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From Self-Explanation to Self-Justification : Some Functions of Online Diaries and Blogs

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Résumé : Après un bref historique de l'histoire des journaux intimes et des blogs sur Internet, cette étude aborde la fonction d'explication des préambules de journaux intimes ainsi que leur fonction d'autojustification au travers de l'étude de la notion de transparence ainsi que des implications de la présence explicite du lectorat au cœur de l'écriture de soi.

Abstract : After a brief overview of the history of online diaries and blogs, this paper addresses the explanatory and self-justificatory functions of the incipit to diaries, by analysing the notion of transparency and the implications of explicit readership presence in self-representational writings.

The ancestry of contemporary self-representational writing may be traced back to religious sources that underwent a secularisation process beginning in the seventeenth and eighteenth century exemplified by Rousseau's posthumously published *Confessions*.[1] By projecting intimate events onto the public sphere, Rousseau testified to a need to unveil the intimate truths of the self through writing – a need that has endured up to the present time.

In contemporary industrialized societies, the desire for transparency permeates political and social discourse as part of a vast ideological formation, so that the public and the private sphere seem to meld and merge, to the dismay of many. But the contemporary

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[1] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les confessions* (Paris: Garnier, 1964; orig. publ. 1788).

permeability of the public and the private is not necessarily catastrophic. The ceaseless back and forth movement between the two realms transforms the drive towards huddling over one's secrets and hoarding them into a circulation between the individual and the collective. The Internet opens up the closed space of interiority onto a space that is far larger than itself, but stops short of being entirely public.

Online diaries therefore both uphold a well-established form and instil strangeness into it. Beginning with the development of the Internet into a mass medium in the early nineteen nineties in America, large numbers of people began to create a presence for themselves on the Net by designing their home pages and using them to record their daily lives. The practise gained momentum with the advent of weblogs, a form that enabled the rank-and-file of Internet users to post any sort of content online. The increasing popularity of this kind of writing spurred on the inventiveness of users, leading to a spate of new coinages; first, 'webloggers' became known as 'bloggers'. This abbreviation turned out to be linguistically productive, because the next, almost instantly popular coinage, was that of the word 'blogosphere', by a self-described computer geek, science fiction writer and blogger called William Quick, who formed a portmanteau word merging 'blog' and the Greek *logos* which, to him, was expressive of the way blogs operated.[2] Lexical creativity did not end in 2001 and many new words have appeared, up to and including a weblog entitled "Blaugustine", in an apparently unwitting nod to the illustrious ancestor of self-representational writing.[3] Such developments, based as they are on folk etymology, have elicited the exasperation of some : "Blog. Blogorrhea. Blogosphere. Blogistan. Blogdex. Blogrolling. Warblogging.[4] Where will

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[2] William Quick, *Daily Pundit*, Dec. 30, 2001 : " I PROPOSE A NAME [sic] for the intellectual cyberspace we bloggers occupy: the *Blogosphere*. Simple enough; the root word is *logos*, from the Greek meaning, variously: In pre-Socratic philosophy, the principle governing the cosmos, the source of this principle, or human reasoning about the cosmos; Among the Sophists, the topics of rational argument or the arguments themselves. (The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language)". Emphasis in the text.
http://www.iw3p.com/DailyPundit/2001_12_30_dailypundit_archive.php#8315120. Accessed February 2002.
[3] http://www.nataliedarbeloff.com/blaugustine.html
[4] Blogistan refers to a writer's weblog called Radio Free Blogistan. http://radiofreeblogistan.com. Accessed September 2003. Blogdex. com is an MIT research project which evaluates the propagation of ideas in blogs by

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it all end ? (…) I wish someone had gotten to the naming committee before this whole movement got rolling. I hate the word 'blog,' but I like the format, particularly as a writer."[5] This nearly schizophrenic attitude, and its back-and-forth movement between annoyance and enthusiasm, probably underlies much of the success of the form, be it among practitioners or readers, as it feeds on the ambivalence it elicits.[6]

Since 1997, when they began in earnest, blogs have evolved into a variety of genres. A large number of weblogs function as directories to other content on the Net while also containing news commentary, personal rants about current events, such as Conservative Glenn Reynold's *Instapundit*,[7] or thoughts about social issues and technology, like *Rebecca's Pocket* or *BoingBoing*;[8] alternatively, weblogs may deal primarily with private matters and hence may be indistinguishable from fully-fledged online diaries focused on personal issues.

