Digital Authorship and Social Media:
French Digital Authors' Attitudes towards Facebook[*]

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The World Wide Web, which its pioneers and first enthusiasts imagined as a virtually endless, open, and democratic space with a more or less homogeneously distributed network of connections, has developed into something quite different from that dream. In the past two decades, it has become increasingly territorialised by a handful of multinational companies and their platforms that create a gravitational effect. As Louise Druhle writes in her web cartography project:

> These giant monopolies are vying with each other to pull the entire surface of the Internet down their respective web slopes. The most relevant example is Google, which dominates both web spaces: Google's ditches join at the centre of the Web, revealing its predominant position online. (Druhle, 2017)

This gravitational pull inescapably applies to literary authors as well. Valérie Beaudouin observes that

> [l]a question du lien direct entre les auteurs et leurs lecteurs étant constitutive de l'engagement numérique, les auteurs ne peuvent ignorer les innovations dans l'environnement numérique car celles-ci à chaque fois menacent ce lien établi avec le public. Ne pas s'adapter, c'est risquer de voir son audience décliner. (Beaudouin, 2012: 122)

If Google's penetration seems too complete and complex, and its impact too overarching and diffuse to trace and sketch a full picture of it, authors have more targeted tools to engage with, the function and impact of which are somewhat easier to circumscribe. Social media platforms, especially Facebook and Twitter, and the video sharing platform now also absorbed by Google, YouTube, are among those which have most clearly shaped authorship in the past decade. The almost simultaneous birth of these three websites around 2005 represents a turning point in the history of the web in that they have significantly rearranged the dynamics and power relationships in the cyberspace, in particular by redefining the notion of 'publication' and scrambling the distinction between public and private. This article focuses on the largest and most controversial platform, Facebook, and the authors who find themselves under the strongest pressure to engage with it, practicing what I will call 'digital literature' and 'digital authorship'. This combination will help to highlight the constraints authors face in the present media context dominated by social networks, as well as some key aspects of authorship in the twenty-first century more broadly. In this exploration of the subject, I propose three case studies of individual authors who represent a different attitude each towards the platform, which can be considered as basic types of strategies: using, refusing, and abusing.

What is 'digital authorship'?

'[*L*]'*auctor*, c'est tout d'abord "celui qui accroît", puis "celui qui se porte garant de l'œuvre"', Gabrielle Chamarat (Chamarat and Goulet, 2017 [1996]: 9) reminds us of the etymology of the term 'author'. In print culture, this typically means that the author 'grows' culture with new books and takes responsibility for them. These two meanings correspond to the two main aspects of the job of the person who creates literature: 'l'écrivain', who does the writing, and 'l'auteur', who 'fait vendre' (Pingaud, 1977: 77). Or, as Benoît Berthou puts it: 'Auteur, celui qui "porte" l'œuvre, et écrivain, celui qui "fait" l'œuvre' (2011: 16). An 'author' may not be a 'writer' if writing is not a main occupation,[1] and even when it is, Gisèle Sapiro and Cécile Rabot note the disconnect between symbolic and professional recognition (2016: 7–8). In France, writing as a profession has developed substantially since 1975, when new legislation unified the status and created bursaries for residencies (Sapiro and Rabot, 2016: 15), but with the persisting Romantic image of the born poet inspired by his muse, it is still far behind the English-speaking world in recognizing the value of professional training.

A new phase began in the 1990s, which included the emergence of digital media. The latter has indeed brought about radical changes through the shift in communication between writers/authors and their audiences. Valérie Beaudouin identifies two aspects of the change

> qui obligent à repenser l'activité de publication en ligne: les mutations dans les usages, liés à l'innovation de services, et les changements dans les trajectoires professionnelles (être publié chez un éditeur classique, par exemple). (Beaudouin, 2012: 110)

Beaudouin distinguishes the two main resulting orientations in authors' use of the web: 'on a des auteurs qui inventent des formes d'écritures adaptées au numérique (qui écrivent numérique), de l'autre des auteurs qui n'utilisent pas le réseau comme lieu de création' (2012: 134). I use the term 'digital author' to refer to the former. Digital writing practices may include blogging and born digital creative outputs on the author's own or other websites, including the combination of texts with other media such as photo, audio, and video, as well as even more direct experimentation with the technology, such as text generation and other procedural and interactive literature.[2] The latter belongs to the narrower field of electronic literature, which requires technical skills or collaboration with programmers that only a relatively small portion of authors have access to or are interested in. The former especially means producing what Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) term 'spreadable media' – blogs, videos, social media content: anything that can and needs to be shared and spread across digital networks to obtain visibility and therewith, existence in the strong sense on the web.

Gilles Bonnet has proposed the term '*écranvain*' for the creators of both kinds of digital outputs, which he defines as

> l'auteur qui ne se contentera pas d'une représentation et d'une médiation de soi grâce aux technologies numériques, mais qui les investira comme un véritable environnement doté de ses contraintes et potentialités spécifiques. (Bonnet, 2017: 8)

While Bonnet uses 'auteur' and 'écrivain' interchangeably, his definition clearly places the emphasis on the nature of the writing process and of the publication, which I agree needs to be the basis of the distinction between digital and non-digital authoring.[3] I will nevertheless prefer here 'author' to 'writer' because of the professional connotations of the latter, which will not apply to all the authors I mention, and because the focus of my attention will be on these authors' public-facing presence and self-mediation on Facebook.

