desire as the prime mover of humankind constituted the major change in self-conception occurring in the middle of the eighteenth century and rippling down to the present day, not least on the Internet.

1.2. Formal characteristics of self-representational writing

The second point requiring some elucidation is that of the definition of self-representational writing and more specifically of the diaristic form. To this end, I propose to use the definition given by Lawrence Rosenwald in his masterful study of Emerson’s diaries. Based in part on Lejeune’s conception of self-representational writing, his views nevertheless differ on essential criteria. Rosenwald thus writes:

> In form a diary is a chronologically ordered sequence of dated entries addressed to an unspecified audience. We call that form a diary when a writer uses it to fulfil certain functions. We might describe those functions collectively as the discontinuous recording of aspects of the writer’s own life; more technically we might say that to call a text of the proper form a diary we must posit a number of identities: between the author and the narrator; between the narrator and the principal character; and between the depicted and the real, this latter including the identity between date of entry and date of composition. (Rosenwald 1988: 5)
Such a definition is particularly useful in that the criteria are both devoid of any reference to content and clearly defined, thus making it possible to exclude a number of affiliated but dissimilar forms: out go the ‘to do’ list, or the aspiring author’s notebooks or the fictional autobiography. In addition, using the concept of “identity [...] between the depicted and the real” makes it possible to bypass the thorny issue of truth or, as Rosenwald puts it, of the fallacy of “veridicality” (Rosenwald 1988: 13).

This point is essential to the debate surrounding the very definition of diaristic writing. Lejeune indeed states that the autobiographical compact entered into by the writer guarantees that the latter is committed to telling the truth (Lejeune 1975: 13-46). In a similar vein, John Paul Eakin asserts that “autobiography is by definition a referential art [and] [...] the self that is its principal referent is in fundamental ways a construct of culture” (Eakin 1991: 15). On the other hand, Rosenwald, following Gusdorf’s lead, argues that the self cannot be distinct from the very process of introspection (Rosenwald 1988: 14). For Gusdorf, “private life does not allow itself to be taken literally; it is not a prisoner to whatever discourse claims to depict it. [...] In such a perspective, self-representational writing is released from its promise of literal faithfulness to experienced reality” (Gusdorf 1991a: 13-14). ¹¹ Put differently, this statement points at the fact that truth is constructed by diaristic writing, in an ongoing process of interpretation. Similarly, the question of “identity [...] between the author and narrator” must simply be interpreted so as to exclude any work of fiction, or any biography.

The issue of time is also accounted for by this description of diaries. Because there is little or no interval between the time of experience and the time of writing, personal diaries have both a fragmented approach to time and a continuous one. Fragmentation is due to the writing of each entry under a specific date, continuity is due to the regularity of the commitment to writing. None of these features, however, excludes editing or revising from the field of diaristic writing. Time may therefore intervene in a third way, as the hiatus between two or more versions of an entry.

Rosenwald’s definition also excludes from its definitional field any autobiography, such as Benjamin Franklin’s (1903) which, according to Pierre Pachet, is the first ever to have used self-representational

¹¹ “La vie personnelle ne se laisse pas prendre au mot ; elle n’est pas prisonnière du discours, quel qu’il soit, qui prétend la représenter. (...) Dans cette perspective, les écritures du moi se trouvent déliées du vœu de fidélité littérale à la réalité vécue.”
writing as a path towards self-improvement (Pachet 2001: 11). Indeed, 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 (Lejeune 2000a: 213). This can also be found on the Internet, for instance in Shmuel’s Soapbox, when the diarist includes two autobiographical essays written for the admissions committee of a graduate program. In these texts, the diarist attempts to make sense of his whole life by making it fit into a pre-arranged pattern, so that all the events of his past life seem to converge towards this application for university admission. 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, displaying some kinship with judicial discourse, in which the autobiographer simultaneously plays the part of defendant, counsel and judge (Olney 1981: 22-23; Kuperty-Tsur 2000: 9). Hence autobiographies are essentially akin to apologia, and The Confessions of St Augustine can be said to have provided both a model and a foundation for them (Spengemann 1980: 32). The diary, by contrast, “must be conceived as a book of days and dates and intervals. Whatever functions a diary serves, the writer […] chooses for them a form articulated by dates in chronological order, and a mode of writing spaced over time” (Rosenwald 1988: 6). Self-chronicling on the Internet may take either one of these two forms; our focus, however, will be the diaristic facet of self-representational writing with its patient, sometimes brilliant recording of the flotsam and jetsam of daily life and its back-and-forth movement between living and writing, which ends up irretrievably interweaving the life and the written word.

