Mapping the Body Electric – Digital Authors in the Blogosphere

Since blogs are very different in many respects than the established literary forms, there is plenty of room for new exploration. Academic discussion is currently limited by the lack of shared terminology and critical ideas that can assist discussion of the structure and purpose of blogs. When print models are pulled directly into new media, confusion is caused by attempts to match the existing vocabulary to the new techniques and styles of writing. This paper proposes that blogs can usefully be separated into several categories; blogs used as diaries, blogs used as networking/community building tools, blogs used professionally for self-promotion or public journalism. In this paper I propose to further refine this model by suggesting theoretical frameworks and utilising examples to assist with carrying the discussion of blogs into the academic and life narrative realms. There is a tremendous upsurge in the number of voices available through the new digital publishing models; it is time to try to make some sense of the digital chatter.

The first group to be explored will be knitting bloggers. These blogs form a networked community of diarists who weave digital texts as a replacement for the tradition of chatting over sewing. This is an interesting community for several reasons. Although online diarists occasionally meet up in “real life” there is little expectation of personal contact. The knitters, however, create knitting rings where they read each-others’ blogs and mail the items they knit to one another in an organised gifting. The depth of their discussion is also noteworthy; amongst discussions of needles and yarn are personal explorations of death, loneliness and friendship. There are many middle-aged women in these networks, it will be interesting to see the patterns that emerge from their traditionally unpublished texts.

Blogging consists of individual entries updated daily. These texts do not represent the self the way we are accustomed to in traditional literature. Since Blogs and home-pages are snippets of time, the longer journey is not the immediately visible core aspect of the text. This fragmented focus, rather than a holistic one, means that characters like archetypes are not required. There is no tangible plot line, rather a segment of stories that often does
not have an ending. There are conclusions, but no ‘happily ever after’. The narrative develops on a day-to-day basis. This ties in with Smith and Watson’s conclusion in their ‘autobiographical subjects’ chapter,

Readers often conceive of autobiographical narrators as telling unified stories of their lives, as creating or discovering coherent selves. But both the unified story and the coherent self are myths of identity. For there is no coherent “self” that predates stories about identity, about “who” one is. Nor is there a unified, stable immutable self that can remember everything that has happened in the past. We are always fragmented in time, taking a particular or provisional perspective on the moving target of our pasts, addressing multiple and disparate audiences. Perhaps, then, it is more helpful to approach autobiographical telling as a performative act.¹

This ‘performative act’ is exactly what blogs and online journals facilitate. The story unfolds day by day in fragments. Ideas are vetted, emotions laid out on public view, philosophies explored. The audience, rather than reading the entire story in one compact packet, receives the updates day-by-day, or month-by-month. Blogs are a series of snippets that sometimes can be drawn together into a larger view, but not always.

In my paper I will lay the blog entries next to the theory in an attempt to analyse not just the individuals, but also the network as a whole. Each blogger has a unique diary. However, the communities that are created become groups. This paper will apply life narrative theory to the individual bloggers and then draw back to look for patterns (for example terms and worldviews that appear in the writings of multiple authors) in the network. I will suggest that these groups have defining characteristics that point to how the community perceives itself in relation to the world around it. Analysing a community of interest (as opposed to proximity) as reflected by the daily texts of the community is an exercise that has no parallel in traditional print.

The role of authentication and validation in blogs are unique to this particular medium. The paper will discuss how these occur in the digital realm.

¹ Smith and Watson, p. 47