In his survey on 'la condition de l'écrivain à l'âge numérique' commissioned by the Centre national du Livre, Frédéric Martel argues that 'l'auteur [...] est mort s'il ne change pas'

(Martel, 2015: 9), following the media and cultural shift that menaces the writing profession. He encourages the attitude of 'l'écrivain "social"',

> un écrivain qui a construit autour de lui sa 'communauté' grâce aux réseaux sociaux. Il existe de nombreux auteurs qui, grâce à Facebook ou Twitter, mais aussi par le biais de sites propres, de chaînes YouTube, de réseaux Instagram, SoundCloud ou LinkedIn, engagent une 'conversation' avec leurs lecteurs. (Martel, 2015: 44)

While this does indeed seem to be happening, as we shall see, Martel recommends it in conjunction with what he calls 'smart curation', 'une forme d'éditorialisation intelligente qui allie des algorithmes à une intervention humaine et qui permet d'agréger, d'éditer, de choisir et de proposer des contenus aux lecteurs' (Martel, 2015: 47).[4]

The curator is, however, for Martel, by definition a third party and not the author themselves. It is someone who also offers explanation and evaluation (Martel, 2015: 48), which ideally gives rise to conversations between the author and their readers. He mentions the booktubers, peer recommendation in social networks, and Facebook groups as examples. Yet Martel's illustrations and recommendations are entirely based on the book industry, and the case of digital authors, with their typically more reduced and somewhat niche readership, will be different.[5] What we shall see is precisely that being an 'écranvain' and producing digital literature is inseparable from being a digital author, implying on the one hand a different primary mode of engagement with the audiences than non-digital authorship, and on the other a deeper intertwining between the writing-related and the authorship-related aspects of producing literature in the digital space – including the task of self-mediation and self-curation.

Insofar as smart curation, as Martel defines it, involves publishing, choosing, and proposing content to the readers, it takes on not only the role of the critic, but partly also that of the publisher. The latter has three main roles, as summed up by Benoît Epron and Marcello Vitali-Rosati (2018): 'une fonction de choix et de production, une fonction de légitimation et une fonction de diffusion' (Chapter I:

Pour une définition de l'édition à l'ère numérique, para. 2). The 'désintermédiation et réintermédiation' (Epron and Vitali-Rosati, 2018: Chapter I: Pour une définition de l'édition à l'ère numérique, section La littérature: nouvelles formes de diffusion, para. 2) that characterizes digital content production and publication mean that the choice of *what* to publish is entirely in the writer-author's hands – certainly not without consideration for the audiences, but not influenced by publisher policies and preferences – while the legitimation and distribution is part of the 'curation' by both the authors themselves and their 'communities'. Christian Fuchs notes that in addition to the 'convergence of media and machines', computer technology and networks 'has enabled the convergence of production, distribution (communication) and consumption of information' (Fuchs, 2017: 45). Legitimation by definition cannot lie with the author themselves, and the community, the influencers, and the larger networks will come to fill this role. But beyond – and especially before – that, the entire process previously distributed across the book chain is for digital literature concentrated in the author's hands. Social media is a key tool in the (self-)curation, (self-)mediation, and distribution of content – and sometimes also in its creation.

'Social media' is often used interchangeably with 'social network', defined as 'a social structure made up of actors called nodes, which are connected by various types of relationships' (Gündüz-Ögüdücü and Etaner-Uyar, 2014: 1). While a social network may exist non-digitally, 'social media' implies a digital infrastructure and places emphasis on the (multi)media aspect of the network, referring to 'digital platforms, services and apps built

around the convergence of content sharing, public communication, and interpersonal connection' (Burgess et al., 2018: 1). Fuchs lists eleven definitions (2017: 38–39), which highlight communication, community formation, information and content sharing, user-fed databases, and collaboration outside the traditional social institutions. Individual social networking sites vary in terms of target population, focus, and primary uses, and even if they often allow for a variety of these, the platforms' specific affordances will remain an important force in shaping these, designed precisely to invite certain practices and disable others (Norman, 2013 [1988]; Bucher and Helmond, 2018).

Philip Agre observed already in 1998 that

the economics and the politics of the Internet are as one, and the institutional transformations that the Internet is already facilitating are political processes in the deepest possible sense – a near-total renegotiation of the mechanisms and mediations of our lives together here on earth.

One of the most recent major factors in this renegotiation is precisely social media – and in particular the largest of them with over 2 billion users worldwide, Facebook. In this light, any choice of attitude towards it cannot be merely a question of personal preference, but also inevitably implies a political choice and an ethical stance. No author can be blind to this, and digital authors are particularly aware. This will generate the core dilemmas and define the dividing line between approaches.

Use: François Bon, *Connecteur*

Author of over thirty books, including novels and non-fiction, published by traditional publishers such as Minuit, Seuil, and Verdier, and with some 40 titles to date in the catalogue of his one-man publishing enterprise Tiers Livre Editeur, François Bon is also well known for his early and continuing engagement with the digital medium. He was among the first in France to launch a literary website, and his online revue remue.net has become a point of reference. His website, tierslivre.net, which exists since 2005, with its over 6000 articles and 11000 photos (Bon, 2014/2018), is easily the largest online literary labyrinth on the web created by one person. Bon has been present on Facebook since 2007,[6] even before it had a French edition, and is also active on Twitter and Instagram. His activity on these largely overlaps with, and for Instagram also feeds into, Facebook. Since 2015, the focus of Bon's work has gradually shifted from writing on tierslivre.net to videos on YouTube, partly also published on a professional account on Vimeo for better image quality. Everything is well documented on tierslivre.net, with a regularly updated list of videos, but the author's YouTube channel[7] is developing into an entire little literary universe in its own right.