2. The ethics of Internet research

2.1. Accessibility of sources

In industrialized countries, the development of the Internet into a mass-medium over the past few years has predictably given increased visibility to previously underground or peripheral developments. Online conversations, once the province of computer scientists and students, are now part of the daily practises of large populations across all age ranges. In a similar fashion, online diaries have moved in the...
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span of a few years from an obscure geek-like activity to a phenomenon the mainstream press now writes about (Keller 1999; Rosenberg 1999; Wang 1999; Levy 2002).

The growth in Internet use has spurred the increasing interest of individual researchers, mostly in social sciences. The study of computer-mediated communication can be said to have turned into a fully-fledged field of research (Jones 1999), leading to a large number of attempts at conserving Internet material for future reference. National heritage institutions have accordingly begun archiving the contents of the Net. The large number of texts generated on message boards or in other venues is indeed not as ephemeral as was first thought by early Internet users and social commentators. Thus, messages posted to Usenet newsgroups have been archived since March 1997 by deja.com. When Google took over the company in 2001, the Usenet archive went offline but was promptly made available again after several activists protested. In addition, the cache system put in place by Google enables the consultation of pages for a certain amount of time even after they have been taken offline. Finally, the Wayback Machine\(^\text{13}\), a public non-profit organization backed by the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution, has been archiving snapshots of the Net at six-month intervals since the fall of 1996. Because it preserves sites with the entirety of their links, the Internet Archive gives greater permanence to Internet communication and contents and has enabled researchers to tap online material in the knowledge that their sources would remain accessible to others in the field.

2.2. Privacy

However, even though the impermanence of the Web may well turn out to be a fallacy, other contentious issues have yet to be dealt with in a definitive manner. One of them is that any research that takes the Internet as both means and medium has to address ethical issues regarding copyright and privacy. A research project about online diaries is doubly challenged by such issues, as its material is made up of sometimes very intimate outpourings written by easily traceable people. Even moderately knowledgeable Internet users can almost effortlessly find out a considerable amount of information about most diarists, up to and including their real names.\(^\text{14}\) Many diaries reveal

\(^{13}\) The Internet Archive, http://mail.archive.org/index.html

\(^{14}\) This can be done with the help of a ‘whois’ search, for instance.
personal histories, or are used to work out painful issues, sometimes involving entire families.

Because they have had to deal with present-day questions and populations, social sciences have long evolved guidelines to help practitioners collect data while respecting individual privacy. This has not been the case for literary studies, inasmuch as they deal with fiction and as the very definition of fiction entails nearly complete freedom for both authors and critics. Privacy issues are irrelevant in a fictional world, although the diaristic genre, by introducing a concern for truth, may pave the way for veracity and referentiality issues being raised.

The present research, however, finds itself at the confluence of two disciplines: on the one hand, studying online diaries from a literary standpoint may shed light on the development of new forms of writing, and contribute to assessing the extent of this transformation and its meaning. On the other hand, viewing online diaries as primary sources may afford insight into the mores of ordinary people in contemporary America. In other words, studying online diaries may require approaches drawn from literary criticism as much as from social sciences – two disciplines with starkly different outlooks, methods and goals. Let us examine each one in turn.

2.3. Two approaches compared

A literary approach to online diaries rests on the assumption that, no matter how ‘truthful’ diarists purport themselves to be, their version of truth, of character, or of protagonist is a fictional construction (Anderson 2001: 17). As will become apparent, this theoretical hypothesis is a fertile one both offline and online. Ethically speaking, it means that personal writings on the Internet are not to be viewed as “slice-of-life” documents or faithful reflections of reality. Attention is instead focused on the internal logic of the text, seen as a self-contained, self-referential artifact.

