Online Diaries and Websites on Egodocuments

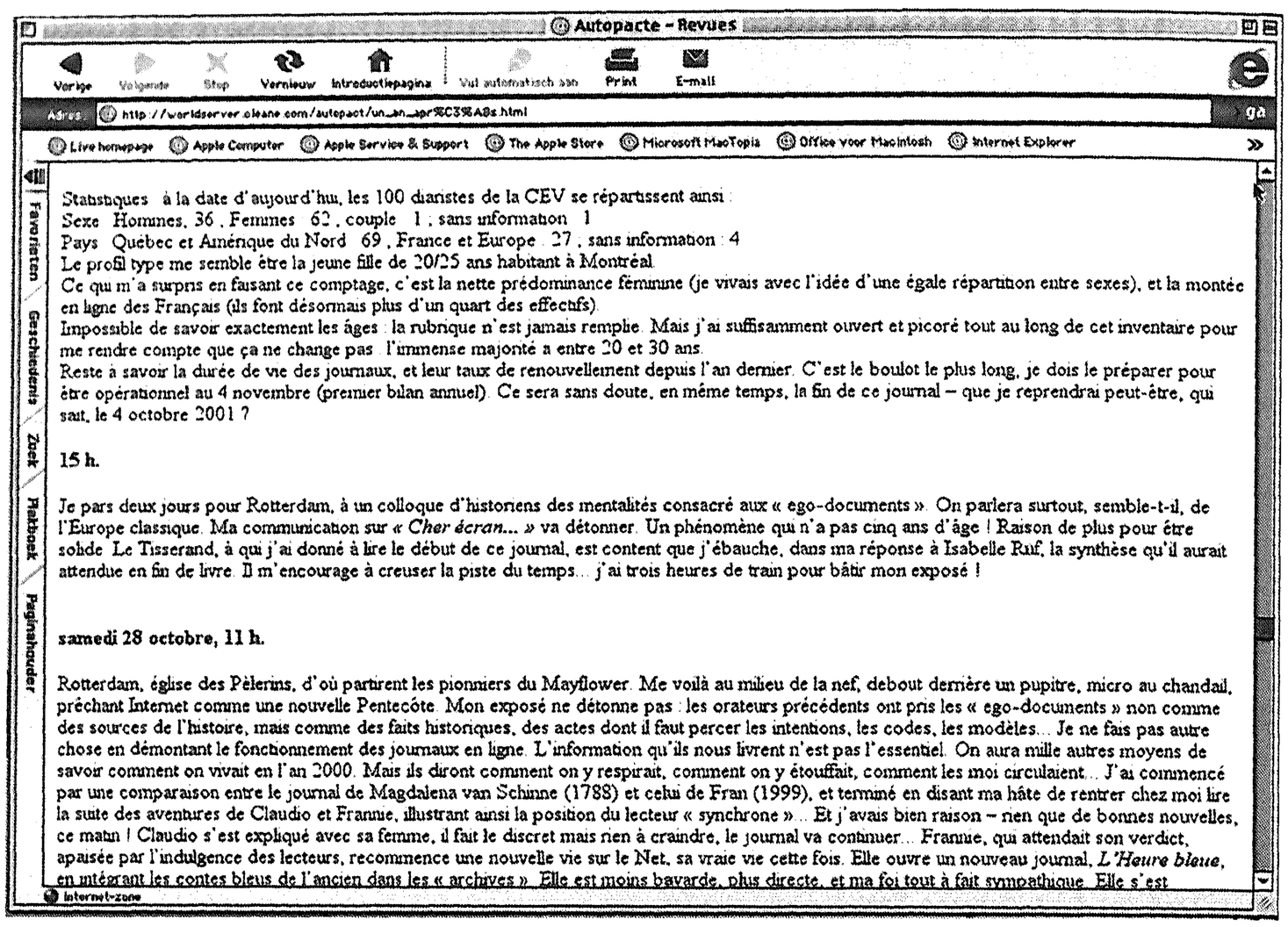
GERARD SCHULTE NORDHOLT

> *The diary was strong and complex. It covered two centuries, seven nations and four religions. It was written by a woman, who explored her horizons by expressing the wonder of her daily rhythm. Being private and public at the same time, it covered her world and her person. As it moved through time, it defined time in the process. Describing the world around her, she defined her own identity. Seeking and finding the perfect equilibrium between imagination and reality, the one defining the other, never to be separated. If ever published it could become a beast of a book, an all consuming tripledecker of the human universe. It was about love and death, about thinking and feeling and it was online...*[1]