In his blog post titled 'je te suis, tu me suis (ou pas): des réseaux', dated 3 November 2017, Bon provides a detailed overview of his use of, and attitude towards, the different social networks and platforms from Facebook and Twitter through SnapChat, Youtube, and Instagram (Bon, 2017a). It is a complex and carefully managed ecosystem of networks that each have their place in Bon's organically developed but well reflected practices. He sees them as complementary tools and spaces that communicate with one another – not without overlaps, but with clear differences in emphasis in their uses and functions. YouTube is increasingly a space for publishing and exploring content, including creating playlists to promote others' videos, and to some extent for discussions around them. Twitter serves for a 'veille en information générale ou informations spécialisées' and for announcing new content published on the author's website or on YouTube, or other information such as events he participates in. Twitter's main appeal of being open and (supposedly, or according

to account settings) neutral in its presentation of the information flow also proves to be its weakness, however, in Bon's view, insofar as despite a large number of followers (15000 at the time of writing that blog post), the visibility of his tweets and engagement with them remain minimal. As opposed to the 'assez indifférente et passive' Twitter crowd, Facebook 'permet de belles relations avec les amis, ça propulse les choses sérieuses qu['il] me[t] sur [s]on site ou [s]es vidéos.' (Bon, 2017b).

The 'propulsion' of contents published elsewhere and the friendship and community building are two key reasons and objectives of Bon's presence on Facebook, where he declares feeling comfortable ('Je me sens bien sur Facebook', Bon, 2017b). This does not mean that he is uncritical: he reproaches the platform for its 'mépris […] pour l'utilisateur prévisible, l'utilisateur valeur moyenne, l'utilisateur interchangeable, quels que soient la singularité intime dévoilée' (Bon, 2017b), for instance. His decision to still use the platform is not simply a sign of submission, inconsistency, or mere pragmatism either, however, but represents an ethical and political stance:

> à décider de rester dans l'ombre propice de la table à écrire, et le manuscrit remis à l'éditeur, la communauté littéraire se sépare de l'intervention dans le monde, s'isole dans ses pratiques les plus traditionnelles […]. [U]n territoire littéraire se crée et se structure […] en dehors de la disposition intellectuelle constituée traditionnellement par la régulation critique, et ce territoire et ses agents, dans leur dispersion et – aussi – leur non-inscription de champ, devient de fait une spécificité littéraire complémentaire qui se juxtapose aux pratiques existantes. (Bon, 2007/2017)

If this need to engage with the emerging communication technologies dates back to the late 90s, 'les réseaux sociaux, c'est un changement très important de la pensée Internet' (Bon, 2007/2017). Authors and artists, especially those not (yet) institutionally recognized, published, consecrated, but also those who are but can no longer subsist on their book sales and authorship related activities funded by traditional media and institutions, can and *should* use the social networks, as they (should) have used the web, to connect with one another, circulate one another's work, build a community, and shape the network, the platform, and an alternative literary ecosystem around and for themselves. '[C]'est comme en politique: a-t-on le choix du terrain de la résistance ?', he wonders (Bon, 2017a).

Bon's mode of resistance is through responsible[8] and self-aware usage that takes from the platform what it can give. Most importantly, he highlights the users' often overlooked power to shape the tool:

> me fascine certainement le fait que Facebook a été construit par ses propres usagers, et s'il demeure une tension permanente entre ceux qui l'ont inventé et qui continuent de le développer, aucun discours prédictif, il y a 10 ans, n'aurait pu rêver du Facebook d'aujourd'hui, même dans la tête de Marc Zuckerberg.
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> […]
>
> toujours penser que nous ne sommes pas simplement des 'utilisateurs', mais, par le fait même que nous utilisons, des 'constructeurs' – FaceBook [*sic*] et les autres réseaux se modèlent selon la façon dont [on] les utilise : ce sont des plateformes d'observation décisives, parce que le Net s'organise depuis ces nouvelles possibilités. (Bon, 2007/2017)

Without being blinded to the company's surveillance and marketing strategies that trap and exploit the users, he also sees it as a tool of empowerment when used smartly for circulating information, making connections, and building a community that can stand on its feet outside

the outdated and, for the digital author, largely unhelpful literary establishment. He even goes so far as praising Facebook marketing:

> tu veux que soient signalées tes nouvelles parutions sur Tiers Livre Editeur, paye 20 euros et nous te garantissons diffusion auprès de tant de personnes etc, c'est-à-dire un glissement vers un modèle économique avec appui partiel sur l'usager devenu payeur, et son paradoxe : là où ton site est le seul vecteur de diffusion de tes livres, ou tu n'as jamais vu ni journaux ni radio ni libraire s'y intéresser, merci Facebook et Amazon de nous sauver la mise, donc tu payes et tu vends tes livres, et ça compense ce que l'édition traditionnelle ne t'offre plus. (Bon, 2017a)

He has indeed used Facebook ads to boost new publications of Tiers Livre Editeur,[9] probably through the now rarely used Page named after it. Despite having a Page for the publishing enterprise, however, Bon does in fact transgress Facebook's policies by presenting his authorial and editorial activity primarily through his personal Profile. The Profile 'Intro' makes this very clear: 'tiers livre: des vrais livres, des vidéos, des ateliers, et la préférence au web!' This goes against Facebook's terms, which explicitly prohibit using personal profiles for business-related activity (Ramos, 2014). Facebook handles Pages and their content differently from Profiles. They are public and can be seen by any user,[10] who can click 'Like' on the page to follow it, which means that the content posted on the Page *may* appear in their News Feed. The emphasis on the 'may' is important: the visibility of Page posts is sensibly lower than Profile posts', and Facebook actively promotes its Page-related advertising services, which is a key income generator for the company. This is no doubt the main reason why the company insist on its use for business-related purposes.