By contrast, a social science approach to diaries entails taking into account the social dimension of this practise, and hence it entails securing the consent of the diarist through interaction of some kind, either email or more traditional forms of communication. According to the Association of Internet Researchers, observers “seeking informed consent need to make clear to their subjects how material about them and/or from them will be used – i.e., the specific uses of material and how their identities will be protected are part of what subjects are informed about and asked to consent to” (Ess 2002).
This requirement raises several problems. One of them is that obtaining the permission of a subject necessarily involves resorting to participant observation, a research methodology which is particularly appropriate to the fine-tuned understanding of human behavior, but which is also fraught with difficulties. Participant observation, which relies on direct contact with and immersion in a subject's activities, entails a number of specific distortions. Because observation modifies the observed, this approach obviously lays itself open to the charge of bias, precisely because it relies on direct interaction and hence empathy with the subject (Adler 1994: 377-392; Scharf 1999: 243-256). A way of systematizing observation and righting bias must therefore be devised.

When the subject of the research has to do with intimate writings, the difficulties of participant observation increase dramatically. Philippe Lejeune summarizes the problem thus: "Reading diaries, or interviewing diarists: in a perfect world, you could do both. The issue, however, is tricky. Reading the diary of a living person even as it is being kept, while simultaneously maintaining a relationship with the diarist, is closer to an intimate pact than to a scientific approach. No one ought to be encouraged to undertake such an adventure. Analyzing an interview is perilous enough as it is, even under a pseudonym. Dissecting a diary is even more hazardous" (Lejeune 1998: 174). The 'intimate pact' Lejeune refers to – the exchange of correspondence almost imperceptibly leading to interpersonal relationships – is very likely to turn into an impediment, for at least two reasons. First, scrutinizing the diary of a person the researcher is acquainted with, and eventually publishing the results, might be assimilated to a breach of trust. In addition, familiarity is likely to induce reluctance to expose certain, sometimes unflattering, perhaps even sordid aspects of the diarist's life and thus might skew research towards a mild form of hagiography. I have therefore carefully eschewed any interaction with diarists when attempting to gain an insight into the phenomenon of online journaling as a whole.

15 "Lire les journaux, ou interroger les diaristes: l'idéal serait bien sûr de combiner les deux. Mais la chose est délicate. Lire le journal, qui continue à être tenu, d'une personne vivante, avec laquelle on est en relation, c'est un pacte intime plus qu'une démarche scientifique. On ne conseillera à personne de se lancer dans une telle aventure. Il est déjà périlleux, même sous un pseudonyme, d'analyser un entretien. Mais disséquer un journal..."
2.4. Anonymity

Another sensitive issue is that of anonymity. Concurring with Marvin (Marvin 1995), the Association of Internet Researchers recommends taking precautions and changing names or pseudonyms. Yet shielding identities may turn out to be materially impossible in an academic context, where footnotes are a requirement and the URLs of all the sites under observation have to be cited to enable verification. Quoting from a diary therefore opens up the distinct possibility of its author being readily identified. This may not represent a difficulty for some diarists, who use their real names and sometimes even provide their addresses. Others, however, even while putting forth their writings on as public a medium as the Net, may strenuously object to academic scrutiny, not so much because of rather improbable possibilities of publicity, but for deeper, unconscious reasons, having to do with the very reasons why they undertook a diary. Bowing to the reluctance of such diarists would make the remaining ones a virtually self-selected sample, with the attendant distortions this would imply.

In addition, complying with the Association of Internet Researchers' recommendation to inform subjects of the uses to which the material will be put may represent daunting challenges, inasmuch as it ultimately amounts to granting them the right to oversee the research project. Many projects grow and develop through unexpected twists and turns and in unpredictable ways. This is indeed a defining feature of any research undertaking, and confining oneself to pre-determined orientations for the sake of privacy might end up hindering and perhaps sterilizing research.

2.5. Research hypothesis: the mirror and the veil

For all these reasons, my methodological choice in the present project has been different from the one recommended by the Association of Internet Researchers. I have assumed that the texts uploaded by diarists were certainly personal, often intimate but not private. Anyone who engages in self-representational writing on the Internet is not producing private material, but is engaging instead in "public acts deliberately intended for public consumption" (Paccagnella 1997). This implies diaries can be viewed as published literary works whose study demands compliance with copyright law and quotation rules, without, however, any further precautions regarding privacy or anonymity. My data gathering has therefore

16 Uniform Resource Locator, i.e. the address of an Internet site.
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remained unobtrusive, while one of the questions I have tried to address is precisely the motivation of those, ever more numerous, who use the Internet to attempt a representation of the inner processes of the self. Assuming that the practitioners of self-representational writing are not necessarily the most reliable observers, I have attempted to work out an answer to that question without any reference to statements other than those included in the diaries themselves.

