Review of Viviane Serfaty's ***The Mirror and the Veil: An Overview of American Online Diaries and Blogs.***
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Viviane Serfaty is the author of a Ph.D. dissertation on the political use of the Internet (1999, pub. 2002). *The Mirror and the Veil* is a more specific study of a recent development in the web—"blog" became a buzzword only in 2004. A *blog* or "we*b log*" is supposed to be a rather formless and gaseous undertaking; although it is possibly not fuzzier as a concept than "diary," or "zebra", or, for that matter, "concept".[1] As usual, there will be a number of family resemblances within items falling under the blog umbrella, although none of the members of the group share *one* crucially defining trait which is at the same time absent from all non-blogs. At its loosest, a blog is a web page that keeps growing and is updated with chronologically organized entries. The blog's URL (Internet address) takes visitors to the main page, containing the most recent entry and usually a few recent ones. Earlier entries are usually accessible in separate pages in the blog's archives. A blog may include other elements, such as a small directory of internal links to permanent contents (writings, photographs, etc.), and external links to blogging tools or preferred software, on the one hand, and to other blogs read by the author, on the other. Bloggers sometimes use their real name, but nicknames are far commoner.

The concepts of *online diary* and *blog* intersect but need not coincide. An unblogged online diary may be, to take an extreme case, an electronic edition of Pepys' *Diary,* or, more commonly, a diaristic web page

which does not take the reader to the most recently dated entry, but to the initial one. If such an online diary is regularly updated, though, it becomes almost (though perhaps not quite) a blog. Diaries are usually personal self-narratives, and blogs provide a powerful medium for the publication of online diaries. But the contents of a blog need not be diaristic or personal at all; and blogs need not be authored by a single individual; indeed, they rarely are, although most have one main author or editor. That said, there is much common ground between online diaries and blogs. Viviane Serfaty's book deals with this shared ground, the book's main object of study being blogs which are used for personal expression and life-writing, rather than as specialised journalism, collective forums, or pure weblogging (understood as a mere sequence of links to interesting new sites). Serfaty's focus on the intersection between online diaries and weblogs leads her, though, to disregard those aspects of the blogging phenomenon which do not fall under this head (e.g. newsblogs, collective blogs, technical blogs, professional blogs, sex blogs, moblogs, etc.) and to argue rather sweepingly that "the distinction between diaries and weblogs is increasingly meaningless, as one form seems to have morphed into the other" (22). She does note, though, a crucial difference regarding software: "Weblogs are different inasmuch as the software is in charge of displaying readers' answers; the blogger has very little scope for editing or deleting answers. In addition, responding to an entry is usually not done through email but through a form located at the bottom of the page" (66). But even that would need to be contextualised, as bloggers are given more and more options by an increasing number of blogging platforms and software developers.

The introduction makes it clear that for Serfaty, "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" (1). The introduction provides a sketch of this history, and much of the rest of

the book, especially chapter 2, emphasizes the kinship between blogs and previous forms of life-writing in the tradition of modern self-expression. French theorists, such as Philippe Lejeune and, most prominently, Georges Gusdorf, provide the theoretical and historical background at this point. Three major sources are pointed out for the development of modern life-writing: Catholicism (St. Theresa, J. H. Newman), English Puritanism (e.g. Bunyan) and Libertinism (leading to Pepys and Rousseau). "The development of a private space, where thought could roam freely" apart from dogma (6) leads eventually, in Rousseau, to the rule of desire as the prime mover of the modern individual. Diaries constitute truth as a space of interpretation, where dating entries is essential but revision and reinterpretation may also enter into the picture, thus compromising any claim to a faithful portrayal of reality. Individuals represent, justify and re-create themselves through their life-writing, with the writing itself feeding back into the process of self-making and self-understanding. The book's introduction also addresses the ethics of Internet research, as many diaries raise thorny issues of privacy and copyright. Different views as to the ethics of research may appear depending on whether the diaries are considered to be "literature" with the diarists' self-representation being understood as a fictional construct, or documents for social science research. But, as Serfaty deals here with diaries freely accessible on the Internet, she has assumed "that the texts uploaded by diarists were certainly personal, often intimate but not private" (12). The title of the book, *The Mirror and the Veil*, refers to the double function of the computer screen, which simultaneously enables diarists to achieve public self-representation and concealment, in a dialectic of disclosure and secrecy inherent to weblogs. Serfaty approaches this dialectic with the tools of Lacanian psychoanalysis (including an assessment of the researcher's own involvement with the material).