Beyond the potential consideration for the disadvantages of a Facebook Page, however, Bon's reliance on the Profile can be seen as the (digital) materialization of the fact that 'Francois Bon' stands for a 'maker-of-texts-and-photos-and-videos-and-creative-writing-workshop-engine-and-creator-of-Tiers-Livre-and-one-man-publisher' that constitutes a unit which cannot be separated into 'creative-individual' and a 'professional-public-intellectual' components – on the social network even less than elsewhere.

Refuse? Neil Jomunsi's escape attempt

A number of authors refuse to engage with social media, especially the most criticized Facebook, and this is sometimes the case of even those who otherwise have a creative practice in the digital space, such as Eric Chevillard,[11] Noémi Lefebvre (Lefebvre and Grappe, n.d.), or Philippe de Jonckheere (n.d). Julien Simon, alias Neil Jomunsi, has had a much more complicated relationship with the platform, and I propose to present his experience rather than a clear-cut refusal because it highlights not only the 'dark side' of social media and the reasons to keep far from them, but also the pressures (digital) authors face in the new cultural and socio-technological environment dominated by them, as well as the resulting tensions.[12] Neil Jomunsi – it is under this pen name that he publishes and is present on social media – is the author of often playful fantasy fiction and sci-fi, including novels, short stories, and feuilletons, self-published or published by the now defunct publishing venture Walrus (Gary, 2018), of which he was a founding member. He open-mindedly experiments not only with forms, but also with platforms: on YouTube he published the video-audiobook feuilleton *Gobbledygook* (2017) and the short story series *Projet Bradbury* (second season, 2017), as well as a playful introduction to storytelling (*Storyfication*), and two series on Wattpad (*Le dernier jour d'école* [2015] and *Nemopolis* [2017]). While he makes most of his work online available free of charge, he invites contributions through Tipeee, Liberapay, or PayPal, and

also admits looking for a publisher for his 'textes plus longs, plus sérieux aussi', well aware that 'il n'y a que de cette façon qu['il] pourr[a] toucher un public plus large' (Framasoft, 2015). His website page42.org 'tourne autour du livre sous toutes ses formes' and presents 'une projection de [s]a bibliothèque idéale' in the form of reviews and reading notes, but also interested in 'l'objet-livre – sa fabrication, ses évolutions, ses futurs possibles' (Jomunsi, 2013a). In the blog, he has commented in detail on his issues and experience with social media.

In addition to Facebook, Jomunsi has also been present on Twitter, Instagram, Diaspora, and Mastodon, even though the latter two, which were meant to offer an alternative to Facebook, admittedly didn't catch on and Jomunsi's use has also remained limited. His use of Twitter, where he tweets and retweets a variety of information from literary to political subjects, about personal experiences mostly related to creative practices as well as about public and professional matters, is (as of December 2018) more intense than his presence on Facebook, where the nature of the posts is nevertheless very similar and often overlaps with his tweets. On Facebook, where his civil name is indicated underneath the pen name,[13] posts are often shared only with friends and occasionally include personal things, such as photos of his young twins. Jomunsi also has two Pages, one for the website Page 42 (188 'Likes' as of Dec. 2018), and another for his latest publishing venture, Ozmocorp ('Fabrique artisanale d'objets fictionnels', Jomunsi, n.d., 71 'Likes'). The activity on these pages is more limited: Ozmocorp focuses on the (still rare) news related to the publisher, and Page 42 announces new blog posts and occasionally shares other news from the media. The same announcements tend to appear on the personal profile as well, however, which the number of reactions and comments suggest being more visible to contacts.

On 14 December 2016 – after leaving Twitter and Instagram – Jomunsi announced on Facebook: '"Je quitte Facebook (et c'est sans regret)" – Voilà le dernier article que je publierai sur Facebook. Ce soir, ce compte n'existera plus.' The reactions varied from sadness for seeing him go to congratulations on making the difficult decision. Two and a half months later, on 2 February 2017, he reappears on the network: 'Bon, de toute façon, personne n'y a jamais vraiment cru. 😅 [tear of joy emoticon] (je suis faible)'. The reactions are mixed again, between happy welcome back and a degree of disappointment that he didn't manage, as if it had been some difficult challenge and a real feat to accomplish. His 'social suicide' can be considered a new edition of the Seppukoo movement that hit Facebook a few years into its existence, where social media aware artists and individuals called for leaving Facebook and proposed tools to facilitate the quitting, resulting in users effectively leaving by the thousands (Les Liens Invisibles, 2009; Borrelli, 2010; 'Web 2.0 Suicide Machine').

In his blog, Jomunsi explained in detail his issues with social media, especially Facebook, including his reasons for both leaving and returning. First of all, he recognizes the positive aspects – most important among all, the fact of effectively helping to maintain old friendships and form new ones:

> [J]'aime beaucoup Facebook. J'aime la manière dont Facebook a aboli les distances, nous a permis de renouer d'anciennes amitiés, de partager nos images et d'avoir l'impression de ne jamais être loin les uns des autres. Ce site, peut-être plus que n'importe quel autre, a profondément modifié nos vies. (Jomunsi, 2014)

What is more, he acknowledges the networks' role in shaping his personality in a positive way, thanks to the people they allowed him to meet and the learning and discussions that came of it, particularly precious for a writer:

> Je suis aujourd'hui en partie ce que les réseaux sociaux […]. Pour la plus grande partie, je pense qu'ils m'ont rendu meilleur: parce qu'ils ont complexifié ma pensée, ils l'ont enrichie de nouvelles nuances. Je me pose des questions que je ne me serais jamais posées auparavant, je cherche davantage à voir le monde à travers les yeux des autres, […] et tout écrivain devrait considérer cela comme une bénédiction. (Jomunsi, 2016a)

This ease of connecting also leads to one of the downsides, however, which will quickly appear more numerous: Facebook '[a] dévoyé le sens du mot "ami"' (Jomunsi, 2017a) and