My research hypothesis rests on an interpretation 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 mirror. 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 (Serfaty 1999: 223). There is 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 the world over, 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 increased understanding and sometimes power from that knowledge. “Making oneself invisible means one no longer is a mere transparency anyone can see through, but that one has turned into a gaze that no taboo can stop” (Starobinski 1971: 302). 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 moreopaque, so that the screen is transformed into a mirror 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 specularity 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 venue in which the private self can be deployed and reconnect with the social self.

Online diaries therefore pose a theoretical challenge because they can be seen as literary, personal and social spaces, and that for each of these aspects, specific methodological tools will have to be used. In fact, well-established analyses of diaristic narratives will be used to approach the new phenomenon and will perhaps contribute to pinpoint the defining features of the new medium whenever they fail to apply (Miller 1995). Thus, the examination of the literary and rhetorical features of online diaries will rest on a study of their underlying structures and on a comparison with traditional self-representational writing. Such a study will assess the links of this form with other, earlier texts and will use the tools of critical textual analysis to appraise the intertextuality of online diaries and of online self-representational practises.

Viewing diaries as personal spaces will entail studying the forms of the public-private divide and the meaning of the drive to publicize the intimate. Psycho-analytical tools will make it possible to investigate the significance of these evolutions. In addition, because online diaries often are long thought-out efforts to break with traditional representations of gender and self-identity, this study will approach the ways in which online diarists attempt to re-negotiate
their relationship to their body-image and more generally to their identity.

Finally, assessing the social dimension of online diaries will lead us on the one hand to ascertain the affinities of Americans with this form, and on the other hand to describe and interpret the interactions between diarists and readers. Because diaries seem to have become a meaningful activity for so many readers, we shall discuss the notion of sociability brought into play by online diaries, relying on conceptual tools taken from social sciences. The combination of these three, sometimes divergent, approaches may indeed be necessary not only to grasp the specificities of Internet diaries, but also to outline their links with older forms of self-representational writing, thus exemplifying the need both to extend our methodological repertoire to take into account the complexity of online diaries, and to re-conceptualize cross-disciplinary approaches. Understanding a literary form cannot be done in full without an understanding of the symbolic and cultural stakes intertwined in even the seemingly most ethereal art form. The task of the literary researcher is indeed often extraordinarily close to that of the psychoanalyst or the social scientist, and nowhere is this truer than on the Internet, where forms of writing and multimedia communication overlap and cross boundaries, constantly and creatively hybridizing and in the process defying classification. But this very unruliness is the mark of the need for the researcher to attempt a full examination of the distinctiveness of online diaries through interdisciplinary approaches.

3. Corpus

The sample under examination in this analysis consists of forty-two personal diaries and blogs, all written by Americans, several of whom were born abroad -- Carolyn Burke in Canada, Mary Anne in Sri Lanka or Aiyah in Hong-Kong. The diarists being observed here are almost evenly divided between women and men and except for Mary Anne, who publishes erotica while finishing her dissertation, none of them is a writer by trade, although several are expressly using their diaries to hone their writing style. In addition to this sample, the present study also rests on the observation of twelve diarists’ webrings containing literally thousands of diaries. Yet as my primary purpose in the present work is structure rather than content, I have chosen to narrow my focus and examine closely a limited number of instances. Structural approaches by definition transcend the individual while at
the same time providing tools for the analysis of individual cases. The same methodological choice has led me to disregard the largely formal distinction between blogs and diaries to focus on the underlying features they share.

The sample was constituted randomly, through a search engine. The diaries and blogs that came under observation were then evaluated by two criteria; the first one was definitional, since any commercially oriented diary, often found whenever erotica is proposed, was kept out of the sample. Diaries and blogs primarily devoted to current events, politics or social commentary were also dismissed out of hand. Only diaries written by a single individual for non-professional purposes were included. The second criterion was content: entries had to consist of more than mere lists of annotated links to other websites. There had to be a clearly recognizable authorial voice responsible for each entry. As is apparent from these criteria, no claim for exhaustivity can be made, such a claim being precluded by the sheer infiniteness of Internet contents. I have instead chosen to focus on structure as a way to gain a purchase on the analysis of all diaries, through the in-depth examination of a few. The sample was studied from September 2001 through December 2003. In the course of such a long and regular interaction with these texts, some have acquired more presence and more character than others: the subjective element indeed cannot be removed from the researcher’s stance and her own personality necessarily influences her choice of material. Some diaries have therefore been studied more closely than others, always keeping in mind, however, the characteristics common to all.