One autumn day in October 2000, in a train speeding north from Paris, a man was working on his lecture for a conference on egodocuments in Rotterdam. He had just published a book about diaries, computers and the internet.[2] And now he was wondering: 'Ma communication sur "*Cher écran*" va détonner. Un phénomène qui n'a pas cinq ans d'âge! Raison de plus pour être solide.'[3] All the other contributions to the conference seemed to have the classic European Culture and its egodocuments as a subject. But he plans to speak about the computer and the internet, drawing comparisons between classic and online diaries. We can read about his feelings on the conference and on his lecture in his own online diary. This diary gives a unique insight into his feeling and thinking that no formal lecture or paper can ever hope to achieve. And as it is online, we do not have to wait until some researchers find it in long forgotten archives. Egodocuments scholar Philippe Lejeune is one of many diarists on the Internet.

> Online diaries have come a long way since the beginning of the Internet. They started out with a few individual people writing their diaries online just to have a Web site or just to have a place to keep it where their family would not be able to get their hands on it and read it. They have now evolved into long stories that are public for all to see. Sometimes even friends and family are invited to come read it. This can cause conflicts at times but the author of the diary has to determine whether that is something they are willing to put up with. Some of the online diaries are really not any more personal than a site about family. Others, though, are so intimate that they have to have a warning on them.

To quote just one observation on one of the more reflective websites on online diaries.[4] There are many such sites, portals to literally thousands of online diaries and journals. I have assembled several of these here (see below), but there are without



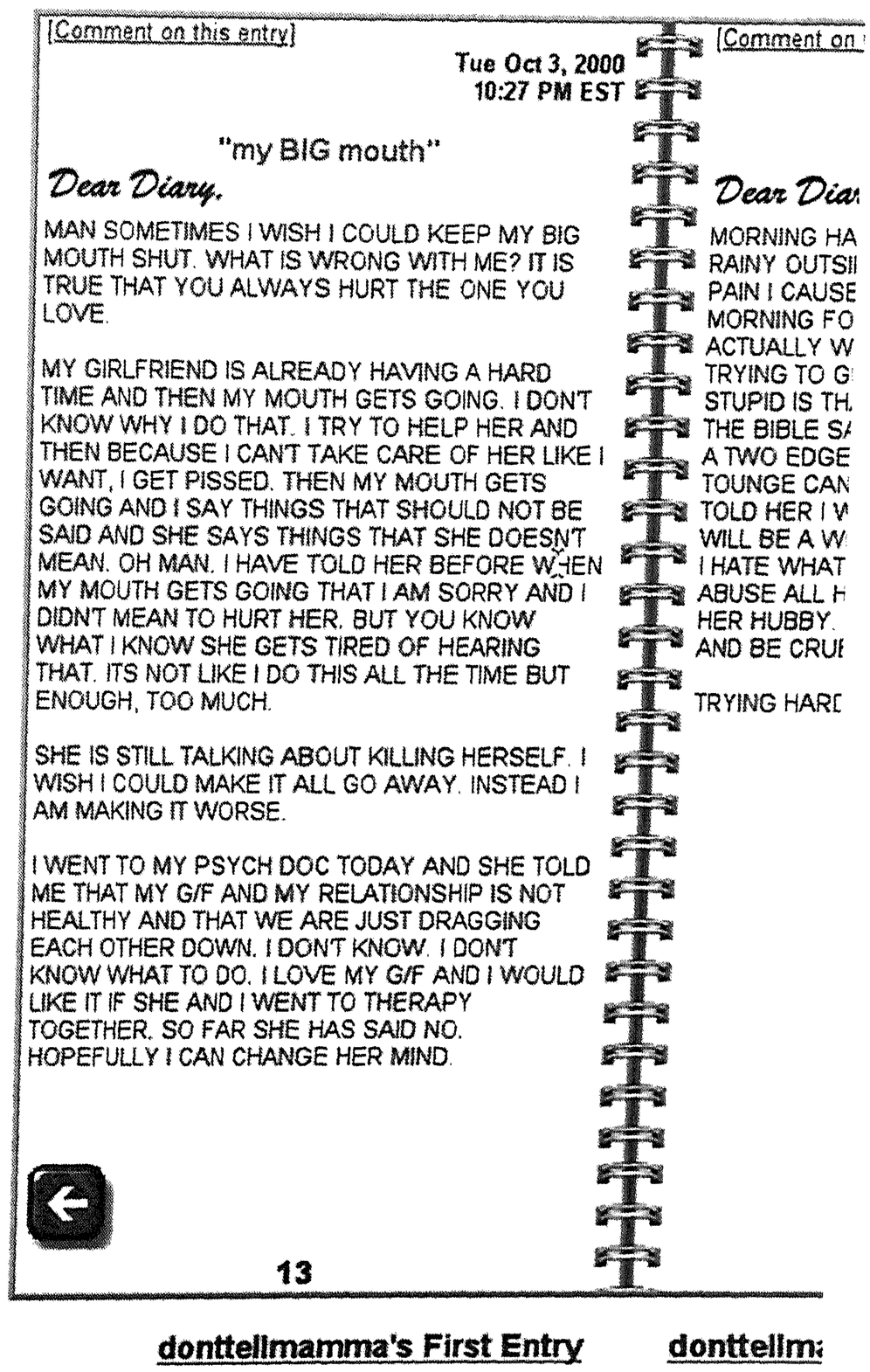
Page from Philippe Lejeune's Internet diary, entry about his visit to Rotterdam in 2000 to participate in a conference on egodocuments.

