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## **Wrenchingly Funny : Self-Deprecatory Humor and Self-Construction in American Online Diaries**

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While relatively recent, the phenomenon of online diaries has been steadily gathering momentum as Internet users become both more numerous and more computer literate, and technology makes it ever easier to upload data online. In the process, Internet diaries have morphed into weblogs, soon called blogs by both practitioners and public.<sup>1</sup> If some bloggers have gained prominence as acute commentators of current events, many more carry on writing about themselves, using the new medium to modify the form but also to preserve the traditional goals of self-representational writing. American Internet users have proved especially susceptible to the hybridisation of public and private spaces afforded by online diary writing and they are now numerous enough to be organized in webring, teeming with often daily updated stories and cogitations.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed history of weblogs, see Rebecca Blood, « Weblogs : A History and a Perspective », Sept. 7, 2000. [http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog\\_history.html](http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html). Accessed Feb. 15, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance 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/> .

In this tidal wave of diaristic narratives, humor is used under various guises, making it necessary to focus first on its forms, before investigating its functions in American online diaries. Because the definition of humor is notoriously elusive,<sup>1</sup> this study will subsume jokes and witticisms under the category of humor, even though their effect on the audience differs, the former attempting to elicit laughter, the latter more often ending up in smiles. This theoretical choice is a way of underscoring that online diaries conform to the general tendency of websites towards playfulness, no matter how serious their purpose might be.<sup>2</sup> Humor being in and of itself a playful manipulation of language, its prevalence in Internet self-representational writings comes as no surprise.

Most online diaries use text as well as drawings, photographs and sometimes audio recordings of the diarist's own voice. The juxtaposition of different media is used for humorous effect through a process of either illustration or counterpoint. In the following example, one of the photos provided is that of a grimacing young woman's face, while another one shows the diarist with her tongue sticking out.<sup>3</sup> The entry reads as follows :

In the first pictures taken of me as a newborn, I look like an oversized, partially digested tadpole with a bad case of sunburn and a toaster for a head; my parents hold me in their laps and stare down at me with frozen smiles of dismay while my grandmother leafs through the baby book looking for a name that means "lumpen blob" in Welsh. Matters did not improve much in my early childhood; in my Sears baby portraits, I worked the giant-muffin-with-arms look, and then my parents, apparently in an effort to snag the prize money in some sort of Scariest Two-Year-Old In New Jersey contest, took a series of photos of me in all my just-bathed, stark-naked, Gorgon-headed toddler glory<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Franck Evrard, *L'humour*, Hachette (Paris, 1996), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Viviane Serfaty, "Showdown on the Internet : The Aesthetics of Al Gore's and George W. Bush's Campaign 2000 Sites", in V. Serfaty ed., *L'Internet en politique, des Etats-Unis à l'Europe*, Presses universitaires de Strasbourg (Strasbourg, 2002), p. 81.

<sup>3</sup> "Picture Imperfect: So Many Chins, So Little Time", <http://www.tomatonation.com/picture2.asp>.

<sup>4</sup> "Picture Imperfect: Don't Point that Thing at Me", <http://www.tomatonation.com/picture.asp>. This entry and all subsequent quotations from diaries are unedited.

On the surface, the hyperbolic description of ugliness, which comes complete with mythological references to the Gorgon, is meant to reinforce the significance of the supposedly ugly photograph illustrating it. The snapshots act as a sort of visual match for the text. In addition, the similes all tend to liken the newborn baby to either an animal ('tadpole') or a thing ('toaster, blob, giant muffin'), a metamorphosis which casts off the baby into the realm of the non human.<sup>1</sup> On a deeper level, however, exaggeration is a time-honored, humor-creating rhetorical device aimed at undermining and even reversing the ostensible meaning of the text and of the pictures interwoven with it. The snapshots of the supposedly unprepossessing young woman mesh with the hyperbolically exaggerated description of ugliness to produce the exact opposite of dismay or horror – laughter and admiration for the wit of the writer.

On the other hand, next to the picture of Terri, a pretty smiling brunette, the text reads: "First the bad news: I am a cranky, self-absorbed, fortysomething/noncustodial mom/recovering alcoholic/newlywed/transplanted-Seattleite-turned-California-Girl ... and I write about it in relentless, mind-numbing detail on the Internet every day."<sup>2</sup> The "good news" is, predictably in the humorous context, absolutely identical. Here, text and image clash and thus heighten the comic effect through counterpoint and the tension between visual and lexical elements it affords. This kind of 'incongruity' was seen by A. Schopenhauer to be essential to eliciting laughter :

The origin of the ludicrous is always the paradoxical, and thus unexpected, subsumption of an object under a concept that is in other respects heterogeneous to it. Accordingly, the phenomenon of laughter always signifies the sudden apprehension of an incongruity between such a concept and the real object thought through it, and hence between what is abstract and what is perceptive.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Evrard, p. 119.

