St Andrew’s presentation – Jerome Fletcher

Good evening. Firstly, many thanks to Andrew and Elodie for inviting me to not only take part in this event, but to remain involved with the Centre for Poetic Innovation.

This section comes in two parts. The first half is part performance/part paper. I am going to be presenting a work of digital poetics of mine and simultaneously providing a commentary on what you’re seeing by talking through some of the compositional processes that went into their making. The second half will be a live reading and digital performance with myself and Andrew Roberts. I’m hoping that in both cases there will be resonances with themes that have arisen from the papers presented earlier this afternoon – in particular, performance and translation.

[START PLAYING WITH PENTIMENTO]

* For a while I’ve been working with what could be described as a ‘scratching technology’. The cursor is used as a tool for apparently digitally removing layers of text and/or

image to reveal the content of layers underneath. This is done manually using the mouse or trackpad.

So this is, if you like, a live performance of the technology. This piece is called Pentimento, but I’m going to replace this with a video screen capture of a performance of another piece using the same Java-based program and let it run to its conclusion, which will be for 15 minutes or so, while I talk. I’m also going to avoid announcing its title.

[Set …reusement running]

* After some initial text/image works like Pentimento I began thinking about composing a purely text piece – layers of text on a plain background - and I was interested in working with a bilingual, or maybe even a plurilingual text. An additional inclination was to work with found text, rather than original composition, partly because, in performance, this technology of scratching or erasure is capable of altering the language so radically that questions of attribution become almost irrelevance.
* The choice of text emerged from a chance encounter with a set of titles from the first volume of Michel Leiris’s autobiography, *La Règle du jeu*. This volume is subtitled in French, *Biffures,* translated into English as *Scratches.* Here was an obvious link with the gestural and material nature of the technology itself. The first chapter of *Biffures* is entitled ‘…Reusement’, which I initially read as ‘Re-usement’, I assumed it was an odd English neologism related to some notion of re-use or recycling. Only when I got through the chapter did I realise that the word is actually …reusement, a contraction of the French ‘heureusement’
* So the title of the piece exists in a troubled bilingual form, although the two words, …Reusement and …Re-usement, have very different meanings. The language of the title only becomes apparent when you say the word out loud. A bit like Schrodinger’s cat or Wittgenstein’s duck/rabbit. When the title is read visually it remains both French and English simultaneously. When it’s spoken you have to make a choice about its linguistic home, so to speak. Also when the word is read out, you lose the ellipsis at the beginning of the word. [The ellipsis in this case is a diacritic mark. Thus ironically you lose the marker for loss - the visual marker that something is missing here - Interesting – this shift back and forth between the written and the spoken is itself a mode of translation related to the performative].

So the primary compositional strategy of this digital text piece then became the use or re-use of found text, in both its original French and its English translation, all of which is taken from that first chapter of Leiris’s autobiography, with its implication of recycling and reworking of ‘the language that belongs to many others’.

This stage of the composition also involves another mode of translation - from page to screen. The printed texts were translated to a digital environment, in this case as a series of jpg’s, which are of course image files. [ Another aside - you could argue that in effect this means that the piece is not a digital text piece at all, but a digital image piece, although discussion about the ontological status of a text as opposed to the image of a text is beyond the scope of this presentation].