> réussi à modifier durablement la manière dont nous entretenons des relations avec nos proches. […] [L]es réseaux sociaux, c'est la facilité. […] [L]ier à ce point des amitiés sincères à une entreprise colossale, c'est faire preuve à mon avis d'un sens des priorités discutable : on choisit la facilité du contact à la pérennité de l'amitié. (Jomunsi 2016b)

Overall, 'social action' has become all too easy and superficial with the networks, the realization of which will contribute to Jomunsi's decision to quit.[14] Other issues he reproaches the platform for include the filter bubble ('nous nous isolons avec des gens qui globalement pensent la même chose que nous' [2016b]); the addiction encouraged by the site's affordances, especially the 'Likes'; and the platform's neo-liberal spirit ('Le réseau social est avant tout une tentative […] de canaliser l'énergie que nous mettions autrefois dans le monde – ces mêmes énergies monétisées ensuite sous forme de données personnelles revendues aux publicitaires' (Jomunsi, 2017a). All these criticisms have often been raised against Facebook, and Jomunsi considers already in 2014 the possibility of leaving – and explains his reason for staying at that point:

> D'un service gratuit et universel, Facebook s'est peu à peu métamorphosé en une gigantesque machine à générer du cash, et je l'ai accepté. J'ai continué d'utiliser ses services, car tous mes amis étaient désormais interconnectés et que je n'avais pas envie de tout recommencer ailleurs. […]

> En occupant le terrain, et en décidant donc de ne pas fuir Facebook, mais d'en faire le terrain de la lutte, non seulement on effectue une action de protestation qui a du sens (saboter l'analyse marchande de nos comportements sociaux), mais nous la transposons à l'endroit où se situe le problème.
> Je vous invite à faire de même. (Jomunsi, 2014)

He also highlights a number of negative implications faced more specifically by authors, with a focus on the case of the 'écrivain-startup en phase de croissance' (Jomunsi, 2013b). First and foremost, '[l]e fonctionnement de Facebook incite à scénariser sa propre vie, en utilisant ellipses, images et focus' (Jomunsi, 2012), and in the case of authors this becomes a pressure 'de s'observer dans le processus de création' and, most problematic of all, risks impacting the writing itself:

> si ces entreprises ne sont pas innocentes, elles sont encore moins neutres. Et leur impact sur l'écosystème de la création est considérable. Facebook ne contrôle pas l'œuvre que vous fabriquez, pas plus que Twitter, YouTube ou Wattpad. Mais ces sites contrôlent la manière dont vous allez en parler. Ils contrôlent la manière dont vos communications vont être vues, sous quel format elles vont apparaître, et aussi à quel rythme cesdites communications seront le plus efficaces. Ces sites font les règles du jeu. Et ces règles du jeu ne sont pas questionnables. […] Les réseaux sociaux – en somme la manière dont nous partageons nos créations – façonnent donc la manière dont nous créons. (Jomunsi, 2017c)

All these factors, including those formulated later, have arguably contributed to him eventually quitting (for a while). The alternative he proposes when leaving is very simple: do it like before Facebook. Use email, chat apps, phone, blogs and its comment option, hyperlinks in blog posts, and so on (Jomunsi, 2016b; 2016c).

He remains acutely aware, however, that the digital and self-published author's autonomy, as we have seen, means all responsibility for the marketing and promotion of their work being concentrated in his hands:

> [S]i le fait de créer des œuvres numériques nous libère par définition de la contrainte de trouver un éditeur, un producteur, un agent, il ne nous libère pas de toutes contraintes. Avec la multiplication (le mot est faible) des œuvres diffusées sur internet, s'est très vite posée la question de leur visibilité. Il ne suffit pas de publier : il faut le faire savoir, arriver à faire connaître son travail, acquérir un public et faire fructifier sa popularité. Sans quoi publier sur le net revient à écrire un livre pour qu'il reste dans la réserve de la librairie.
>
> Et c'est là qu'entrent en jeu les réseaux sociaux, dont les utilisateurs (toi, moi, nous tous) sont aujourd'hui les plus grands prescripteurs d'œuvres numériques : 'regarde cette vidéo', 'écoute cette chanson', 'lisez ce livre' sont d'innocentes injonctions dont nous sommes passés maîtres. (Jomunsi, 2017c)

While it is technically possible to spread the word through other means, refusing them means depriving oneself of a key strategic tool which, while time-consuming and questionable at many levels, is still the most efficient way to reach audiences: Jomunsi 'concède que [l']usage massif et global [des réseaux sociaux] les a rendus incontournables' (2017a), and that

> [c]es Likes, ces votes, ces commentaires, ces partages du Facebook, ces RT [retweets] sur Twitter, sont des graines disséminées au vent du web. Sans elles – sans vous – les auteurs ont les pieds coulés dans le béton. (Jomunsi, 2017b)

The independence of the 'écrivain-startup en phase de croissance', then, seems to depend to some extent on their acceptance on a degree of dependency on the tools that allow them to achieve it – including the social networks.[15]

Ab-use: Jean-Pierre Balpe's Uncertain World

A very different kind of digital authorship presents a third approach to the social network. While François Bon insisted that the platform is for spreading and promoting content published and stored elsewhere on the web, such as a blog or personal website, others use it as the primary site of writing and publication, for some or the entirety of their literary or quasi-literary outputs – some of which would not even exist without this platform. Literary creativity takes a number of forms and modes within the framework proposed by the website, which would deserve a detailed study in its own right.[16] I will here present an example that both embraces and disrupts the form at the same time.