Chapter one, "Offline and Online Diaries" sketches a history of weblogs, from personal newsletters on advances in computing issues, through personal web pages and messaging channels, to the massive development of specific weblogging software and companies from 1995 on. The crucial step in this development was the spread of free web space for blogging together with fully automated templates for storage and online interaction (through the readers' posting of comments to the diarist's entries). Serfaty provides a thumbnail guide to the best-known blogs and bloggers, and the main debates around the blogging phenomenon: jargon, communities, etc.[2] Readers who are unfamiliar with these recesses of the Internet will find here clear information on many interesting facts and possibilities, from the Waybackmachine which allows you to see previous versions of many web pages, to the first complaints about the "bloghorrhea" induced by this diaristic form. This chapter analyzes the main defining characteristics of online diaries: accumulation (of text, multimedia and links), open-endedness, self-reflexivity and co-production. Accumulation of text, often trivial, but multiplying representations of reality, and favouring "a diachronic vision of the self" (28). Accumulation, too, of images, especially with the new digital technology in cameras (and, let me add, multimedia cell phones); accumulation of links, which unlike mere footnotes, do more than reference information, as they entice the reader to immediately follow them out of the site. The "netiquette" governing interaction in personsl weblogs is generally laudatory as far as diaristic sites are concerned (sites which are more journalistic in character would belie Serfaty's assessment here, but they fall outside her self-imposed scope); punctuation defies grammar so as to enhance expressiveness. This accumulation of signs "counters the comforting simplifications of everyday life to point to the radical singularity, the absolute uniqueness and the endless complexity of a single individual–traits

that are supposed to be downplayed in day-to-day social interactions, in which one has to sustain one's image as a public character, whom others expect to behave in certain, stereotypical ways" (27). Serfaty is also attentive to many generic aspects of online writing, such as the interplay of sequentiality and fragmentation produced by the dated entries, the tension between (a) the diarists' attempt at controlling their self-representation and (b) the way this construction of a unified self is problematized through proliferating representations and the opening of new spaces for interpretation. Unlike autobiographies, diaries promote an expressive, open-ended version of the self. Insofar as their online avatars enhance some of these functions, they "can be seen as a means to think through the seam between the private and the public self, and as such, they are more attuned to contemporary uncertainties about the self" (29). Open-endedness is also enhanced through the interaction with 'wreaders'. There is a reflexive dimension to online diary-writing, as a self-consciously modern practice; the diarists are often highly conscious of the poetics of Internet writing, and this becomes a topic in many entries. Re-writing of past entries is not uncommon. The combination of intimacy and public accessibility breaks many taboos on self-representation, on which many diaries are experiments; though they become open to the charge of "escribitionism". Diary-writing can be a way of coping with the formlessness of experience, a search for truth or authenticity, constantly beset by the self-imposed vigilance of the limits of disclosure inherent to the genre. Many diarists are aware of the constructed nature of the authenticity they achieve, of the inevitable split between self and modes of representation; in many, this leads to the production of new modes and more text, "a text which in turn becomes the enigmatic metaphor of self" (39). Feedback by readers is a crucial distinguishing feature of online diaries: "where traditional diaries were written for an implied, ideal reader, online diaries explicitly search for

an audience and in so doing, turn themselves into a collaborative project" (39-40). If the representation achieved by the diaries is a fiction, it is a collective fiction, with the audience playing the part of a mirror for the writer: "The feedback of readers is therefore required in order to reinforce the sense of the diarist's own identity" (40): unlike traditional diaries' emphasis on the individual's interiority and privacy as the basis for identity, online diaries articulate an identity which is essentially interpersonal (without thereby bridging the gap between self and other, the irreducible separateness of the diarists and the society they join).