<sup>2</sup> Footnotes, <http://www.secraterri.com/bio.html>

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, II, E. F. J. Payne, trans., Dover (New York, 1969), p. 91.

Some diarists base their humor primarily on text : thus Shmuel uses the lyrics of a song as an epigraph and wry commentary on his entry about the choice of Joe Lieberman as Al Gore's running mate in the 2000 presidential campaign:

I think I now have a new benchmark for 'mixed feelings.'

Let's see: Orthodox Jew running for V.P. On the one hand, if this happens, Al Gore has just lost the election. I simply don't believe the country is really going to put a Jew in the White House. (I can't decide whether the next sentence should be "Especially a religious one" or "Even a religious one." Each applies, albeit to a different segment of the population.) . . .

Am I cynical? A few millennia of systematic oppression can do that to a people. In a way, I'm even more scared they'll win than anything else. Just what we need to convince people that we really do run the world. As if the film industry weren't enough.<sup>1</sup>

Next to this entry, the epigraph is located on the left-hand margin, in a much smaller font and in verse form, and reads : "Before this night is done / Their plan will be unfurled / By the dawning of the sun / They'll take over the world ! ( *Pinky and the Brain* )"

In this case, both space and contents are used in complex interaction. The marginal text is set apart from the central one by the lay-out and the use of different-sized fonts, resulting in an a-symmetrical use of space. The epigraph's contents, on the other hand, provide an apparently straightforward and therefore symmetrical comment on a tongue-in-cheek entry. Yet connoisseurs of American popular culture will have identified the source of the quotation : it is a song in a cartoon where the two characters, a cat and a mouse, make up elaborate plots to dominate the world in each episode. The contextual background therefore reinforces the rhetorical device of creating a distance between what is said and what is meant, even as it strengthens the real, implicit meaning. Here the Jewish diary-writer seemingly appropriates a common piece of anti-Semitic slander – the better to send it up and encourage readers to decipher the significance embedded in the lightness of his words.

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<sup>1</sup> Shmuel's Soapbox, <http://www.babeltower.org/soapbox/0800/080700.html>. August 7, 2000.

Other diarists relying primarily on text create a recognizable form studded with repetitive formulae eliciting amused recognition from the readers. Terri thus writes an entry about how she watched a videotape of her children dating back to the early 90's and sent to her by her ex-husband, along with some homemade beef jerky :

Well ... it was a lot tougher than I thought it was going to be. [The Christmas video, I mean, not the beef jerky]. . . . On the other hand, it was a lot sweeter than I expected it to be [The Christmas video, I mean, not the beef jerky]. . . . It was definitely a lot smokier than I remembered it to be [The Christmas video, I mean, not the beef jerky]. . . . And it was a lot more interesting, from a purely historical standpoint, than I thought it would be [The Christmas video, I mean, not the beef jerky] . . . . On the down side, it wasn't as filling as I'd hoped it would be . . . . But at least it wasn't as painful as I thought it would be. Usually I indulge in this sort of thing even though I know it's probably going to be hard and it's probably going to hurt and I'm probably going to be spitting blood and picking gunk out of these iffy molars of mine for the next two or three days.

The beef jerky, I mean, not the Christmas video.<sup>1</sup>

The string of double-entendre ('tough, sweet, smoky, hard, hurt') builds up tension with a long list of ambiguities and misleading allusions until the punch line finally erupts in a kind of climactic resolution of tension. In the process, however, the suffering caused by separation and loss has been hinted at, albeit in terms which could be taken at face value as well as metaphorically.

All three examples evidence that the production of humour in online diaries relies on a juxtaposition of media reflecting the juxtaposition of events in a diary and working through either illustration, with thematically linked elements, or counterpoint, with deliberately clashing features. When images are not used, the layout of the text may function as a visual prop interacting with the meaning of the text. In addition, the language used introduces a cognitive dissonance between signifier and signified, thus leading to laughter and at the same time indicating that the intention of the writers may be at variance with their apparent

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<sup>1</sup> *Footnotes*, February 24, 2003.

meaning. However, reducing humor to its meaning destroys laughter, as can be seen whenever anyone tries to paraphrase a joke.<sup>1</sup> Formal devices are therefore essential both to producing laughter and to pointing out that there may be more to it than meets the eye.

Such humor-creating devices are so prevalent in online diaries that they seem to be the indicator of an all-important, probably self-conscious function for humor in self-representational writing.