Un Monde Incertain (Balpe, n.d.a), with 444 'Likes' as of December 2018, is a Page presented as an 'Installation Numérique' in the subtitle in the cover photo and as 'Écrivain' in the 'About' section, which also explains the objective: 'Tenir à jour l'évolution constante de l'œuvre collective Un Monde Incertain initié par Jean-Pierre Balpe.' The profile picture shows a human shadow – quite recognizably that of Jean-Pierre Balpe himself, who likes presenting himself through pictures of his shadow in his Facebook profile and webpage as well. The Page refers to www.balpe.name, which is itself 'Un univers de génération automatique littéraire', 'la page d'entrée principale de l'hyperfiction en flux et expansion

continue "Un Monde Incertan" basée sur la génération automatique de textes littéraires' (Balpe, n.d.b). This intentionally labyrinthine website contains a number of 'Dédales', some of which is (as of December 2018) also headed by the image of a similar shadow.[17]

The Facebook Page contains posts of videos published on Jean-Pierre Balpe's YouTube channel, attributed to 'authors' such as Rachel Charlus, Germaine Proust, Antoine Elstir, Sylvestre Saint-Loup, Paul Mephisto, or Charles-Emmanuel Palancy, to mention only a few. These names will ring a bell to readers familiar with Proust – a somewhat confused bell. All these 'authors' also have their individual profiles on Facebook, with a network of friends and regular and varied publications, the style of which varies from one profile to another, with quite recognizable (Facebook) identities for some of them. Rachel Charlus, the most active, for instance, is an aristocrat living in her mansion and often posting pictures of classical erotic artworks, testing the limits of Facebook censorship, but also news items from the media, and often somewhat disconcerting statements and 'microromans' such as this:

> Microroman n° 96209:
> Cathan alluma une bougie et en approcha l'enveloppe qu'il n'avait pas osé ouvrir. Son corps d'armée, fort à peine de quelques milliers d'hommes, ayant pour toute cavalerie deux escadrons d'artilleurs, appuyé, il est vrai, par la flotte d'Anar, avait franchi le Var, avec Puiseaux pour objectif... Cathan avait passé la nuit, mouillé sur une ancre, par neuf brasses même fond, à quatre ou cinq lieues dans l'est de l'île de Dognen. (15.12.2018, https://www.facebook.com/rachel.charlus/posts/1961645973950416)

Rachel Charlus of course does not exist in real life. She is one of Balpe's numerous characters who came to life from his website's generative environment thanks to the space provided by Facebook. Jean-Pierre Balpe, real-life poet, writer, 'auteur si l'on veut' (Balpe, 2016) and professor emeritus of the University of Paris 8, pioneer in generative digital literature and one of the founders of the first hypermedia research group in France in 1990, has a profile with his own name – one heteronym among the others – from which he reposts the generative videos on Un Monde Incertain. Balpe describes himself as a 'maître du jeu' (Balpe, 2016).

The 'community' of this 'uncertain world' is not a conventional one then: even though followed by real people, the most active members populating the Page are not conventional Facebook users but fictional profiles animated by a single person.[18] The 'Ecrivain' the Page represents therefore does not correspond to the conventional bookish idea of a writer-author either, as not only does he not publish books, but he does not even *write* in the traditional sense at all.[19]

Balpe's use is therefore disruptive in two respects. First, his uncertain Facebook 'world' goes straight against the website's Terms of Service (Facebook, 2018), according to which one person may only have one account, and each account has to belong to a real person. This (de)generated Proustian world includes dozens of fictional characters that Balpe has managed to integrate so well in the network through connections with real people's profiles and frequent posts that Facebook has not picked up their fictionality. Tightly intertwined with the real world, this generative fictional universe thus contributes to growing the network. Un Monde Incertain is, in this sense, a little grain of sand between the clogs of the big Facebook machinery, for which only authentic users and user information is useful, feeding into their user data which allows the company to sell targeted ads. Inversely, ads are wasted on fictional characters with no real money to spend. Creating a whole fictional world on the platform therefore subverts the company's capitalist-mercantile logic and abuses its services.

But this subversion is not gratuitous or simply political. It is, secondly, aesthetic and literary. Generative art emerged from a questioning of traditional literary aesthetics, institutions, and modes of sense-making. As Balpe writes in a paper published in 2001:

> Le livre EST le problème ; le livre est tout le problème… ou plutôt l'industrialisation du livre et tout ce que, dès son origine, elle implique et qui, peu à peu, s'enchaîne dans un ensemble de dispositifs de plus en plus contraignants : la standardisation, le formatage, les conventions, les collections, le marketing, les publics, les critiques, les auteurs, les autorités et les genres… (Balpe, 2001a: 5)

He points out that before the book, 'littérature se manifeste essentiellement comme des "instants" de texte, instants éphémères, volatiles, changeants, variants… contextualisés'. The digital medium allows us to break away from the printed page on the one hand, and from the finished and closed form and work on the other. Literature thus becomes (again) both ephemeral and infinite. Generative art amplifies both these aspects with the algorithm creating each time a different text that will most likely never happen again, and potentially infinitely so, as long as the machine is working. Balpe uses Proust's texts as a 'parangon des écrivains français' (Balpe, 2015) and recycles them through the web of characters and generative algorithms that each make something different out of it.

The relationship to the reader also changes in that the 'author's' role – who is the creator of the algorithm and his fictional shadow – in the process of sense-making is limited to offering grammatically correct texts and combination of words that rely on a dictionary complete with what Balpe calls 'representations des connaissances' (Balpe, 2016) which provides a degree of semantic coherence. This applies to the YouTube videos reposted on the Page, where images, sounds, and texts alike promise some sort of a sense without fulfilling that promise. It is up to the reader to construct the meaning of the texts – and it is their choice whether to bother or not.