Online diaries and blogs differ from traditional self-representational writing in several ways. Combining as they do text with sound and images, they use strategies of accumulation representative of the aesthetic now being developed in the design of Internet sites.[9] The use of diverse media was however not unheard of in traditional self-representational writing, where postcards, pictures or other mementoes were often inserted in the text. The truly innovative feature in blogs is the explicit attempt to establish contact with their audience, instead of relying on an implicit addressee. In online diaries, the reader/viewer is no

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counting links; Blogrolling.com is a company that offers link management software; warblogging refers to the numerous diaries devoted to the war in Iraq, the most famous one being that of an Iraqi male nurse, Salam Pax, whose blog has been recently published : http://dear_raed.blogspot.com/ . See S. Pax, "I became the profane pervert Arab blogger," *The Guardian*, Sept. 9, 2003. Accessed September 2003. http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,3604,1038208,00.html.

[5] Eric Alterman, "Determining the Value of Blogs," *Nieman Report*, 57, 3 (Fall 2003) 85. Accessed October 2003. http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/03-3NRfall/V57N3.pdf.

[6] Viviane Serfaty, « De la répulsion à la fascination : l'Internet et les représentations des NTIC », *Asp*, Université Bordeaux II, 27-30 (2000) 238.

[7] Glenn Reynolds is a law professor at the University of Tennessee http://www.instapundit.com/ . Accessed September 2003.

[8] Rebecca Blood is both a blogger and the author of a manual about blogging, *The Weblog Handbook*, Perseus Publishing, 2002; *BoingBoing* is maintained by a collective of writers : http://boingboing.net. Accessed October 2001.

[9] Viviane Serfaty, "Showdown on the Internet : Al Gore's and George Bush's Campaign 2000 Websites. " Viviane Serfaty, (dir.) *L'Internet en politique, des Etats-Unis à l'Europe*, Strasbourg, PUS, 2002, 75-94.

abstraction, but someone whose collaboration is actively sought through a comments system enabling anyone to post a response to any given entry.

The explicit introduction of the readership into what was once primarily rooted in the writing practices of solitary individuals, raises major issues about the changing nature of self-representational writing and about the way diarists view their craft. The traditional goals of diaries – self-explanation leading to self-construction, all carried out in a private space – are no longer taken for granted. There is an abiding need for self-justification. "Why do I do this?" is a question that pops up with such regularity that it requires scrutiny.

While this question is not specific to online self-representational writing, it acquires a new urgency because of the continuing presence and participation of an audience. Even though an implicit addressee[10] has always been part and parcel of diaristic writing, the issue of privacy is addressed by all the diarists examined in the course of this study. Publicizing the intimate seems to arouse questioning both among people who publish their diary online, and among readers of online diaries. Diarists go ahead and write anyway, but try to explain and vindicate their reasons for doing so publicly, on the one hand, and on the other hand attempt to maintain a modicum of privacy by stating that they do not reveal everything and by placing cautionary warnings in their incipit to ward off the intrusion of unwanted readers. I will therefore examine the preamble or incipit to three diaries to find out in what way online bloggers both explain their choice of medium and justify it.

Lejeune states that "the beginning of a diary is nearly always emphasized. People seldom begin without saying so. The new writing territory is staked out in one way or another".[11] These pre-texts can be seen as guidelines to the reader, as tools to pilot and sometimes control the addressee's interpretation of the diaristic narrative. Moreover, diaries

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[10] Wolfgang Iser, *L'acte de lecture : théorie de l'effet esthétique*, translated from the German by Evelyne Sznycer, Bruxelles, Pierre Mardaga, 1976, p. 70.

[11] Philippe Lejeune, « Comment finissent les journaux » *in* Lejeune Philippe, Viollet, Catherine, eds., *Genèses du 'je' : manuscrits et autobiographie*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2000, p. 209, my translation.

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or weblogs are rarely uploaded online without a title. Often creative, the title either attempts to reflect the general tone of the body of text, or is the pseudonym of the writer; titles are what Genette calls a threshold, both an indication as to what to expect from the text and an invitation to the reader, or alternatively an attempt at misleading readers or prodding them towards an interpretation.[12] Then again, some titles have a definite intertextual element, harking back to the most hallowed *topoi* : the *Confessions of an ADD Physics Major*, for instance.[13] In such cases, the existence of a title combined with its intertextuality sustain the construct of reader embedded within self-representational writing. The title, combined with the incipit or preamble to a weblog or diary is far more than a purely descriptive exercise, and represents in fact an authentic attempt at analysing and synthesizing self-representational writing, as opposed to the dailiness of diary writing.

