Outline of paper

- There have been a number of mentions of hybridity so far and this paper is designed with hybridity in mind – a performance of the hybrid – part-findings, part questions, position and composition, a patchwork of research notes.

As a contribution to the overall theme of the digital subject, it started out somewhere else – it was meant to be an exploration of the avatar, in particular, a proposal that language within the digital literature assemblage might stand in the same relationship to the reader as the avatar does to the player in a games environment. It rapidly turned into one of those exercises of constantly stepping back, taking the term ‘digital’ literally, and then metamorphosed into something like a dog’s dinner. But I think it at least touches on some of the topics that have arisen so far.

This is where it begins:

- ha perdut la veu… - performance.

I have been developing and working with a touch screen version of this scratching technology, a version whereby the hand and fingers become the tools for the performance of writing and reading, of exposure and erasure. As a way of developing new texts for this technology I’ve been reflecting on the choreography of manual and the digital gesture (as opposed to a semiotics of gesture), and considering the relationship between touch on the one hand and writing and reading on the other. A particular element in this consideration is the use of etymology, which itself is a process of unearthing and erasure.

The performative reading is in 15 sections.

**1. Samyuta Hasta - Asamyuta Hasta**

In Indian Classical dance, there are 52 names for the single and double hand positions adopted by the dancer. Each one has a name in Sanskrit. The following text is constructed out of the translation from Sanskrit into English of each of those 52 names. Theoretically, somebody who knows Sanskrit, English and the 52 hastas could dance this text entirely with their hands. To that extent, this text is a manual. Or one could describe, it as a digital score.

* We begin with the joining of hands in salutation.
* The crooked elephant in rut glitters in the light of the crescent moon like the eye in a peacock’s tail. It is accomplished in the art of dissimulation so as to escape the attention of formidable beasts of prey.
* A black bee hums around the wheel of the libertine potter. The discus produces a faulty articulation of vowels.
* Ingenious images of the boy Krishna swing from a wood apple tree. A mythical bird, swan-born, alights alongside, there where the monkeys dwell.
* A dove, grey as the ore of antimony, takes off in startled flight from the curved beam end of a balance, as fingers smelling of cow dung grip the arrow at the point where the feather is attached.
* A cow rubs itself against the pillar while prosperity swings in its hammock.
* In his second incarnation, the hairy-tailed King of the Fish clenches his fist like a bud and measures time with the head of an antelope. He remains fettered by a snake.
* On the horizon, a boar-shaped cloud.
* A cord binds the soul as dice tumble down the steps leading to the water.
* A pinched agreement to coitus sounds the conch shell of alarm and distrust.
* Sated, sprayed with fine rain, the bull is worshiped; its flanks take on an adamantine lustre
* Within the temple stands the moringa, miracle tree. Bitter and unsullied, it shades the red-crested cock.
* His face naturally marked with three wrinkles, sign of the Trident, Shiva’s weapon.
* Joined hands form the calyx of a lotus.

**2. Thesis**

This is a thesis: the thetic: the tic: the nervous gesture. The Hap tic

The etymology of the word ‘thesis’ – it comes from the Greek meaning a ‘downward beat of the hand’.

The laying down of the hand on the screen writes the word. The hand lays a hand on the word. This is a process of benediction. The laying on of hands is a well-saying.

And it is a healing. The hand heals the broken word by a laying on of hands. It is restorative and yet violent. Lay a hand on me and see what happens…

New fibres of connective tissue are produced by cells called fibroblasts. These cells are abundant in the dermis, and when the skin is wounded they are carried to the location by bleeding and by a general inflammatory response. Once at the wound site, they begin manufacturing strands of connective tissue which bridge the gaps created by the injury, filling in the wound.

The intelligence of skin, the literacy of skin. Collapsing the distance between nerve and word.

The constant membrane intervenes between agitated light and skin - as the hand calms the agitated light, fragments of words emerge even as other words disappear.

Running the hand over the smooth face of language, coaxing meaning into being through the haptic.

Language leaps that synaptic gap.

This then is a thesis - a downward movement of the hand, as in a beat.

Poetry is not pedal, pedestrian, tripping over its own feet. The dactyl in poetry isn’t a foot; it’s a finger with three joints. Poetry is manual and digital from the outset. The child begins to read by tracing the line of language with its finger. The child might even believe that Language flows out of the tip of its finger.

This is a thesis … and a *pros*thesis.

Has the hand become a prosthesis of the machine? Is it a question of the bicycle?

In Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman*, atomic theory is at work, a mutual exchange, a flow of atoms and particles of matter; and this means not only flowing *within* precisely delimited bodies and identities, but rather the unbounded flow *between* bodies that touch or come close to one another, that merge into one another in neighbouring zones. This flowing is found, for instance, between the feet of the walker and the road, between the blacksmith’s hammer and an iron bar…

The astonishing point of this elaborate invention: the more time a person spends on their bicycle, the more their personality mingles with the personality of the bicycle. Consequently, there are more or less precise calculations in relation to the question as to what percentage this composite and moving assemblage, this machine, is now a bicycle and to what percentage it is a human being. …there are bicycles with a high proportion of the human, which obviously develop emotional and sexual responses and occasionally, food inexplicably disappears when they are near.

Or Heidegger, who asks - while a mechanic with an artificial hand is mending a motorbike, is the artificial hand part of the mechanic or part of the motorbike?

**3. Zuhanden and Vorhanden**

Zuhanden - that which is at hand, that which comes to hand, the matter in hand.

Zuhanden – attention, For the attention of…

The hand calls to the word, attends to the word, tends the word. Calls attention to the word. The finger makes a point. Points to the point. The hand interpellates the word in ostentive definition, the most-straightforward mode of semantic procedures.

A fundamental aspect of Heidegger’s project is to give an account of the ways in which the subject/object dichotomy emerges at the moment when our fundamental, practical engagement with our world breaks down. In general, we encounter ourselves as immediately and unreflectively absorbed in the world of our concerns rather than as located at a distance and separated from an “external” world of objects. For example, consider the way you ordinarily experience a tool when you are carrying out a practical task - using a hammer to knock in a nail, or a tapping on a keyboard to write a note. The encounter is radically altered when this practical engagement with the world of our concerns is interrupted; when the head comes off the hammer, when the computer screen freezes, or when, while we are still learning how to do something, some unexpected difficulty brings our task to a halt — in all such cases what Heidegger calls our ordinary, immediate “hands-on” (*zuhanden*) way of engaging with the world of our practical concerns undergoes an *Umschlag*, a transformation, in which we encounter ourselves as isolated subjects standing reflectively before a world of external objects. Consequently, we come to experience these objects as standing over against us in the mode of something objectively *vorhanden* or “on hand”(BT 408-9/SZ 357-8).

Heidegger insists that the first-order level of practically engaged, “hands-on” existence — in which self and world are unified — must be the starting point of any description of ordinary human experience that seeks to do justice to what such experience is really like, a phenomenological dictum which, Heidegger insists, should also govern any attempt to describe our meaningful encounters with works of art.

**4. Finger print**

The signature of the hand becomes the writing tool.

On a touch screen, the infra-red eye recognises the presence of the signature and causes language to appear. This is hand/eye co-ordination.

The touch screen is the glassy surface of a lake - a mirroring of the world - the eye scans from above and from below - the palm and the top of the hand. Palm up/palm down. Lines and veins. The one an inversion of the other. Lines of text - veins of writing. The eye sees the veins from above; the camera lens see the lines and the signature print from below. This form of writing is underhand. It owes much to the magician’s sleight of hand. Prestidigitation.

The underhand is hidden from the eye but is the revealer of the text. The overhand is the revealed. In the end, these are religious terms. We are confronted by Luther’s Deus Absconditus. Meister Eckhart tells us that ‘the hand that erases writes the true word’.

Hidden/revealed: This is Derrida -

‘Some might claim, and may even demonstrate … that what is hiding, in this withdrawal of the human hand, so as to act in secret, is the hand of God. Is this just another figure? How is one to separate this "prevenient grace" from all the senses and ways of the Gospel, from its light or flesh?’

End of quote.

Surface/depths.

It may be that, with the handwritten, we cannot escape an ontology of surface and depths, although we can at least insist on the migration of elements between and across layers.

Human skin derives a good deal of its toughness from being arranged in progressive layers, much like plywood. The outermost covering, the epidermis, generally consists of four distinct layers; The Malpighian layer, which is made up entirely of living cells; the granular and hyaline layers, where these living cells are gradually transformed into dead but very tough plates that make up the final waterproof layer, also referred to as squamous cells. It is the epidermis as a whole that is continually being shed and replaced. Constant cell division is occurring in the deepest part of the Malpighian layer, and these new cells then migrate upwards, passing through the granular and hyaline phases to become squamous cells and eventually to drop away.