Chapter Two discusses the "Social Functions of Online Diaries in America." While rapidly expanding to the rest of the world, online diaries originated as, and largely remain, a predominantly North American phenomenon. Not that they do not exist everywhere else, but English is the majority language by far and the figures show a consistent dominance of North American (in number of diaries, webrings and readership). A 2002 overview showed 1% of American Internet users created a web log. This can be explained in part as a side effect of the fact that Internet activities as a whole are still dominated by Americans. Sefaty, though, tries to build up a case for an ideological explanation based on an interpretation of American cultural traditions: "The practice of keeping an online diary may indeed be seen as a direct offshoot of the philosophical outlook developed in America in the nineteenth century, Transcendentalism" (44). And she does argue a good case, commenting Emerson's essays "Self-Reliance" and "The American Scholar", arguing with Rosenwald that Emerson first fused the diaristic form and the commonplace book (46). Emerson's democratic appeals to the value of the ordinary "are echoed with uncanny accuracy by the statement of intention of a diarists' webring: 'No one's life is insignificant . . . ' " (48). Online diaries would be a contemporary manifestation of a peculiarly American quest for self which tends "to

ground value in the individual and to issue a declaration of independence from conformity and external rules" (49). There are some problems with this formulation, though: first, whether "independence from conformity", while present as a discourse in the American cultural landscape, can be described as a minority or a majority ideal (that is, the problem of which is the actual social grounding of this discourse). The majority of American society would certainly seem readier to conform to simplistic narratives than to contest received ideas (thence the consistent success of presidential candidates like George–especially W.–Bush, or the widespread belief, of nearly 50% of the population of the US, in the most simplistic brand of creationism). Serfaty does not discuss, either, whether the self-reliance espoused by the Emersonian discourses, whatever their actual influence in America, is real or merely illusory (from the cultural critic's viewpoint, that is). Be as it may, the main weakness of her analysis is its emphasizing of an early nineteenth-century ideology, Transcendentalism, as the cornerstone of a phenomenon so inherently associated to (very) late twentieth-century technology and communicative protocols. This is not to dismiss as nonsensical Serfaty's very well-argued analysis; only, such a complex phenomenon must not be traced back to this one main root; especially not while letting other more evident roots in postmodern urban culture, multimedia communication, and computerized literacy pass largely undiscussed. She does mention, though, that "Difficulty in meeting other people and connecting to them is indeed one of the best researched aspects of contemporary social relationships" (57), with blogging circles acting as virtual Utopian community to compensate for the shortcomings in "real" life.

Still, one of the main strengths of Serfaty's book is her study of the continuity between Romantic diaries—with the blank page instead of the screen acting as the simultaneous mirror and veil—and contemporary

personal weblogs. The image of the mirror is developed with some remarkably clear applications of Lacanian theory, especially Lacan's theorization of the construction of the self-image and of the role of desire; while the diaries' interactivity leads Serfaty to invoke Bakthin's polyphony. The book is quite free from theoretical obscurity, though, and these post-structuralist theories are used in a spare and illuminating way. A relatively small number of diaries are discussed, with a handful of the diarists being subjected to closer scrutiny, especially as regards the stylistics of their self-presentation and their negotiation of privacy and of reader-response. The oralization of writing both in entries and in the readers' commentaries is perhaps of especial interest from a stylistic perspective; but Serfaty's study stands on the whole at the crossroads of cultural studies, literary theory, sociology and stylistics.