Let us examine one such text, the incipit to a diary entitled '*Documented Life'*, by Miles Hochstein, a social scientist in his early forties, whose site presents an interesting mix of autobiographical and diaristic features. Using forty-five pictures of himself on his front page, each one introducing more pictures of himself and family members with some captions, this diarist traces his forebears over several generations and his family and himself up to the present day, without, however, wrapping up his story, since he leaves space for more pictures, up to the year 2049. In this way, the open-endedness of his site links it to diaristic forms, even though very few everyday life notations appear. In his preamble, Miles Hochstein sets forth his reasons for creating his diary and posting it online.

The author begins by stating that he is "dedicated to getting the facts right", but qualifies this in the next paragraph when he adds : "I have not tried to tell every truth and even for those truths I do tell, perfect objectivity has not been my goal. It is enough for me to avoid serious misrepresentations. (…) The photographs help keep me honest."

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[12] Gérard Genette, *Seuils,* Paris, Seuil, 1987, p.73-76.
[13] http://youngaddfemale.blogspot.com. Accessed April 2003.

What we have here is an example of the so-called autobiographical compact which according to Lejeune is entered into by each diarist : "Unlike all forms of fiction, biographies and autobiographies are *referential* texts : just like scientific or historical discourse, they claim they are providing information on a reality that is external to the text."[14] However, the very wording indicates that the diarist is aware of the fundamental fallacy of any attempt at achieving full transparency. From the outset, the diarist hints at his awareness of the fact that truth is a construct. For Lejeune, what really matters is not so much the way in which the diarist carries out what he has set out to do, but the very fact that the pact was made and adhered to. Miles Hochstein's paradoxical stance, combining his striving for accuracy and his simultaneous realization that truth is unattainable, therefore locates him at the very hub of self-representational writing. Revealing oneself while at the same time realizing the impossibility of total exposure constitutes a major hurdle each writer of the self has to contend with.

On the other hand, Miles Hochstein's reliance on pictures, so typical of Internet diaries, appears charged with meaning. A documentary function is clearly ascribed to pictures which are supposed to act as pieces of evidence bolstering the statements of the author, and this particular belief in the honesty of pictures seems to be taken at face-value. Yet throughout his diary, Miles is taken aback by the strangeness of some pictures of himself at an earlier age. In the following example, for instance, he comments on the year 1986; the fact that he does so in dialogical form seems to indicate the inherently ambivalent results of the urge to chronicle oneself, inasmuch as it ends up confronting the diarist with discarded versions of self, hence giving rise to some unease, perhaps even threatening his current definition of himself :

> *Question*: So you don't like what you see in this photo and document?

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[14] Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, Paris, Seuil, 1996 (orig. publ.1975), p. 36, emphasis in the text.

> *Answer*: I remember what it felt like, and it seems like a sad time, a cul de sac. There was no apparent way to move my life forward. Something had to change, and soon. But at this moment the future was almost completely obscure.
> *Question*: Is that the whole truth?
> *Answer*: The truth is never whole. It is always fragments of broken pottery that lie scattered across the floor, waiting to be reassembled.[15]

Pictures appear to turn him into the Other, and his sense of bewilderment actually causes him to unleash a flood of words, thus belying the transparency of representation pictures are supposed to enable. Pictures resist interpretation, they introduce heterogeneity in diaristic discourse and so they lead to a proliferation of words[16] which actually cover up more than they reveal. What they cover up is the split between self and modes of representation – a split conducive to the production of text, a text which in turn becomes the enigmatic metaphor of self.

Another issue addressed in this preamble is that of the boundary between public and private selves. Analyzing his own production process, Miles writes : "I admit that I have sought to avoid overtly embarrassing myself, or others. I have wrestled with the right balance between exposure and privacy. In my life there are at least a few things better left unsaid, and certainly a number of moments better forgotten. (You too? Yeah, I hear you. Join the club.) I try to be nice to people here. I'm not into settling accounts."