Ever since Freud's 1905 study of jokes, followed by his 1928 article on the same subject,<sup>2</sup> the functions of humor have been understood to be those of the release of aggressive and sexual drives providing a means of saying precisely what cannot be voiced because of social or personal inhibitions. Humor thus mimes dangerous drives as a defence against them and so as to better master them.<sup>3</sup> Thanks to language, the danger of these drives is both represented and contained. Humor, however, is far more than a mere defense : the laughter it generates shows that something which should never have been said, has nevertheless been conveyed and is right on target.<sup>4</sup> Humor therefore functions as a device enabling sociability, even as it gives expression to drives society would rather keep hidden. This is why humor requires the presence of a third party, even if it is only an implied ideal reader or listener, to take part in the fun.<sup>5</sup>

Because this analysis of humor acknowledges the need for an audience, it shows that humor has to do with sustaining relationships : on the one hand, when eliciting laughter, it pinpoints the existence of a kind of common ground or interest, giving access to the innermost

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<sup>1</sup> A. W. Szafran et A. Nysenholc, « L'originalité de Freud », in *Freud et le rire*, A. W. Szafran et A. Nysenholc, dirs., Métailié, (Paris, 1994), p. 11-28.

<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, [1905], Hogarth (London, 1978). See also "Humour" [1928] in S. Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, Hogarth (London, 1978). vol. 21.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Rosé, "Essai d'évaluation du travail du séminaire" in S.A. Shentoub, dir., *L'humour dans l'œuvre de Freud*, Two Cities (Paris 1989), p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Paul-Laurent Assoun, « Freud et le rire », in Szafran, p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Guillaumin, « Freud entre les deux topiques : le comique après « L'humour » (1928), une analyse inachevée », *Revue française de psychanalyse*, 4 (1973) p. 637.

reaches of the Other<sup>1</sup> and establishing a community.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the shared smile or laughter is a way for humorists to get in touch with themselves or more accurately with that part of themselves that seeks to emerge to consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Humor thus tends towards self-revelation.

This analytical framework, when applied to online diaries, sheds light on the reasons why the self-deprecatory variety of humor is so prevalent in that particular medium. The first one is to deflect criticism : while diary writing used to be a widespread practice for religious or social purposes,<sup>4</sup> it has now become a highly individualized undertaking and contemporary diarists cannot rely on any social support for it. This is why all of them without exception feel the need to justify their diary writing with a self-deprecatory strain of humor, which acts as a cover-up for the embarrassment of self-description and its attendant hint of ego-worship. One of the purposes of self-deprecatory humor thus is to short-circuit the criticism of others through pre-emptive striking, as can be seen from the examples quoted above. Tomato Nation and Terri make fun of themselves while Shmuel makes fun of himself, of the entire Jewish people and of the hatred some harbor against it; for all three diarists, however, the point is to take the initiative and in so doing, take away from potential attackers any enjoyment they might have derived from uttering a similar kind of witticism. Self-deprecatory humor is a way of appropriating the enjoyment of the Other and of making it one's own.<sup>5</sup> An additional purpose of self-deprecatory humor is to highlight that the diarist is a clear-sighted, self-aware observer of his own life, again defusing potential charges of being self-deluded.

The second function of humor is to enable diarists to admit to painful affects. In Tomato Nation's case, the hyperbolic self-disparagement helps the writer to confront fears

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<sup>1</sup> Assoun, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> Serfaty, p. 82.

<sup>3</sup> Assoun, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Le moi des demoiselles : Enquête sur le journal de jeune fille* (Paris : Seuil, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Sibony, « Bribes de rire et d'humour », in Szafran, p. 75.

of rejection at birth through the disappointment she might have caused. By assigning inhuman characteristics to her baby self, by turning her baby pictures into the very expression of otherness, she is able to sever herself from her own childhood and from her parents' desires for and/or disappointment in her. Similarly, Terri, in one single sentence, crams together all the sore points in her life ('non-custodial mom, recovered alcoholic'). Self-deprecatory humor enables writers to convey the hardships they are going through, even as they make light of them. Humor thus makes it possible to avoid the cloying sentimentality all too often permeating self-representational writing, a sentimentality which plunges the writers into depths of despair, without providing them with a way out. Thanks to humor, what could have been a tear-jerker is turned into a purposeful narrative of self-construction through self-revelation. Taking Terri's diary as a basis for our analysis, we shall see that humor functions first as a defence then as a device for recovery and finally as a means of intergenerational transmission, all three functions contributing to the diarist's identity construction.

