

Of Programmatology

John Cayley is part of a small subset of poets who have sought out the programmable and procedural possibilities of computers – following on from Cage, chance, and other forms of random generation. Here he talks with his colleague and former publisher, John Welch

My conversation with John Cayley took place at his home in North London in February of this year. In 1975 I set up a publishing imprint, **The Many Press**, to publish editions of new and innovative poetry, and in 1993 I brought out the work of John's referred to at the beginning of our interview. Among John Cayley's other publications are *Wine Flying* (Wellsweep, London 1989), *An Essay on the Golden Lion* (Morning Star, Edinburgh 1995) and *Ink Bamboo*, a full-length collection of poems and translations (Agenda/Bellew, London 1996). John Cayley is also a publisher – his 'Wellsweep Press' has brought out finely designed and produced editions of Chinese literature, both classical and modern, prose and poetry. He is a skilled designer and typesetter and in that capacity has given me much assistance with my publishing venture. John Cayley's work with computer-generated texts relates to an area of experimental writing that I became interested in, in the 1970's, and this provided a starting-point for our discussion.

*I come to your work as a person familiar, both as consumer and practioner, with the modernist art practice that it relates to, but with a limited understanding of computing – something which I daresay will be only too evident as we proceed. As a publisher I brought out your **Under It All** in 1993. I wonder if you'd like to say a few words about that piece and the procedures it involved.*

I started doing these sort of procedures and manipulations of text shortly after leaving university when a friend of mine sent me a letter which I originally thought was written in a sort of code. He had replaced every letter with a word that began with that letter. It's a simple acrostic procedure which other writers have employed, though I didn't know that at the time, most spectacularly Jackson Mac Low, and John Cage – though not exactly the same procedure – and I was very taken with it. At that stage, I was already mucking around with personal computers and it was quite an easy procedure to programme, so I started making and experimenting with

poetic texts, using these replacements. Emmett Williams is another writer, an important poet who has experimented with similar procedures, whose work I wasn't aware of at the time. *Under It All* is another variety of this kind of work, called mesostic, a technique both Mac Low and Cage are known for, where letters in a text are replaced by words that contain those letters in any position. In my work there are additional constraints which tend to make the generated language read more like natural language.

Yes, you explain some of these points in the Afterword and I'd like to quote if I may your definition of what you call, by analogy with 'hologram', a hologogram. You say it is 'a pattern of language produced when the words or the order of words of a base text are glossed, paraphrased, etymologised, acrostically or otherwise transformed, and such transformations are allowed to interfere with the base text; a set of rules, a machine or a computer program which defines or displays such a pattern.'

What I've done subsequently has grown out of these sorts of engagements. And then with the advent of the Internet in 1994, when the worldwide web came into prominence, there was very suddenly a broad audience, not just the possibility of publishing the results of such procedures, such as Cage and Mac Low published, but working programmes that actually generated texts 'on the fly'. Since then there have been a number of people working in this area, which I prefer to call 'writing in networked and programmable media' – I don't have a short phrase for it. *Under It All* is for me an early example of writing in programmable media, not networked, but in a published form and, because you kindly allowed me to insert a page in each copy which was unique to that copy, the booklets reflect, better than most printed publications of this sort of work, the nature of the procedures I was using.

*Another piece of yours that I saw was a very haunting piece, **Windsound**, which was shown in the Platform Gallery in Spitalfields, London. Here you used sound and animated text projected onto a screen – so that's a sort of advance?*

It's an advance in a sense. I'm keen to make it clear that my focus is text and language. If you're saying it's an advance because it has sound or image-like qualities, I would say definitely not. But it's more advanced for me in that it uses other ways of generating and manipulating text that I currently find more interesting. *Windsound* is a text movie. I think of it quite clearly as a text movie since now it seems finished, it just plays through in a linear fashion. It takes twenty minutes and you simply watch it, like a movie. Whereas other things I've done you either navigate or manipulate; you configure them as you read.