Heavy-handed/light-fingered -

**5. Digital Computation in the Classical world**

Numbers in digital performance.

From the Venerable Bede’s *De loquela per gestum digitorum*

*‘ The hand… was held upward, the palm flat, the fingers together, except the thumb…’* This was positioned away from the side of the hand until required to perform. The thumb stands in the wings. From this starting point, numbers were digitally configured in the following manner using just the left hand:

Number 1 = the little finger bent at the middle joint

Number 2 = the ring and little fingers bent at the middle joints

Number 3 = the middle, ring and little fingers bent at the middle joints

Number 4 = the middle and ring fingers bent at the middle joint

Number 5 = the middle finger only bent at the middle joint

Number 6 = the ring finger bent at the middle joint

Number 7 = the little finger closed on the palm

Number 8 = the ring and little fingers closed on the palm

Number 9 = the middle, ring and little fingers closed on the palm

Number 10 = the tip of the index finger touching the middle joint of the thumb.

The sign for a hundred is identical to 10 but using the right hand.

The sign for a thousand is identical to 1 but using the right hand.

The round numbers of 10,000 were formed by placing the left hand flat on the chest and by touching various parts of the body. The system ended with one million made by interlocking all fingers.

**6. Touch screen**

“Not only our geometry and our physics, but our whole conception of what exists outside us, is based upon the sense of touch.” Bertrand Russell.

Touch, more than any other mode of sensation, defines for us our sense of reality. It was St Thomas who realised that touch was the only sense that can be relied upon in questions of faith.

'Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe'.

Touch renders the necessity of faith obsolete. The deity is guaranteed by touch. Which brings us back to the avatar

**7. The avatar – a deity which descends, just as the hand descends.**

So this paper grew out of a moment of using the sort of scratching technology I presented earlier, and thinking what is the name given to this sort of complex and varied engagement with language – this sort of augmented reading. I began wondering whether, and if so, what parallels may exist between the avatar as it functions in digital games and the ways language functions within digital literature works. To be more precise, the intention was not to argue for the avatar as a *metaphor* for digital language performance, that digital language is somehow *like* an avatar. Rather, it’s to present a corollary between the relationship of player/avatar and the relationship of reader/digital language.

This can simply be represented as:

Player : Reader

Avatar : Digital text

What I was hoping is that this corollary might be extended further to include the relationship between speaker and natural language, producing a schema such as this.

Player : Reader : Speaker

Avatar : Digital text : Natural language

**8. A detour – a winding.**

Why do we talk about the reader of a digital text still? This may seem like a trivial and/or irrelevant point, but I wonder if ‘reader’ is the best term for this particular figure or position in relation to a digital text in particular or digital literature in general. Is reader/reading a necessary, but *in*sufficient term for what happens at the conjunction between the subject and the digital text environment?

**9. Wreading**

From the early days of theorising about digital literature, the term reader has been problematic. In his 1997 book *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*  George Landow coined the term ‘wreader’ in relation to hypertext, as an amalgamation of writer and reader. The thinking behind this was to characterise hypertext as a new form of literary production where the writer and reader both engage in the creation of the text. Nothing new or radical here, of course. The reader has long been viewed as being deeply implicated in the creative process. And the idea of the ‘wreader’ is another manifestation of that. There is an equivalent in the term ‘prosumer’ - producer and consumer of a creative work. I have an aesthetic problem with the term, namely that it looks ugly – it has a sort of medieval air about it. I imagine a wreader as some sort of 14th century artisan basket weaver, or hurdle maker.

**10. A detour - Wrighting the digital**

Let me coin an equally medieval-sounding term, ‘wrighter’. A ‘wright’ is a ‘maker’, as in shipwright, wheelwright, etc. Wrighting then is a making – the term foregrounds the idea that digital text needs to be construct/generated, rather than simply consumed. Does it makes sense to think of the reader of a digital text as a maker? Insofar as any cultural activity could be called a making – One is reminded of Dante’s reference to poet, Arnaut Daniel as ‘il miglior fabbro’ the best maker. – an epithet later picked up Eliot in his dedication of *The Wasteland* to Ezra Pound. Perhaps we should find a place for the idea of the ‘digital textwright’ as a correlative to the ‘wreader’ or ‘prosumer’.]