any doubt many, many more. They point to vast vistas of unknown personal worlds. To give one example, 'Sare' expressing the need 'to be who I am':

> "So, how do I go about this, hmm? I've tried, many times over, to write a journal and to stick to it loyally. I can't. This project will probably end in about two weeks – if not two days. If nothing else, I want to teach myself patience enough to sit down and write about what I'm feeling, what I'm doing. Perhaps it'll help me understand why I feel the need to be who I am."[5]

For diaries this is the best of times. At no other time in history have so many diaries been written and read by so many people in such a short time, using the centuries' old formats of writing about oneself in a medium that is younger than most of the authors themselves. Though I did not do any systematical counting yet, I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that there are more diaries online now, than can be found in all the archives neatly preserved as the harvest of many centuries. Perhaps, even more diaries are being written today on the internet, than in all the long centuries before man came online put together. Online diaries are only the latest stage in the long and slow process of developing and defining the identity and individuality of a person in contrast to a seemingly ever faster change of the human and non-human environment he or she experienced as a phenomenon apart from

Page from an Internet diary.



himself during the last two dozen decades. And that accelerating change did not stop in the last decade with the appearance of internet, on the contrary!

Online diaries are therefore a booming business and they are, as remarked above, merely the latest expression of the diary, or broader, the egodocumental movement that started some centuries ago. As in earlier egodocuments, there is a dialectical swing between private and public audiences, between classic, intimate and personal diaries and businesslike descriptions of uneventful daily rhythms. Between diaries written for only one reader sometimes locked with lost keys[6] and published diaries with an audience of many thousands. And the former ones are not always the most intimate, nor are the published ones necessarily the more impersonal.

Writing is assuming to be read, assuming an audience, a 'pact' between writer

and reader, to paraphrase Phillipe Lejeune's terminology of the 'pacte autobiographique' .[7] It is supposing a community where writer and reader understand each other ("I write about myself, and you, 'reader' know and understand that I, 'writer', am writing from my own personal perspective").

As 'Steve' says in his online journal:

> "Mere, unpolished and uncensored everyday words. Perhaps it's just a diary. Perhaps it's more. Within, I reveal, react, remember and rant. From day to day, it may be a humor column, a soapbox, a confessionary, or a balcony for reflective soliloquy. Though it be madness, there is a method to it. There is a reason, somewhere between self-discovery and shameless vanity, behind all this. I cannot name it, but I humbly invite you to share in the harvest. To be honest, I don't think I'll be putting out a FAQ in the near future, nor will I defame my friends with a who's who roster any time soon. In short, you'll have to pretend you know me well."[8]

This imagined community, virtual or not, can inspire you to express your thoughts, feelings and reflections. On the internet, the idea of that imagined virtual community is very strong. In principle everyone all over the world is connected with everyone else online. And the existing formats of diary, autobiography and other forms of egodocuments are now used in another environment. So it is no wonder that there are so many personal journals or diaries to be found on the internet. Sometimes with an exhibitionist need to express, sometimes hidden behind pseudonyms or nicknames. All possible variations can be found. Here two characteristics of the internet meet, the first being the information flow and fast communication, bringing people together who share the same interests, and a second, less often mentioned characteristic, the possibility or even the need of expressing oneself.[9] In a virtual imagined community like the internet, the possibilities of communication and expression find each other hand in hand in happy harmony.