'Niceness' stands in sharp contrast with the earlier concern for truth and immediately evokes behavior codes, social etiquette. Because his diary is public, Miles seems to recoil from any infringement on established social rules. The panoptic transparency Miles Hochstein expressly embraces a few lines down seems to turn him, against his will, into a smooth, conventional surface reflecting the most conventional thoughts. In acting thus, diarists attempt to repress and suppress whatever is unsayable, unnameable – the nature of their own desire, perhaps. This indeed seems to be the case in *Documented Life*, where the blend of text

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[15] *Documented Life, op. cit.*
[16] Sarah Kofman, *La mélancolie de l'art*, Paris, Editions Galilée, 1985, p. 24-29.

and pictures looks remarkably like a family album – until we come to the second part of the preamble, where Miles thinks through the concept of living a "documented life" :

> Why do we instinctively know that we must hide ourselves and our lives if we are to survive? Is this knowledge of the supposed 'need' to hide really knowledge, or is it an illusion? Who benefits if we are afraid of revealing our own stories? Who benefits from our fears? Should we allow the fears we have about being known, seen, watched, or observed to control our lives, or might there be value in freeing ourselves from our fears of being seen?

> In the 21st century we are witness to "cam-girls" (and cam-guys? and autodocumenters?) who live their lives online, and to bloggers who report their daily activities and musings. The idea of not being hidden, or of breaking down the normal barriers to privacy, is in play. What they may share with this web site is an interest in being rebelliously indifferent to observation. We are all engaged in resisting the idea that we are disempowered by being seen, or that we can only find empowerment by being private. Some of us even suspect that the need for privacy plays right into the dominance structures that are predicated upon one way observation. We are perhaps fighting the use of observation as a technique of power, by claiming the status of "being observed" as a way of empowering ourselves, and thus of dismantling the use of one way observation to dominate and shame and control.

This highly perceptive text displays a keen awareness of the issues at stake : the socially constructed distrust of narrative self-exposure is identified and clearly linked to the matter of control; the contemporary phenomenon of people choosing to film their daily life and to publicize it on the Internet is interpreted as a rebellion against social control and as a way of regaining power over their own lives. Publicly exposing one's privacy turns into a radical criticism of society. Paradoxically, however, even though for the diarist under consideration the transgression of secrecy may be fraught with socially altering and ultimately empowering implications, his own diary remains well within the social strictures on self-disclosure.

How can this vindication of self-revelation be reconciled with the limits to openness set in the earlier part of the preamble ? Of course it cannot be. But precisely because these opposing views cannot be reconciled, they point to the split between opposite drives within the self. Fear of transparency does battle with the desire for total self-disclosure, and diaristic writing is a means of resolution of this conflict. By taking up the simultaneous position of

observer and observed, "what the diary material forces is a recognition of a gap - a space within which, in the process of both embodying and representing self, an irony, a distance (…) can happen."[17] Therefore the long-range goal – creating social change through self-disclosure – serves as self-justification to the potentially unsettling self-scrutiny that a diary inevitably involves as it directs the subject towards that part of himself that he represses and wants nothing to do with, but that keeps trying to gain admittance to his consciousness.

The tug-of-war between opposing drives is not necessarily found in all diaries. Some, like Carolyn Burke, hold firm beliefs in the value of total honesty. In a diary attempting a representation of the inner processes of the self, she simultaneously posits and violates the existence of a private domain, as she thrusts further back the boundaries of what can be revealed. In the preamble to her journal, reproduced on the Online Diary History site, she thus writes :

> I believed strongly in the power of good that results from free expression, free information exchange, and open and honest communication between people. I'd been studying Popper and Feyerabend in university, about creating an open society as one aspect in the pursuit of better quality knowledge.
>
> An online diary, a place that exposed private mental spaces to everyone's scrutiny seemed like a social obligation to me. I felt at the time that I could give back to society something important: a snapshot of what a person is like on the inside. This is something that we don't get access to in face to face, social society. Out intimacies are hidden, and speaking of them in public is taboo.
>
> I questioned the privacy taboo. I disagreed with it.
>
> I exposed my private and intimate world to public awareness.
>
> *"How dare you display your private diary to the world on purpose."* [18]

Like Miles Hochstein, Carolyn Burke very clearly attributes social functions to the invasion of her own privacy she engages in, as well as being aware of the fact that she is breaking a taboo. Trying to uncover the truth about oneself pre-supposes a general logic whereby

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[17] Maria Pini, "Girls on Film : Video-Diaries as Auto-Ethnographies," *Body, Gender, Subjectivity*, Fourth European Feminist Research Conference, Bologna, Italy, Sept. 28-Oct. 1, 2000, http://www.women.it/4thfemconf/
[18] http://www.diaryhistoryproject.com/recollections/1995_01_03.htm

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appearances rule. Therefore the private quest for truth inevitably collides with social rules. This is why diarists think their utter honesty might have revolutionary repercussions. They are aware, however dimly, of the socially transgressive nature of their candor.