In any case, with his Monde Incertain, Balpe counters both Facebook's mercantile spirit and literature's established modes of thinking. 'Je crois que le milieu littéraire m'ignore totalement – et ça me convient bien,' he says (Balpe, 2016). At the same time, he radically appropriates the space of the social media, intended to ease communication with the help of simplifying and interpreting algorithms, for a subversive kind of literature, while also expanding the domain of literature.

Conclusion

The three cases presented show three different modes of digital authorship in terms of kinds of writing, publishing experience and preferences, audiences, literary and financial interests and needs, and effective livelihoods. François Bon, the best known among the three, has a long experience in both traditional publishing and running his own web-based experiences, including self-publishing. In the past few years, he has taught creative writing at the École nationale supérieure d'arts de Paris-Cergy, which confirms his symbolic and professional recognition, without nevertheless providing sufficient income. Self-publication and website subscriptions constitute the other core component of his livelihood, and a large network of connections with colleagues, artists, professionals of the book industry, amateur authors, and readers is crucial not only for the visibility and financial viability of these projects, but also more broadly for building an environment where such undertakings outside the traditional publishing infrastructures can become generally recognized and viable. Neil Jomunsi, not (yet?) enjoying the literary establishment's recognition and targeting a very different audience with his writing of more popular kinds of genre fiction, with a considerable

amount of texts published but none by a traditional third-party publisher, is similarly aware of his dependency as an author on the social networks. In his case, however, this awareness conflicts with concerns about Facebook's mode of functioning that transforms and exploits human relationships. This results in a difficult dilemma about whether to use it or not, leading to a period of refusal, which was nonetheless to remain limited. Both authors' experiences and attitudes ultimately illustrate and confirm the especially acute relevance to digital authors of what Jill Rettberg observes:

> [W]e can't not play technology today, at least not as a society. Individuals can extract themselves, refuse to be on Facebook, resign from the Wikipedia in disgust at the ways in which editors team up and use entries as weapons, but ultimately if we refuse to participate in technology and social media we can't participate in contemporary public debate, democracy, employment, commerce etc. An absolute digital detox is all but impossible today. We need to build alternatives. Bruce Sterling describes us as not living in digital capitalism […] but in digital feudalism, where we live in spaces owned by our feudal lords (Google, Facebook, Amazon, etc) and are both completely dependent on them and actually feel fealty to them. I think Sterling is right in that these technologies have become part of the air we breathe. (Rettberg, 2015)

Jean-Pierre Balpe represents an entirely different relation to literature, writing, and presence in the network. Emeritus professor with no financial need to worry about and long-term practitioner of generative literature, Facebook is for him a tool to give virtual existence to a series of fictional 'authors' animated by him and his text generation software. While much of the text generators' 'writing' also appears on Balpe's websites, they only turn into 'authors' through the virtual existence afforded by Facebook, thanks to which they become actual (virtual) members in an actual (virtual) social network. Facebook also represents an approach to language that reduces its creativity to make it more manageable, not foreign to the spirit of stale literary institutions, both of which are indirectly called into question through the artificial texts that invite human imagination to play. Balpe's combination of text generation and social media practice thus hijacks both 'Literature' as an institution and Facebook as a service, letting loose the creative power of a combination of language, human imagination, and digital technology.

Overall, Facebook proves to be a key – if not indispensable – tool in digital authors' self-mediation and public existence, which cannot be replaced by Twitter or Instagram, where profiles are far more basic, nor by websites or blogs, which are not automatically present in other users' digital social space and therefore have a more limited visibility.

Well before social media, authors have practiced self-mediation wherever and whenever they talked about their life and work as an author/writer, through their literature and paratexts, including self-commentary in print, television, and radio interviews, readings, book launch events and festival appearances, and so on. While those continue to exist, their reach now seems limited compared to social media, in both directions: only a relatively small portion of authors have sufficient opportunity to appear in traditional media and public events, and these are also seen or heard by more limited audiences than what social media can provide when content starts spreading.[20] The value of individual social media posts certainly cannot be compared to a festival appearance, but a much smaller piece of news or writing than a festival appearance can be the occasion for a post, the frequency and quality of which can ensure a more valuable and lasting contact with existing and potential readers.

When this happens through an author's personal profile where the boundaries between personal and professional life are porous, it means a closer integration of the writerly and the authorial aspects of their work. If in 1977 Bernard Pingaud concluded his

article on 'La non-fonction de l'écrivain' by saying that '[l]a séparation entre écrivain et auteur est, pour le moment, et pour longtemps encore, inévitable', four decades later social media practices show this separation to be disappearing in the case of digital authors. While Facebook's distinction between personal Profiles and professional and public Pages invites the clear distinction between personal and professional life, writing is an activity that bridges those too, and the pressure of self-observation while at work highlighted by Jomunsi among social media's expectations facing authors also muddles the water in the opposite direction. In the case of the fictive-virtual 'authors'[21] who exist exclusively in the form of Facebook Profiles, the integration of the 'writer' and the 'author' functions is even more evident.[22] Alain Vaillant's observation highlights, however, that such integration of the writerly and the authorly existence is not a new development:

> [L]e divorce entre l'être et le paraitre, le dedans et le dehors de la littérature est récent. Jusqu'à la fin de la Restauration, l'homme de lettres écrit et, d'autre part, est intégré à des réseaux de sociabilité auxquels il participe dans le cadre de relations interpersonnelles. (Vaillant, 2017 [1996], 38)

While the 'partage de soi' remains, as Bernard Lahire argues, characteristic of the 'condition littéraire' (Lahire, 2006: 19) insofar as authors need a different source of revenue than their writing, the 'partage de soi' between 'l'être et le paraitre' of the writer-author is fading (again) with digital authorship. In this light and context, we can therefore consider the impact of social media a return, in an entirely different environment and for different reasons, to a mode of functioning that was the norm until the early nineteenth century. Just like writing in and for the "flux" resembles a pre-nineteenth-century or pre-print approach to literature – as both François Bon and Jean-Pierre Balpe often emphasize – where texts were more malleable, existing and circulating in a variety of versions and forms.