3.1. Value judgments

In view of the substantial growth in the number of online diaries and blogs, the question of value has to be addressed, if only so as to be dismissed. It is of course self-evident that from a specifically literary viewpoint not all diaries, whether online or offline, are of equal value; Gusdorf thus decries the trend toward the inclusion of obscure diarists in the realm of the study of self-representational writing (Gusdorf 1991a: 247). In stark contrast with this admonition, however, the present study rests on the assumption that the very existence of online diaries makes them worthy of study, in part because they extend and modify the traditional definition of the genre, as we shall see in the coming chapters, and in part because of the intrinsic worth of the material. The literary nature of such texts is not an issue in the present
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study, nor is the setting up of a canon along aesthetic criteria. What matters is that the private writings men and women offer to the attention of the world can provide an insight into the contemporary American ethos and give access to a form of writing in the making. The point in the present study therefore is to scrutinize a form that is rapidly gaining acceptance and is accordingly increasingly widespread. Even though online diaries and weblogs have already developed their own celebrities, and awards for writing excellence are given at regular intervals, the issue of literary value judgments remains irrelevant in this context, in the first place because a literary value scale is by definition hard to design, much less to apply. Fraught distinctions between high and low, elite and popular literature interfere with any attempt at appraisal. Secondly, although traditional literary criticism deals primarily in the literary canon, fierce challenges from recent scholarship have attempted to eradicate the very notion of a canon, and have been successful in replacing the vertical and exclusive hierarchies of yore with a more horizontal and inclusive pattern. The contemporary textual student therefore need not be concerned with issues of value judgments or hierarchies. In fact, it is necessary to forego completely the issue of value if one is to use a structural approach. Examining such forms regardless of the literary value they may possess or not is the only approach that gives empirical access to emerging literary models or evolving behaviors in America, both with regard to self-construction and the perception of the Internet.

3.2. The researcher’s stance

Another of the specificities of this research is that the Internet is at the same time its subject and its tool. Not only is the raw material for this study gleaned directly from the network, but the network itself provides the tools necessary to approach this subject. In addition, the Internet is very much part and parcel of this particular researcher’s life; the interweaving of the researcher and of her subject must be subjected to analysis, so as to detect the predictable distortions resulting from this situation. What might indeed be expected is excessive identification with the subject of the research, since I cannot envision myself to be exterior to the representations and the practises I am studying; I cannot view myself as being above, and detached from the subject of my research. This closeness may give rise to a series of impediments to analysis: “participation in the belief system inherent in the field, […] disregard for the relevant information because it
supposedly goes without saying, the illusion of immediate understanding and the related inability to question what appears to be above questioning” (Mauger 1999: 118). In spite of these hurdles, researchers have to carve for themselves a position enabling them to grasp their research subject without being overwhelmed by it. It is therefore necessary to analyze the personal dimension which presides over the choice of a field of research and the development of working hypotheses.

As shown by Gaston Bachelard, there is no such thing as ‘objective’ observation (Bachelard 1970). Not only does the researcher always interfere with the subject under consideration, but this interference is required to develop the concepts necessary to the understanding of the subject. In other words, distortion is the very condition any research has to labour under. A sociologist, Alain Médam, pushes even further this vision of the intricate relationships between researchers and their fields, claiming that neutrality is out of reach, beset by involvement and bias (Médam 1983: 67).

However, becoming aware of the limits to one’s neutrality does not mean that a subject cannot be accurately thought through. Such a realization does impose, however, a transversal approach to the research field as the most appropriate means to grasp its meaning with the least amount of bias. This is the reason why this work resolutely crosses over disciplinary boundaries: placed under the banner of multi-disciplinarity, at the crossroads between literary criticism and American studies, it is an attempt at ascertaining the structures of a phenomenon already characterized by its uncertain boundaries. A cross-disciplinary approach is a way of trying to make methodology coincide with a fundamentally polymorphous research subject, so as to attempt to grasp its meaning while preserving its inherent complexity.

17 “La participation à la croyance inhérente au champ, [...] l’indifférence à l’information pertinente tant elle va de soi, l’illusion de la compréhension immédiate et l’incapacité corrélative de constituer comme faisant question ce qui paraît hors de question”.

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