There is, however, more to this. The drive to expose one's physical or psychological privacy meets other, not necessarily social needs. For one thing, the desire for total openness, so much at variance with the construction of a fictional self one necessarily carries out when writing a diary, corresponds to a subconscious wish to return to the universe of unfettered communication and mutual comprehension supposedly marred by shame and by social conventions. Moreover, another important issue when publicizing one's journal is that of the intrinsic interest of one's life for prospective readers, as appears from the following example :

> I started to write an entry all about my Thanksgiving non-adventures, but that fell into the dual categories of "Boring as hell" and "No one gives a flying fuck". So instead, I decided to chronicle a couple of recent developments - three that had me all a-twitter, and one that pissed me off royally. I suspect they still fall under "Boring as hell" and "No one gives a flying fuck", but if you really get down to it, this whole journal falls smack dab right into the middle of those, so I just quit worrying about it and wrote this anyway.[19]

In this case, the diarist is grappling with her own sense of worthlessness, far more than with any neutral evaluation of her own life. It is interesting to note that, when saying that her life is boring, this writer includes in her reasoning the reader and hence the public nature of her writing. By dismissing the entire issue of "boring vs. interesting" entries, this diarist is defiantly affirming her determination to ground value in herself.

The third and final consequence brought about when breaching the taboo of privacy concerns the relationship with others. Personal storytelling involves sustained efforts to recover the substance of past events or to give accurate expression to the feelings or states of mind of the diarist. This task is by definition one that diarists must accomplish on their own, as they are the only repositories of their memories – and of the lapses of memory which are just as constitutive of a subject as what is remembered. Indeed, diaristic narratives are

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[19] Bitter Hag, December 9, 2003, http://www.bitterhag.com/current.asp

delimited both by what is said and by what diarists cannot say, illustrating Lacan's concept that the subject is constituted around an originary lack. This lack is precisely what impels various forms of personal storytelling. The blanks in diaristic narratives do not make them any less truthful, but may provide the space necessary for diarists to write and for readers to respond.

Indeed, the very difficulty of remembering and ordering personal narratives suggests that the presence of others is not a mere chance, but a genuine requirement if the effort is to be sustained. Sharing one's inner life and one's life story with others is a way of inviting society to bear witness to the discovery of one's historicity, one's position in time, one's progression from earlier versions of oneself to the time of writing. Because the consciousness of oneself as a subject can never be a given, these private writings are permeated with a concern with readers, who provide the mirror from which it will become possible to talk about oneself. This is apparent in Miles Hochsteins' *Documented Life* : not only does the writer encourage readers to email him, but he also offers them a space on his own site to post their own pictures or life stories, which he refers to by the word 'mirror', suggesting both a 'mirror site', i.e. a website reproducing the content of a given page on a different server, and a looking glass. Specularity thus appears at the very heart of self-representational writing.

Lacan's concept of the mirror stage rests on the idea that either a looking glass or a person serving as a substitute for one gives the infant a chance to perceive her body as a whole, thus making her first steps on the road to selfhood and, by perceiving a symmetrical image of herself, feeling her own otherness. The function of the mirror is to provide a medium for the identification to others as well as for separation from others. When Miles encourages others to put up their own material within his own Internet space, he is inviting others to act as a mirror to himself, and he is simultaneously offering his writings as a looking-glass to others, so that writers and readers can constitute one another as subjects. When asking others to

contact him, Miles is calling on them to identify and respond to the originary lack around which he is constituted. In Miles' own words, email "completes the communication loop": the word 'loop', indicating as it does a system operating on the basis of feedback, also points to the community formation that may be said to underlie much of online diaristic writing.

In online diaries, self-explanation thus regularly turns into self-justification and even apologia in the preambles to the actual journal entries. Online diarists have to carefully navigate between the charges of narcissism, scandalous disclosures and plain irrelevance. This is the reason why so much thought is devoted to the reasons for maintaining an online diary or a blog. The interaction with the audience gains such considerable importance because, while ostensibly working so hard at convincing others of the righteousness of their cause or of their actions, diarists are first and foremost working very hard at convincing themselves. And in this task, the audience plays the part of the looking glass which, by reflecting the diarist, institutes him or her as a separate individual through the signifying articulation of discourse and as an effect of language.

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