Would you say there is any connection between what you do – and I'm thinking of the treated sounds – and the improvised music that's been big in this country since the 1970's, so-called 'free music'?

No real, direct connection. The way I work is not really improvisational. It's not determinate, in that the results cannot be predicted, but it's not played or improvised. But the thing I've been thinking very recently about this kind of work is that you set up a machine, a language machine, or something that generates a piece of art that you hope is going to be effective in some way, but you also make it so that people can play it. At the present time we have these finished literary objects that you either read or consume. Then you have games, where people are heavily into interaction with whatever it is they are playing with – possibly also socially these days where we're talking about multi-user games. Then somewhere in between you've got these things which are artistic, where you don't play to win, and you don't work at them in the way you work at literature by consuming masterworks. Instead you play them like textual synthesizers. I think people have got to start conceiving of these new types of art in a different way, in terms of them being instruments – the way that you play musical instruments. You learn to play musical instruments, and there'll be a whole new class of art-objects which will be like a text or graphic or cinematic instrument that you will have to learn to play and play well.

And you get a result in the form of a text or some sounds or a combination of the two which is your own performance... . What you've said in a sense answers my next question. In the seventies I did work that involved arbitrary transformations of a text, according to a very simple programme. Something that I was interested in then was what survived this process – in particular, did a narrative survive? This obviously related to earlier modernist experiments, particularly among certain French writers. Now a computer can be seen as simply doing the same thing much quicker, and this is how computers were first represented, to the general public, and still are to some extent – their miraculous speed of operation. In what way is what you do more than that – a difference in kind rather than a difference in degree?

There are two things to say about that. One is that the speed is important. I felt the same way as you did about trying to throw everything at a text and seeing what survived. The constant shock is that so much survives no matter what you throw at it. It's very hard to get rid of meaning, to drive it out by the so-called indeterminate or the so-called arbitrary. With a computer you can test something very quickly, you can decide what works, what gets a result, and then alter the process as desired. The other thing about computers – I don't really like the word computer, because computers aren't really computers any more, I prefer to use the word programmaton, meaning 'the programmable thing' – is that this programmable thing for us these days means something with a screen, that has multimedia capabilities and is controllable through a keyboard and a mouse. You can't get away from the fact that pieces of art that are controllable in this way are something that is relatively new. The bits and pieces that go to make up these things – the bits of film, the text, the audio, even the textual procedures that you and I previously did by other means – aren't new, but the bringing of them all together and the possibility that they may be controllable in presentation or performance, is so much easier than it's ever been, that it might as well be called new.

In Under It All the first of the two texts is a meditation that concerns the work of a painter, Christopher Bledowski, and Windsound is in memory of him. Do you feel there are people working in the visual arts area who are more in sympathy with what you are doing than people on the poetry scene?

No, I don't really feel that. As you said, *Under It All* contained a text that was a series of nine pieces on Christopher's work, and then *Windsound* became a personal memorial strongly inflected with Christopher's presence and absence. There was something that was bubbling up and there was this bit of narrative, this filmic idea that I had, that came to be about him. There's no doubt that, when you start engaging with multimedia or digital culture, the people who are critically responsive tend to come from the visual arts world. But that has been changing and there is now some significant response from the properly literary or poetic world. Still it's not very well-informed compared to the visual arts world. But you don't stop being a writer just because you are doing this sort of thing.

I recall going to a show at the ICA way back in the sixties, Cybernetic Serendipity, which presented itself as 'computer art'. Did you see that?