"Humor in Cyberspace" is the focus of the third chapter—humour analysed as "a device enabling sociability, even as it gives expression to drives society would rather keep hidden" (75). Self-deprecation is common, a "fake modest" attitude which in fact projects the image of the diarist as a clear-sighted observer, and controls the excesses of sentimental egotism. Humour is then a particularly useful device in the construction and negotiation of a public self-image so crucial to the diarists' communicative project.

Chapter four, "The Private-Public Divide" begins with a reflection on the paradoxical function of the Internet in opening up "the closed space of interiority onto a space that is far larger than itself, without being totally public, however" (83). Here again Serfaty, like Lejeune (2000), emphasizes the continity between the "public" nature of online diaries and the deceptively "private" nature of manuscript intimate journals which as a matter of fact were often published, and, as noted by Lejeune, were anyway written in order to be read and re-read. "Contemporary media and the

Internet may therefore be said not only to prolong an age-old trend, but also to conform to the underlying, inner structure of diaries" (Serfaty 85). Diarists write for an implicit audience, and have to deal with the gap between that implicit audience and the actual readers' responses–which, however, tend to be largely encouraging and laudatory, in keeping with the bloggers' unwritten etiquette. They have to face issues of intimacy, of possible conflict between their online and offline identities, of the unwanted revelation of oneself to one's own family or social circle, or with the possible betrayal of the confidence of third parties. Online diaries thus amount to an investigation of "the social limits to openness in any given social group–limits which diarists trespass at their own risk" (87). One can never reveal the same thing to everyone, and the consequences ensuing from the revelation of intimacy can never be taken for granted. Most diaries, Serfaty notes, are rather bland and are clearly concerned with publicising a socially acceptable version of the self. But other diaries reflect, or act, on the potentially subversive nature of the diaries' fusion of intimacy and publicity. Miles, one of the diarists, argues that "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" (qtd. in Serfaty 89). Still, the private-public divide cannot be overcome by fiat, and fear of transparency battles in all such diaries with the desire for total self-revelation (90). The dream of total transparency is the electronic version of nakedness in an electronically restored Golden Age, with no veil whatsoever between self and other. But, Serfaty argues, language always acts as a veil; at most, diarists can improve their own access to their inner lives through the multiplication and externalization of representations. In this respect, Serfaty provides an interesting interpretation of the use of pseudonyms in

blogs, arguing that "both the real name and the pseudonym fulfil similar functions in online diaries" (93). While this analysis, like her emphasis on the continuity between blogs and handwritten diaries, is perceptive, it would seem to reveal only part of the stakes behind these practices (a window and a veil, perhaps). Erotic diaries, the focus of a specific section, lay bare (apart from much flesh, textual or photographic) the element of seduction implicit in diary writing—in all writing, perhaps. "Erotic diaries and weblogs strive towards total representation, but their attempts, fortunately, always leave something to be desired" (97).

Issues of gender and desire are examined in chapter five, "Male and Female Cyberbodies", which begins with a discussion of the utopian and dystopian dimension of the Internet insofar as it promotes a new dimension of corporeity, providing its users with "cyberbodies" or "angelic bodies" as a virtual ground for self-fashioning strategies. A number of dimensions of this embodiment are examined: layout and pictures, chronological and narrative dimensions, attitudes to the software and hardware which are the support of cyberbodies, allusions to the "flesh" and other aspects of physical self, linguistic dimensions of corporeity, etc. The diarists' tantalizing poise between the extremes of secrecy and self-revelation also involves a politics of the body and gender, as many diaries "perhaps bespeak an obscure, unspoken attempt at coming out (Lejeune [2000]: 423), at achieving a self-revelation which would allow them to make their private and public selves coincide and hence put an end to the tension inevitably deriving from concealing important aspects of one's personality" (Serfaty 106)–it is hardly surprising, in view of this, that so many homosexuals choose to express their desires more openly through their cyberidentities, and that there are such a high proportion of lesbian and gay blogs. This is one way in which the management of a cyberbody/cybergender is a way of coming to terms with one's "offline"