However, there are two further shortcomings to the adoption of the term, ‘wreader’. Firstly, it firmly locates an engagement with digital text in the literary domain, creating the impression that the literary is the logical progenitor of digital writing. (In this context I am taking ‘literary’ to refer very roughly to a technology – that of print- and page-based media with its attendant reading strategies, theory of language, canon, etc.) This is hardly surprising in that Landow, as a Victorianist, is firmly rooted in the literary tradition, and that his particular area of interest is hypertext narrative, which is itself the area of digital writing most closely allied to the literary. Secondly this term (and others like it) tacitly acknowledge the binary opposition of reader/writer and then simply seek to collapse that opposition linguistically. In other words, it looks like an integration of the two terms but no third term emerges from the integration. The words are agglutinated but the functions remain separated. This is contiguity rather integration. We write then read; rather than ‘in writing we are reading and in reading we are writing’.

**11. Scratching away at language**

The root of the problem with Landow’s term is that when it comes to digital text, the functions of reading and writing don’t cover the complex panoply of interactive engagements which often characterise ‘reading’ a digital text. It sidelines the extent to which the performance of a digital text is embodied and to which is often a key element. Those of you who have seen Philippe Bootz ‘reading’ or ‘writing’ his *Poète-rabot* will understand what I mean. His is just an extreme example of the diverse embodied practices which characterise the accessing, creation and interpretation of digital text.

**12. In praise of the performer**

Having taken that on board, I have a particular preference for the term ‘performer’ in this context. (This ties in with much of what was being discussed on Friday around the figure of the cyborg).

The performer of a digital text is not a person. It’s a series of functions, practices or positions within the assemblage of the digital text which incorporate (literally) writing, reading, coding, designing, revealing, searching, fetching, executing, manipulating and articulating a digital text into significant display.

Furthermore…

1. Takes up KH’s central observation – that the time of the digital text is the time of performance whereas the time of the print text is the time of production. It also allows for the idea that an engagement with digital text is never repeated. The performance is always in the moment and different each time.

2. The performative function places embodied practice at the centre of the digital assemblage.

3. It brings with it an Austinian theory of performative language (How to do things with word) – and scoops up coding as a performative practice in line with Geoff Cox’s analysis of code as speech act.

4. From the point of view of performance theory, language performs as well as being made to perform. \_ which is why it can stand in for the avatar – the deity which descends.

5. It links in with a performative theory of language articulated in integrational linguistics whereby language is always embedded in a signifying context. It is not possible to talk about decontextualized language. In order to understand an utterance one has to understand the context in which it appears or is made to appear.

An additional advantage of ‘performer’ is that the term links more closely with ‘player’ and ‘speaker’ in the corollary.

It’s worth making the general point here, that there is still no consensus within the digital literature/e-lit community about the use of such central terms. And this is not a trivial matter. These terms are not neutral. They bring with them a deal of baggage, or presuppositions about what sort of cultural product we are dealing with here. In that respect, it can be said that such terms condition or even determine the nature of the discourse surrounding these products and that has a knock-on effect on pedagogy. As digital writing/electronic literature begins to appear more and more on university syllabuses for example, the way the practice is taught, and thought about, comes to the fore. In other words, the conceptual tools we employ to ‘unlock’ digital textworks or get a handle on them.

**13. A detour – Wittgenstein’s Handle.**

And talking of handles…

In the 1920’s Wittgenstein was invited to design features of his sister, Gretl’s house in Vienna. He devoted himself fanatically to the making of the door handles. So it is not surprising that later when he was wrestling with the nature of language, he came round to a highly functional view, that words were a form of activity; they were conceived of as tools.

“Think of the tools in a tool-box,” Wittgenstein wrote in the Philosophical Investigations (1953). “There is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws.—The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects.” Words may look similar, especially when we see them in print. “Especially when we are doing philosophy!”

**14. The avatar reascends**

The avatar which started out apparently central to this meander, seems to have disappeared, re-ascended perhaps and like the deus absconditus, is lost from view again.

What we are left with instead is some further questions. If we return to the idea of prosthesis, (here I’d link in to some of the practitioners Lucile was looking on Friday) and we take up Wittgenstein’s view of language as a way of getting a handle on the world, then what does that notion of language as prosthesis do to the idea of the post-human? Is the bicycle an intelligent machine? (Anthony Wilden argues that ‘Any device employing the on/off characteristic of electrical relays or there equivalents, (such as teeth in a gear wheel) is a digital computer) Is the cyborg really a new species? What is it specifically about the digital that makes us post-human? Did we actually become post-human when we started using language? Have we been post-human all this time without realising it?

Always good to end on a series of imponderables, so I will stop there.