Neither of the two characteristics is new in itself, of course. We can compare the nineteenth century diary of Abrahamina Clant with that of the cybergirl 'Spryte22' and find the same need for expression:

Thus writes Abrahamina Clant in her diary in The Hague in 1871:

> "And still I cannot resist the need to put it all on paper",[10]

and 'Spryte22' in Minnesota in 2001:

> "I need to express myself. I have so many thoughts flashing through my head at any given moment during the day (or night for that matter) that if I don't start writing them down, I could explode. No one wants to clean up that mess."[11]

The same need, but in a new medium with a potentially much bigger audience. Comparing the diaries and other egodocuments of the earlier centuries, with those that appear (and disappear) in great numbers online, could be very enlightening for both groups. Understanding the differences and the similarities, analyzing the interactions between author and audience, reality and imagination, fact and fiction, private and public, in the different environments of writing diaries in manuscript at a desk or writing personal journals behind a personal computer online.

As a starting point for this kind of analyses, I have assembled a list of portal sites with links to online diaries, and to some diaries themselves. First, however, you can find a list of links to general sites on egodocuments and some primary sources to historical diaries that can now be read online. This list of websites is, of course, neither complete nor consistent in its coverage. It is only a starting point. The internet is fluid and changes on a daily basis, so today's links are tomorrow's history.

SOURCES AND SITES

General Sites

http://www.egodocument.net. The egodocument site for the various projects currently going on at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. At the moment this site is under construction, but eventually it will include an interactive database on egodocuments and travel journals in the Netherlands up to 1814. Updates on the current project (1814-1914) will be put on this site on a regular basis. And this collection of sources and sites will be updated here. Rudolf Dekker's bibliography on egodocuments and history can be found here too.

http://worldserver.oleane.com/autopact. The site of Phillipe Lejeune. With a large bibliography on autobiographies. French oriented.

http://www.teleacnot.nl/sites/jota-tv/egodocumenten.html. A Dutch educational television site, Teleac, where you can see a documentary about the Dutch research project on egodocuments. (In Dutch)

http://www.iiav.nl, The interactive database of egodocuments of women of the International Archive and Information centre on the Women's movement in Amsterdam.

http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/history/res/dndv/egodocs.html. The egodocuments site of Leiden University. With many good links (sources, articles, web sites and discussion lists). You will find some of these here, but not all.

http://www.beyondwriting.com/automemoirs.htm. Website of Elayne Zalis with many good links. Very complete.

http://sites.unc.edu/~andrews. Wisconsin Studies in Autobiography from the University of Wisconsin.

http://facstaff.uww.edu/hoganj/ab.htm. Site of the Wisconsin University Periodi-

cal: Auto/Biography studies.

http://www.mtsu.edu/~dlavery/abcrbib.htm. Autobiographical Criticism: A Bibliography. An extensive bibliography from Davis Lavery at the Middle Tennesee State University.

http://www.hawaii.edu/biograph. The Center for Biographical Research at the University of Hawai. They also have the International Auto/Biography Association Mailing list.

http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~natasha/usauto\u5\html/usautobiographycourse.html. Contemporary Autobiography in the U.S. Site of the University of Texas. Also on virtual autobiographies.

http://www.stichtingpandora.nl. egodocuments of the 'Stichting Pandora'. Dutch site, contemporary, mostly psychiatric egodocuments. (Go to 'zoeken/search' and type: Egodocumenten.)

http://www.ualberta.ca/~jwilliam/eng478/personalcriticism.htm. This essay is intended to initiate discussion about cultural criticism and location in autobiography. From the University of Alberta.

http://web.lemoyne.edu/~hevern/nr-auto.html. Narrative Psychology: Autobiography, Memoir, and Historical Biography of Lemoyne College New York.

Some sites of conferences and seminars

http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/history/sabean/classes/230A/index.html. Research Seminar: Introduction to the study of Egodocuments of UCLA in 1998.

http://www.konbib.nl/infolev/ing/rgp/werkbest/sympos/algemeen.htm. Dutch symposium on nineteenth century sources, with an article by Hans de Valk on egodocuments. (In Dutch.)

http://www.english.ubc.ca/projects/ab2000. Autobiography and Changing Identities. Conference on "Autobiography and Changing Identities" University of British Columbia, Vancouver July 27-31, 2000.

http://www.wigs.ac.uk/book.htm. Women's Autobiography in German. University of Manchester, Hulme Hall, 16-18 July 1998. Conference proceedings published in book form.

http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/history/res/dndv/fruin.html. Website of a Dutch seminar on Egodocuments in Leiden in 1999. (In Dutch.)