Terri's diary *Footnotes* is self-described as "an ongoing tale of romance, recovery and uncomfortable shoes", the zeugma immediately setting a humorous tone which will be sustained throughout her autobiographical background sketch, as we saw above, and all her entries. Terri does not attempt to reach exhaustiveness in her diary ; she does not stray from the subjects she has set forth to write about : she clearly has a story line and sticks to it, even while making fun of her own mannerisms, as in the entry entitled "How to write your own 'Footnotes' entry in one easy lesson", where she accurately deconstructs her own style.<sup>1</sup>

The carefully structured story that unfolds is that of a little girl whose mother left home to live her life and who was raised by kind maternal grandparents. Terri grows up to marry early, to become a stay-at-home mom for three children – and an alcoholic. She

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<sup>1</sup> *Footnotes*, February 13, 2001.



describes her discovery of Internet chat-rooms, where she eventually meets another man she falls in love with. She thereafter gets a divorce, leaves her three children in her former husband's custody and recovers from her addiction to alcohol. Her second marriage is described as a blissful experience, yet it is always presented in a light, humorous tone characteristic of her entire journal.

Thanks to humor, Terri is able to let her guilt surface – her guilt over drinking or over leaving her children behind in order to live with her second husband. But no sooner has this guilt been stated than humor appears to raise its defences; Terri never admits that the traumas of her life or of reality might have dented her conception of herself.<sup>1</sup> In fact, humor helps her achieve the exact reverse : it highlights the recovery and triumph of the self, and as such it has a strong narcissistic component.<sup>2</sup> Her humor achieves a compromise between the pleasure principle and the reality principle by exhibiting a degree of trust in the power of the self to be re-born.<sup>3</sup>

Being online, Terri's diary has a devoted audience, which responds warmly and frequently to her posts. This audience functions in a complex way but I will merely argue at this point that one of its roles is to take away the guilt associated with the unorthodox life choices of the diarist, by sharing laughter directed at others, be they her former husband or her former self. Terri can thus construe her tale as one of liberation from her former marriage as well as from alcohol, and put herself in the heroic position of the woman who reinvented herself in midlife. This is evidenced by her response to a memorable email, letting her know that her journal is required reading for a college class. She comments thus :

I've gotta admit that the idea of this website being "required reading" for a group of women in transition is a little ... unnerving. Me – the poster child for feminine dysfunction – serving as a role model? But then again, maybe

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Bergeret, « Pour une métapsychologie de l'humour », *Revue française de psychanalyse*, 4 (1973) 557.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 560.

<sup>3</sup> Jacqueline Cosnier, « Humour et narcissisme », *Revue française de psychanalyse*, 4 (1973) 579.

I'm not a role model so much as a warning label. ("Here's what NOT to do with your life, ladies.") Either way – it's an interesting feeling.<sup>1</sup>

This passage shows the back-and-forth movement between narcissistic enjoyment of success and recognition to self-deprecatory remarks that, however, still put her in center stage, if only as a 'warning label'. The overall result is humorous enough to both constitute and conceal a strong assertion of self-worth, thus showing even more clearly the defensive role of humor and the part it can play in developing or recovering a solid sense of identity.

Identity is a notoriously fragile construct and Terri, along with many diarists, has to balance the twin demands of autonomy and of whatever inheritance has been handed down to her by her parents. An entry devoted to Terri's mother's birthday is a case in point. As the narrative wanders from childhood through adolescence to adulthood, the diarist sketches a family history demonstrating how she was socialized into alcoholism and less-than-conventional motherhood, thus outlining a model of the intergenerational transmission of behavioural patterns.

Terri begins with her earliest childhood memory of her mother, then moves on to the time when her mother walked out of her marriage and left six-year-old Terri and her younger brother in her family's care. Terri reports her rejection of her mother's behavior : "All I know is this: when I grow up and become a Mama, I am never, ever going to go away and leave my children." Then the narrative skips to age thirteen, when Terri discovers her mother's diary and reads it through. Her comment : "My mom is the world's coolest mom ... I swear to god," is immediately followed by "My mom is the world's most annoying mother ... I swear to god," as she recounts her mother's break with alcoholism while Terri herself, now a mother of three, is still in the grips of the same addiction. Then the entry moves on to Terri's own break with her sixteen-year husband and her leaving behind her own three children. Finally, the

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<sup>1</sup> *Footnotes*, February 24, 1999.

narrative winds up full circle and reaches the present time, with these concluding words :  
“basically she [Terri’s mother] is exactly what I want to be when I grow up.”<sup>1</sup>