I didn't see it but Eric Mottram, poet and critic, wrote a piece about it that I saw quite recently and which is very interesting, called 'The Triumph of the Mobile'. It's fascinating to read engaged writing about something that was, in the context of this sort of work, a very early

winds rains waking how many petals must have fallen silent sleeping forms points on blank white canvases all possible curves problems far beyond our artists capacities to resolve consider these our small children who awake see their sleeping parents doors ajar enter their rooms bright warm summers mornings all coverings abandoned except these sheets which trail their sculpted folds over partially concealed limbs and lie beneath white sheets whose pure brilliancies children particularly notice their parents barely sleep enjoy still teasing promises of deeper slumbers return our children know their parents now are dimly conscious of days approach notice underlying sheets once more plain white completely silent tender relations of bodies lying which children believe they fully understand they long to express perfectly follow lines linking these bodies then draw their parents intimacies towards themselves but see sheets infuriating pure white absences feel everything so still our children forget ignore lines points on linen canvases know nothing of bodies curves intimate designs sleeping forms are painfully aware even were they able to hold in mind draw these forms towards their hearts eyes hands still too young too inexperienced to follow lines of intimacies they pursue children artists with their own unique imperative visions committed to their most perfect realizations what can our children do they need methods processes techniques children jump into beds between upon their parents pummel with shrill words tiny fists limbs twist flail make demands hairs pulled tangled gentle bruises taunts scratches endless demands somewhere scant traces delicate structures remain dreams slip away their parents attempt to smooth refashion frayed crumpled forms lines so many so delicate once so finely drawn these alone remain white sheets beneath above affections storms break threads split lines shear successive gales all these which slip away with dreams gather lines forms show through within against their tender tempests tattered destroyed returned to days lights winds rains waking how many petals must have fallen

exhibition. And the amount of text, of linguistic play, that was in that exhibition was extraordinary. It made me think, where has it all gone? You had this experimentation with text and with procedure, some of it genuinely interesting, as interesting as anything I do in terms of the procedures, and then it just vanishes. It has no effect, I mean, on the general cultural or literary scene. In terms of the archive you're hard put to find it, and you wonder why. I have this theory that there is a resistance, particularly in the world of language writing, of poetry, to this sort of manipulation, this engagement with the materiality of the medium itself, that doesn't obtain in visual art, or in performance, where the critical regime allows you to play with materiality more than is tolerated in the case of text.

Talking about the materiality, Mottram was very interested in concrete poetry. That was quite a big thing in the seventies, likewise sound poetry, as in the work of Bob Cobbing. How do you relate to that?

This is something that I've thought about quite a lot. I don't see myself as 'Concrete'. Some of the things I've done have been seen in terms of visual poetry, which is much closer to a tradition that would be of interest to me. 'Concrete' I understand as where the actual inscription itself is vital. It's the sign and the sign first, almost. Whereas for me it's signifier and signified at one and the same time. It is writing. And I think that the materiality of Concrete is different to the materiality of writing. The sort of materiality I am interested in is the already digital aspect of language itself, the fact that language was digital before we had a computational notion of the digital, and this is written into its materiality. It follows that, as people engaged in poetry, or literal art, we should be doing work that engages with the materiality of language, in this sense.

Yes. I've heard you say that it bugs you that people make a distinction between the 'digital' and the 'organic'.

I suppose this corresponds to some sort of 'natural/artificial' dichotomy.

The argument that I run through in my mind is this. From the moment you have writing it's already digital. It's divided up into discrete entities, letters, with which you can compose words, and these become discrete entities, and all this allows you to do the things which I believe are what the digital is – perfect copying, digital copying, and digital editing, seamless editing. In other words you ignore all the differences of concrete materiality, what the concrete poet is concerned with, how the A is written for example. All that is significant is that it's

an 'A': an A is an 'a' is an a. That is the basis for writing, and always has been. But the paradox is that writing is also the place where that organic authority, the writer, the author, subsists, along with the author 'mastery', the finished work, the 'masterpiece', with all the gender implications as well. So you've got this paradox that the medium that was always already digital is dominated by a sort of critical and literary regime that runs directly counter to its inherent materiality. So one of the things that I would like to stress is that, if you make work that directly engages with this materiality, possibly one of the resistances to it is the seriousness of its threat to writing and to thought itself.

*You are by profession, if I may put it like that, a sinologist, and run a press, **Wellsweep**, that specialises in publishing Chinese literature, both classical and modern and often in dual text editions. How does your experience of the Chinese writing system relate to your work in cyberspace?*

I do translation. Translation is a fascinating practice that disabuses you of myths about where meaning resides and what the intention of a piece of writing might be. So that's one thing. And then there's the system of writing. Chinese employs the only non-alphabetic system on the planet that maintains a major culture and civilisation.