Sources

Most of the online sources are American, and many cover the Civil War.

http://www.dohistory.org. The diary of Martha Ballard (1735-1812). One of the best sites of a primary source online. Here the internet defeats time, and gives us a direct link into the past itself. A hint of things to come, when we will move as easily through virtual time as we now move through virtual space. Made by the history department of Harvard University, about Martha Ballard, a midwife in the years of the American revolution.

http://www.filmstudycenter.org/DOH/DOH.html. All about the film made at Harvard about the famous midwife's tale.

http://www.uh.edu/engines/epi1035.htm. Audio of Martha Ballard.

http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/asp/NAWLD. North American Women's Letters and Diaries (NAWLD), includes the immediate experiences of 442 women, as revealed in approximately 50,000 pages of diaries andletters. Particular care has been taken to index this material so that it can be searched more thoroughly than ever before. This site is not free, but available on a subscription basis.

http://www.CyndisList.com/diaries.htm. Cyndi's List – Primarily a list of genealogy sites, but with an extensive coverage of Diaries and Letters.

http://www.library.upenn.edu/etext/collections/diaries/index.html. Women's Studies. A list of 6 women diaries online from the university of Pennsylvania library and the Schoenberg center for electronic text & image.

http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/D/1776-1800/war/waldo.htm. From the Diary of Albigence Waldo, surgeon at Valley Forge, 1777.

http://melior.univ-montp3.fr/eol/egoDoc/Corberon/PageAccueil.htm. The journal of Marie Daniel Bourrée de Corberon Paris – Saint-Pétersbourg – Paris 1775-1781.

http://earlyamerica.com/lives/franklin/index.html. Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography.

http://www3.ns.sympatico.ca/dmcclare/title.htm. The 1815 Diary of a Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, Farm Girl, Private website.

http://www.endoftheoregontrail.org/biomenu.html. Oregon Trail Diaries and Emigrant Biographies and Narratives.

http://www.over-land.com/diaries.html. Links-The Overland Trail Diaries-Last updated. A lot of links to Diaries, Memoirs, Letters and Reports along The Trails West.

http://www.utm.edu/departments/acadpro/library/manus/ms009.htm. Diaries of Van Buren Oldham from 1840-1884. University of Tennessee at Martin.

http://www.library.upenn.edu/etext/diaries/fanny. Manuscript Diary of Fanny Ruschenberger, 1858-1881. At the University of Pennsylvania. One of those mentioned above.

http://www.rootsweb.com/~ohpickaw/kinnear/kinindex.htm. Transcript of Diaries of Stephen A. Kinnear 1862, 1863, 1879, 1880.

http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/williamson. Diary of the 16 year old school girl Alice Williamson in 1864 – Duke University Special Collections Library.

http://rylibweb.man.ac.uk/data2/spcoll/wills. The John Rylands University Library. Special Collection Guide W.M. wills's home front diaries.

http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Ranch/9788/Diaries.html. Personal website with Diaries of Mary Elizabeth (Neifert) Richards. An American woman during WWI.

http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/omori/court/court.html. Diaries of Court Ladies of Old Japan. Sources from the digital library of the University of Pennsylvania.

Civil War diaries

http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/vshadow2/letters.html. Valley of the Shadow – Letters and Diaries. A lot of personal documents from Virginia, from the period in and around the Civil War.

http://www.cviog.uga.edu/Projects/gainfo/cwletters.htm. Civil War Letters and Diaries from the Carl Vinson Institute of Government of the University of Georgia.

http://www.iowa-counties.com/civilwar/letters.htm. Iowa Letters, Journals, Diaries and Oral Accounts from the Civil War.

http://www.augustana.edu/library/SpecialCollections/civil1.html. Augustana College Library-Civil War Diaries, Illinois.

http://www.civil-war.net/cgi-bin/urlsrch.cgi?key=searchstring&searchstring =Letters+and+Diaries. Large collections of diaries and letters of the American Civil War.