Both women left their families behind, both were ‘non-custodial moms’, both were alcoholics, both have had a diary for years : the similarities are quite striking and seem at first to be leading to mere duplication of the past. Yet nowhere do we get the impression that Terri’s life is a carbon copy of her mother’s. By interweaving her mother’s story with her own, she indeed highlights the obvious network of correspondences between them. However, by insisting on the process of early rejection and subsequent acceptance she went through, Terri appropriates her mother’s story and turns it into a force for change, rather than a drive towards repetition. What might have been a destructive pattern of iteration turns into a healing, life-giving process by virtue of the light-footed humor with which the diarist glosses over the pain such a life history must have caused. In fact, Terri’s telling of her mother’s story within her own story amounts to a positive assertion of her place within a lineage – a matrilineal chain of transmission : after her initial rejection, she accepts her mother’s inheritance and embraces their resemblances. Here, humor functions as a defence against the fear of merely repeating one’s mother’s life instead of being an autonomous individual.

Terri’s acceptance of her mother as a model is all the more intense as the model is unconventional. She has to vindicate in her own eyes, but also in the eyes of others, the fact that she has left her children in her former husband’s care, i.e., that she has deliberately flouted the motherly stereotype. This she does in a variety of ways : she mentions her guilt (March 21, 2002), her love for her drug-using daughter who is about to stand trial (March 7, 2002), thus establishing that her maternal feelings are not at fault ; but she also mentions that her husband is much better than she is at taking care of the children, that he is the one who attends the hearing at the courtroom (March 9, 2002). Here again, the defensive role of

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, February 25, 2001, re-entered March 27, 2002.

humor is apparent, as it contributes to converting a potentially destructive deviation from social stereotypes into a success story and a validation of her choices. Humor makes it possible for Terri both to handle her own fears of being out of line with the expectations of her social group and to rally a few others to her cause.

Interestingly, Terri grapples with the tug of war between repetition and change with her own elder daughter. Recounting in a recent entry a minor accident that happened to her daughter, she draws a parallel with an accident of her own in which a six-pack of beer landed on her toes, and writes :

But I couldn't help it. It was the sheer poetic ludicrousness of the incident that did it. *Sticking your hand in a chicken pot pie??* That sounds like something \*I\* would have done at her age. [Hell. It sounds like something I would do at **MY** age.] I had to struggle for a long, painful moment to get my emotions under control before I could speak again. “Congratulations,” I told her finally ... my sides aching from all that unspent mirth. “Your chicken pot pie beats my six-pack of root beer. No contest.”

And then we both burst into giggles.

Daughter #1 may not have inherited my blue eyes or my bad teeth or my little round chin. She may have completely bypassed my crappy money management skills and my fondness for pseudo-reality TV shows. But there's no doubt about it: she's definitely inherited my \*Stoopid Accident\* gene.

**And** my sense of humor. (Feb. 11, 2003)

Incongruity appears in the use of language : ‘poetic ludicrousness’ appears instead of the expected ‘poetic justice’, ‘struggle, pain, aching’ are conjoined with ‘mirth’. In addition, this entry ostensibly makes fun of the notion of transmission or inheritance : it uses the rhetorical device of comic denial (“she may not have inherited...”) and a reversal of meaning which turns physical flaws or imaginary ones into qualities (“my bad teeth, my fondness for reality TV, my \*stoopid accident\* gene”). The difference between mother and daughter is also clearly asserted (“she may have completely bypassed...”) and the traits described as flaws are interspersed with compliments to the diarist (“my blue eyes, my little round chin,

my sense of humor”). The ostensible denunciation of her flaws amounts in fact to a celebration of herself and of her elder daughter. The punch line shows that what is really at stake is a transmission of family values through humor, the latter being of course one of these values. Therefore, in this passage as well as in the diary as a whole, self-deprecatory humor functions as a means of asserting the inter-generational link binding three generations of women through the celebration of a number of common traits, while allowing each generation its own individuality. No less importantly, the humorous mode of diary-writing also provides a socially acceptable way of publicly acknowledging one’s heavy burden of guilt and ambivalence, and actualising one’s potential for dynamic transmission rather than repetition.

Self-deprecatory humor in online diaries can therefore be said to possess complex functions, closely interwoven with the self-construction process diarists have long been engaging in. The protection it affords diarists enables them to bring to light habitually silent and potentially dangerous affects and drives without endangering their sense of identity. Humor makes self-revelation possible yet at the same time it offers a shelter from the doubt and division that we all labor under and which, should it come to light, might endanger our narcissistic feeling of wholeness. Self-deprecatory humor therefore does not tend towards subversion or transgression but allows the self to sustain the buffeting of life and to emerge unscathed and as such, it is particularly adapted to the hybrid of private and public selves emerging in online diaries.

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