The ongoing attempt to understand how this system works, and in what way it's different from our own, is something that has made me become much clearer about certain of the issues I've just talked about. For instance, the intrinsically digital nature of writing, of systems of inscription.

*Another of your publications is **Essay on the Golden Lion**. You refer there, and it's also quoted in **Under It All**, to this notion of Indra's Net: 'A network of jewels that not only reflected the images in every other jewel, but also the multiple images in the others. It was a metaphor for universal structure, used by the Chinese Huayan Buddhists to exemplify the "interpenetration and mutual identification" of underlying substance and specific forms.' There does seem to be a convergence here of the very new, in terms of the procedures and techniques you use, and the ancient, as expressed in classical Buddhist and Hindu writings. Would you like to comment?*

There are a couple of things I'd like to say about that. First, I do have a longstanding interest in Buddhist philosophy, especially Chinese Buddhist philosophy insofar as I've been able to make any study of it, but I don't see the work itself as having any necessary relation to that philosophy. The Indra's Net idea, which is about the nature of materiality generally, does seem to me to relate to some of my ideas concerning the materiality of language. The metaphor of the jewels reflecting every other jewel seems to me to be very similar to the way in which letters, scattered throughout language, demonstrate their identity and reflect one another. So each word is like a jewel that has bits of the materiality of all language within it, which are reflected in all the other words that share those letters for example. You can imagine the world of language as an Indra's Net, where there are all these relationships built up on these adamantine identities.

In a previous conversation you referred to your preoccupation with how people project themselves in cyberspace, questions of opacity and transparency. Would you like to enlarge on that?

With this question we're suddenly concerned more clearly with a matter of content rather than form. Inevitably, while working in this field of writing in networked and programmable media, my attention has been drawn to what I see as crucial issues for so-called digital culture or perhaps rather for the ongoing transcription of digital culture generally. A major problem for me has arisen out of the way that representations of the self in cyberspace, in digital transcription, are seen and celebrated as transparent, as readable. If, say, in a chat room or real-time social forum on the internet, I project (through inscription) some representation of myself, this tends to be seen as fully known and created by me, fully

readable by my interlocutors. In certain critics' writing, Sherry Turkle's for example*, this facility may be treated as a therapeutic reconfiguration of the self which allows people to (psychosocially) develop and problem-solve through role-playing in cyberspace. What concerns me is the way these representations – often very 'different' from the person who inscribes them – are nonetheless read as 'real' or even 'essential' aspects of that person: as if they were transformative avatars (the word used on the web) of what is otherwise inaccessible to both self and others. One reason this concerns me is that there is no attempt to confront and then represent the intrinsically, phenomenologically inaccessible aspects of the self – the interiority of the mind – which is protected from transparency without, for example, any need for encryption. You cannot read my mind. I don't think there can be significant representations of the self in the digital realm without at least some acknowledgement of this paradoxical requirement to encompass interiority. Another reason for my concern is that those representations which do exist are, as such, literally transparent. Even where they are encrypted or hidden in the dataspace, they are inherently 'crackable', unlike the mind. Not only can they be read, because of the nature of digital media, they can be captured, copied, programmed and manipulated. How does this square with the idea that they are the therapeutic ministers of evolving bourgeois identity, when they may be freely and easily dissociated, appropriated, and re/mis/abused? I'm not suggesting this is necessarily a bad thing; far from it. But it is a serious matter, and it's not 'all good' as they say in California. There's obviously too much to these issues for us to deal with in this discussion, but I'm glad they've been aired.

*See Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. 1995. (New York: Touchstone 1997)

John Welch is a teacher and runs the intermittent poetry imprint, *The Many Press*.

John Cayley's website is www.shadoof.net

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lá breá lúnasa
do chorp
broad
filling sails
ocean heat
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