While the major social media platforms are (almost) global and the opportunities and issues they raise – in particular for digital authors – and largely the same across languages and cultures in the developed world, all three authors discussed here are French and live in France,[23] and their respective situations is inseparable from the social and cultural context they live and work in. There is much work to be done on how and to what extent attitudes towards global platforms vary due to culture-specific historical and political contexts, which I have not been able to undertake here. While the three large categories of attitudes facing Facebook I outlined – use, refuse, abuse – are very generic and applicable not only to authors, but to the general population, a number of points in the authors' justification of their respective attitudes are undeniably related to the French literary ecosystem specifically. The perceived rigidity of the publishing industry, the decrease in public funding and opportunities for authors in public media, residencies, prizes and bursaries, the peculiarity of the social security regime available to them all contribute to the disillusion with the literary establishment and the motivation for seeking alternatives and building bottom-up author networks and communities (Bon, 2018; Jomunsi, 2018). Having pioneered in generative literature – an often-cited fact in the history of electronic literature (ex. Hayles, 2008: 18–19; Bouchardon, 2014: 95–97; Rettberg, 2018: 38) – meanwhile, has given a French 'auteur si l'on veut' the tools to engage with the social network in a very different and quite original fashion. Both a constraint and an opportunity, then, the global platforms continue to both shape and be shaped by individual traditions, cultures, and modes of literary engagement.

[1] And vice versa, writing alone does not make an author. Bernard Lahire (2006) argues at the same time that being a writer quite naturally involves a 'double vie', sharing one's life between writing and the other activities that provide a livelihood.

[2] On procedural representation, see Bogost (2007, esp. 9−14).

[3] These two forms of authorship are of course not mutually exclusive and can well coexist in the practices of the same person.

[4] Epron and Vitali-Rosati define 'éditorialisation' as 'un processus de mise en forme et de structuration d'un contenu dans un environnement numérique', 'l'ensemble des dynamiques – soit les interactions des actions individuelles et collectives avec un environnement numérique particulier – qui produisent et structurent l'espace numérique.' (2018: Chapter I: Pour une définition de l'édition à l'ère numérique, section L'Editorialisation, para. 5 and 7)

[5] Authorship on Wattpad represents a different situation, which I will not be able to tackle within the scope of this article. See Ramdarshan Bold (2016) for an excellent overview of this problematic with a focus on anglophone authors.

[6] As of December 2018, he has over 4252 friends and 5452 followers.

[7] https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCyhmq2FXs8JxwkFLUgQ2n4w.

[8] He emphasizes the importance of privacy settings and distinctions between types of contacts.

[9] Personal communication on Facebook Messenger, 09.12.2018.

[10] Technically, the content of a Page can also be seen 'from outside' Facebook, but any such consultation is made difficult by Facebook's insistent pop-ups inviting sign-in or registration on Facebook.

[11] See his blog at http://autofictif.blogspot.com/. Chevillard's case is interesting insofar as he does not have a profile in his own name (rumours suggest he may have been present through fake profiles)

[12] I discuss Jomunsi's story with Facebook more in detail in French in a chapter titled 'La bénédiction du piège sucré: L'auteur numérique face à Facebook' forthcoming in the Actes du Colloque de Cerisy 'Art, littérature et réseaux sociaux' (21–27 May 2018).

[13] The number of his friends is hidden, 222 followers on the Profile.

[14] '[L]es réseaux sociaux […] nous "isolent" du monde en nous donnant l'illusion de pouvoir faire quelque chose par un petit like ou une signature sur une pétition. La situation à Alep a quelque chose à voir dans ma décision: ça fait cinq ans que ça pète là-bas, et on a attendu le moment où il était déjà trop tard pour se "mobiliser".' (Jomunsi, 2016b)

[15] Just when this article was ready for submission at the end of December 2018, Neil Jomunsi disappeared again from Facebook and Twitter. He explains the fresh decision in a blog post titled 'Suicide social' (Jomunsi, 2018).

[16] Wrona (2015) offers a first overview of French and Francophone Pages on Facebook that propose literary content. The corpus examined focuses on Pages that repost existing literature, however, rather than on creative writing spaces.

[17] See for instance http://www.balpe.name/-Dedale-de-l-inspiration-

[18] Some suspect that Balpe might get help in animating the profiles that count over a dozen, but we have no evidence of this.

[19] Balpe did previously publish texts as a literary author, including poetry and a novel titled *La Toile* (1998) and a collaborative email novel (2001b), but none of these is mentioned or related to his work in the framework of Un Monde Incertain.

[20] All traditional media now also uses social media to spread their contents, of course, which makes that authors otherwise not personally present with a profile on the website will also likely to be dragged into it whenever they appear publicly.

[21] I propose the term 'fictual' to describe such fictive-virtual entities who integrate a real-world network and by acting in and on it, leave the realm of the purely fictional without nevertheless leaving the realm of the digital-virtual space.

[22] The real person who created those fictive? Profiles is legally responsible for them and is technically their author, but his role is, as we have seen, also very different from the traditional authorial function. The case of fictual authorship and author authorship will deserve a study in its own right as new configurations of authorship facilitated by the web and especially social media.

23 Jomunsi lived in Germany for a while but remained integrated into the French digital literary scene, targeting French readers and working with French colleagues on his publishing ventures.

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