body and gender. On the whole, "the embodied identities in online diaries seem to blur conventional gender lines; fluiidity in self-definition appears to be the norm for both men and women, who use identical strategies to create and consolidate their fictional personae" (114). While this is hardly debatable, I do not think it warrants Serfaty's somewhat contradictory argument that gender "is not a useful category when looking at identity construction in online diaries" (115). There can be no struggle with gender definition if there is no gender definition, however implied, in the diarists' use of their flesh away from the machine, and no confrontation with culturally favoured generic patterns as they write. Other aspects of physicality approached by Serfaty involve the bloggers' location, use of snapshots of physical surroundings and other illustrations, attitudes to food and dieting, bodily symptoms and illness, or the expression of "normal" or "abnormal" bodily practices. On the whole, bloggers use their bodies "and their writing up of their experience of corporeity in order to integrate the discontinuous fragments of their identities, finally taking possession of their body through representation" (113)– although it often seems questionable whether the proliferation of representations ends in an appropriation and unification of self: learning to live with multiplicity and fragmentation, with an increasing multiplicity, would seem to be at least as common a result. For Serfaty, "that the attempt is doomed to fail is irrelevant inasmuch as the complex interplay of textual and graphic representations of corporetiy contains, in and of itself, both the means and the end of self-representational writing, where process is all" (114)—a conclusion which may be satisfactory for the analyst, but which will not provide much relief to those caught in the process. Finally, style and language use themselves become the ultimate site of embodiment; to bend a phrase, 'style is the cyborg'. "Online embodied writing thus becomes a

fully rounded, thorough representation of corporeity channelling a necessarily self-defeating quest for a unified self" (122).

The book's conclusion harks back to Tocqueville's nightmare of the democratic citizen isolated from his community: "he lives next to them, but he does not see them, he neither touches them nor feels them" (qtd. in Serfaty 123), becoming quite literal in the virtual communities. The development of online interaction through blogs is a corollary of the development of modern individualism analyzed by Durkheim or Norbert Elias. The other side of the coin is, of course, the development of fellowship in virtual communities—a human contact always partly veiled—and the development of self-awareness through self-interaction on the screen—a mirror which hides as much as it reveals (mirrors hide the back of your head, to begin with).

The volume also includes 1) a short but useful bibliography on diary-writing, Internet weblogs, privacy, and virtual communities, 2) a webliography of online diaries cited, and 3) an index. It is well edited, written and insightful, and one finds few assumptions or intepretations to disagree with. Rodopi's volumes are not cheap, if we consider the leonine conditions their authors get, but in this case the price is not unreasonable. For more details on the author, cover, orders, etc. see the book's page at the publisher's website,

http://www.rodopi.nl/functions/search.asp?BookId=AMAS+11

Amazon is more generous: they will sell it cheaper, and will let you peek at the introduction here:

http://www.amazon.com/gp/reader/9042018038/ref=sib_dp_pt/103-1934509-5047860#reader-page

Alternatively, you can also visit the author's own website http://www.chez.com/vserfaty/

Apparently, Serfaty doesn't keep a blog (maybe she uses a nickname), but you can read my own at

http://www.unizar.es/departamentos/filologia_inglesa/garciala/blog.html

or, even better, start your own right now, for instance at Blogger: http://www.blogger.com

Notes

1. On some quandaries besetting taxonomists, see Gould (1990).

2. For an even more up-to-date and comprehensive overview of blogs see Fievet and Turrettini (2004) or Hewitt (2005). Earlier (and more recent) bibliography and webliography on blogs can be accessed in the "Blogs" section of my *Bibliography of Literary Theory, Criticism, and Philology* http://www.unizar.es/departamentos/filologia_inglesa/garciala/bibliography .html

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