Online diary sites

http://www.beyondwriting.com/autodiary.htm. Elayne Zalis's lists of diaries and journals online, a good point to start.

http://www.diarist.net/registry. 'The Definitive Directory of Online Journals and Diaries'. Indexing more than 4.000 sites.

http://www.blueroses.com/authors/links/online.html. A portal site to online diaries, with links and journals.

http://www.impolex.demon.co.uk/1999/june99/links.htm 1#Online Diaries. Another site with links to online diaries ('ego on stun', as they are characterized here).

http://home.earthlink.net/~hevern/diaries.html. The personal documentary center, with numerous links to diaries and journals online.

http://www.mydeardiary.com. The mydeardiary online, a site where you can 'safely' share your personal diary and read those of others .

http://www.mydeardiary.com/cgi-bin/diary.cgi?a=donttellmamma. An example of a diary online from the mydeardiary files. Written by 'Donttellmamma'.

Famous quotation: 'The internet has changed my life. I used to be shy and withdrawn. The internet has changed that I feel I can talk to anyone.'

http://diarist.net. The diarist net, 'a comprehensive starting-point for both writers and readers of online journals. With new content every week and even more features in the works, 'we've got everything you need to know all about the people who tell all.'

http://www.diarist.net/links/clips.html. This is their links and articles sub-site.

http://nav.webring.yahoo.com/hub?ring=liveswritten&list. A diary webring site, with 'An online journal of my Dark Dreams Love Wishes' as a first entry.

http://www.malotky.com/steve/current.htm. An example of a webring diary, the diary of Steve: 'Perhaps it's just a diary. Perhaps it's more'.

http://nav.webring.yahoo.com/hub?ring=diary&list. Another diary webring.

http://personalweb.about.com/cs/onlinediaries. 'Find out about their most intimate thoughts and ideas and read what goes on in the public and private lives of these interesting people. With Linda Roeder Your Guide to One of Over 700 Sites'. 'The masculine side of the Internet is revealed in these fabulous online journals. Find out what they like to do in their free time as well as what they do for a living and hear about the most intimate details of their lives.'

http://www.geocities.com/TimesSquare/Lair/7863/10-14-1998.html. Another example of an online diary, see the quotation above.

http://diaryland.com. A site that helps you to make your own diary online, 'get your own fun easy online diary' , with at least a 1000 active online diaries.

http://www.opendiary.com. 'The first interactive diary community on the Internet. Read about the lives of thousands of real people, or get your own free online diary. We are currently home to many diaries from around the world.'

http://www.diaryhistoryproject.com/introduction.htm. A site with reflections and articles about online diaries and journals. Very serious, very interesting.

http://207.158.243.119/html/journals diaries.html. Very nice site about diaries and journals online, with some good links

http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/short/webident.html. Article of David Chandler, "Personal Homes Pages and the Construction of Identities on the Web."

http://www.writing.ucsb.edu/faculty/sorapure/wa/diaries.html. "Almost all online diaries present entries in reverse chronological order, with the most recent entries featured and the older ones archived; this creates a sense of the self immersed in the present, where life is 'merely a sea of moments' (Magdalena Donea, Moments) and 'Every day is a new day. Every story is a new story' (Christine Castro, ReallyBigWords)."

http://www.webgek.com/dagboek. A Dutch diary site, 'dagboek online'.

http://dagboeken.pagina.nl. A Dutch portal for diaries, with a lot of Dutch and foreign links.

NOTES

1 http://www.geocities.com/diary2000us/diary.htm.
2 Philippe Lejeune, « *Cher Ecran...*», *Journal personnel, ordinateur Internet* (Paris, 2000).
3 http://worldserver.oleane.com/autopact/un\u5\an\u5\apr%C3%A8s.html.
4 Online diaries: http://personalweb.about.com/library/weekly/aa011000a.htm.
5 http://www.geocities.com/TimesSquare/Lair/7863/10-14-1998.html.
6 The diary of Cornelia Theodora Johanna van Assendelft de Coningh. Algemeen Rijksarchief. FA Middelberg (2.21.232), 140. The key is not in the archive, so do not lock the diary or you will never be able to read it without destroying it first. Think of diaries hidden behind lost passwords as a parallel to the lost key.
7 Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris, 1975).
8 http://www.malotky.com/steve/0010.htm .
9 David Crystal, *Language and the Internet.*(Cambridge, 2001). "Crystal argues that the Internet is in fact enabling a dramatic expansion to take place in the range and variety of linguistic forms, and is providing unprecedented opportunities for personal creativity", as the publisher's cover text says.
10 Abrahamina Clant in her diary. Algemeen Rijksarchief, FA Vosmaer (2.21.271), 279.
11 http://www.spasmodicreflections.com.