* By happy accident, when I read this chapter of Leiris’s memoir, I realised that the contents further underpinned my intended compositional strategy. In the chapter, Leiris gives an unreliable account of an incident from his childhood where he drops a toy soldier from the table on which he is playing with them. He remembers the momentary panic which sets in as he tries to find the soldier on the floor, and the subsequent expression of relief ‘…reusement!’ (a contraction of ‘heureusement!’ meaning Phew! or Thank goodness!) when he retrieves it. The digital text then relates to two instances of loss and recovery – the young Leiris searching for the fallen toy soldier and the adult Leiris seeking, locating and assembling fragments of memory in an attempt to give a precise account of this indeterminate moment from his past. Obviously this parallels the process by which the digital text is performed. The performer has to search for texts on each layer, to find them among other texts, and those texts themselves already pre-exist as found text in print. The performance of *…Reusement* is a process of finding what is already there through the erasure of what is already there. Not that there can be any re-composition of the original narrative from the textual resources in the digital piece, unless of course the performer recognises and knows intimately the source of the found text.
* The compositional methodology was further developed by a decision to extract and translate only the genitive phrases from within the first chapter of *Biffures* as a way of providing greater cogency to the digital poetics. The genitive is the case grammatically which denotes possession, and also source. For the significance of this, let us return to the Leiris chapter.
* When the young Leiris utters his exclamation of relief, his usage is corrected by an older sibling or maybe a parent. He is told the proper pronunciation of the word is ‘Heureusement’, not ‘…reusement’. The effect of this is to produce a quasi-Lacanian moment of revelation in the little boy.
* This is what Leiris has to say on the matter. It’s worth quoting in full.
* “ One doesn’t say …*reusement*, but *heureusement*. This word, which I had used until then without any awareness of its real meaning but simply as an interjection, was related to *heureux*, and the magical power of this relation suddenly inserted it into a whole sequence of precise meanings. […] This vague utterance – which until now had been completely private and in some sense closed – had suddenly and fortuitously been promoted to the role of a link in a whole semantic cycle. Now it was no longer something of my own: it was part of a reality that was the language of my brothers, my sister, and my parents. It had changed from something belonging to me into something communal and open. […] Now it was no longer a confused exclamation escaping from my lips – still visceral, like a laugh or a shout – but one of thousands of other constituent elements of the language, of this vast instrument of communication whose life outside me, filled with strangeness, I had been allowed to glimpse through the chance remark of an older child or adult…
* […] I had been corrected. For a moment I was dazed, seized by a sort of vertigo. Because this word, which I had said incorrectly and had just discovered was not really what I had thought it was before then, enabled me to sense obscurely – through the sort of deviation or displacement it impressed on my mind – how articulated language, the arachnean tissue of my relations with others, went beyond me, thrusting its mysterious antennae in all directions. (Leiris 1997, 5-6)
* The realisation that young Leiris comes to in expressing relief at the retrieval of his lost soldier concerns the extent to which language is systemic and not entirely in his possession. Language did not belong to him. It belongs to many others. Leiris is caught up in its warp and weft, merely one node in this vast network of communication. In the context of this interplay between possession and non-possession, the choice of exclusively genitive phrases, with their link to possession and source, had its own clear rationale.
* Thus the text of …Reusement consists of images of texts in translation - a set of parallel genitive phrases which are performed through a technology of erasure in a constant interplay of loss and gain. The composition itself emerges from a text about loss and retrieval, both of an object and of a memory, and the performer replays the process of loss and retrieval through the technology.
* Furthermore, the technology employed here, has the effect of rendering the language unstable at every moment, and opening up all sorts of possibilities for plurilingualism. Thus there are moments when words which appear in the context of the one language can, through *de-composition* (the removal of letters or even an accent, for example) become words in the other language. ‘Rainures’ can decompose into ‘rain’ or ‘inure’, ‘pièce’ can become the English ‘piece’, or ‘pie’ or the Spanish ‘pie’, that which is ‘louche’ reveals the English ‘ouch’ at its heart, new locutions like ‘semblages’ can be produced, and so on. The plurilingual potential of this stratified technology can be explored and developed with each new performance of the piece. What starts out as a fixed bilingual print text, ends up in performance as a radically indeterminate text where a particular word - far from being located within the language system it belongs to - can be wrenched out of that context and inserted into another language system. Again, loss and gain.

I’ll finish with remarks on two other aspects of performance – embodiment and spatiality. You can see from looking at the video the ways in which the cursor moves across the screen. At times the cursor moves quickly and decisively. At others it pauses as if reflecting on the next move. It disappears and reappears. These variations in pace, in the time of performance, can be understood as a dynamics of reading as well as writing. Moreover, they make visible the traces of the body in the performance of reading/writing. The digital – often thought of as the most immaterial of modes – absolutely requires the presence of a warm body to initiate and realise this work, and its trace is visible.

Likewise, the space of performance can vary considerably with this piece. It may be a private performance on a terminal or a projected performance in a public space or as here a documented performance in an academic setting. What is significant is that the site and context of performance will have a profound effect on the meaning of the piece, the way it is received, the way it is interpreted. Change the site or context and you change the text.

* Finally, performativity is not restricted to the writing which appears on the surface of this digital work. One could argue that this visible writing is not even the most important scriptural act. What we are missing here is the writing/performance that takes place within the device/apparatus itself - at the level of the codes – not just the editable Java program and the HTML, but also the fixed operating system, making it more and more difficult to specify who exactly is the author of this piece. I don’t have time to go into this in detail; simply to say that performativity extends throughout the entire digital apparatus, even to the hardware and the way that hardware is linked to and performs in a socio-economic context. Again this may seem trivial, but not when one considers that the obsolescence which is very much a part of the digital environment means that this piece could well be unperformable and effectively lost in a few years time – malheureusement.

**1967**