PERFORMING ...REUSEMENT. E-COMPOSITION/DECOMPOSITION

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The video of the work ...Reusement *is available at*
http://moniviestin.jyu.fi/ohjelmat/hum/taiku/digitaalinen-kulttuuri/cybertext-yearbook/

1. Perlection — a reading through

This article is a reprise and development of a conference paper given at the E-literature in Europe conference at the University of Bergen, Norway in September 2008. On that occasion I simultaneously showed and spoke 'through' a video of my digital textwork, ...*Reusement.* This simultaneous showing and speaking was a deliberate performative strategy and the intention is to reproduce that strategy here; hence the inclusion of the DVD which is a recording of a performance of the textwork. The DVD shows this writing machine (see Hayles 2002) in action. It is intended that you the reader will be reading the performance of ...*Reusement* through this article, (and vice versa). This process of 'reading through' I am calling 'perlection', a term which I will return to at the end of this paper. The DVD shows only one enactment of the textwork, of course. At another time and/or with another performer, the piece could be markedly different.

2. Composition

This section is intended to give an account of the compositional decisions which went into the making of ...*Reusement*, not by way

of explanation, but in order to display its levels of performativity. The sequence of compositional choices began from what I already knew of the way in which the java program functioned and they were modified by the nature of the technology. I had originally conceived of the project and developed it with programmer, Toby Holland and this is not the first piece made exploiting the Java program which runs the applet. However, previous versions of the project have been text/image pieces and/or collaborative in nature. This was the first all 'textual' piece and was initiated as a way of exploring textual display and reading/performance based on this technology of the 'erasable' layer[1].

The initial decision was taken to work with found text, rather than original composition, partly because in performance the technology is capable of altering the text so radically that quest-ions of attribution become almost irrelevant. The choice of found text arose from a chance encounter with a set of titles from the first volume of Michel Leiris's autobiography, *La Règle du jeu*. This is subtitled in French, Biffures, and in English, Scratches. There were obvious links here with the gestural and material nature of the technology itself. The first chapter of Leiris's autobiography is entitled '*…Reusement*', which I read – and subsequently realised I had misread – as an odd English neologism related to a notion of re-use or recycling. This title resonated with a passage from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay on the politics of translation where she writes:

> One of the ways to get around the confines of one's "identity" […] is to work at someone else's title, as one works with language that belongs to many others. […] It is a simple miming of the responsibility to the trace of the other in the self. (Spivak 2000, 367)

Thus the primary compositional strategy of this e-composition became the use or re-use of found text, all of which is taken from that first chapter of Leiris's autobiography, with its implication of

recycling and working with 'the language that belongs to many others'.

At the same time, the contents of that first chapter further underpins this compositional strategy. In it, Leiris gives an unreliable account of an incident from his childhood where he drops one of his toy soldiers 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 found text then relates to two instances of searching and finding – the young Leiris searching for the fallen toy soldier and the adult Leiris piecing together fragments of memory in an attempt to give a precise account of this 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. The performance of *…Reusement* is a process of finding what is already there through 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 only the genitive phrases from within the first chapter. This concentration on the genitive provides greater cogency to the e-composition in two ways. Firstly, it produces a series of texts which echo the classic form of a title; 'Of' here can mean 'about', or 'concerning', a pertinent example in this context being *Of Grammatology*, which itself is harking back to the titling practice of classical philosophy e.g. De Rerum Natura. Thus rather than fragments of a narrative, the texts can be presented here as a list of possible titles, albeit slightly odd ones.

Secondly, 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 Michel utters his exclamation of relief, his usage is corrected by an older sibling. He is told the proper pronunciation of the word is 'Heureusement', not '…reusement'. The effect of this is to engender a quasi-Lacanian moment of revelation.

> 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…
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> […] 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 Leiris comes to in finding his lost soldier is the extent to which language is systemic and not entirely in his possession. Language did not belong to him. He 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.

3. Performance

Before going on to consider the aspect of decomposition in this work, I want to look at performance and performativity in relation to *...Reusement* in particular and to e-literature in general. Performance in this instance generates the compositional process (it is not something that follows on from composition) and it initiates a process of decomposition. It is therefore a pivotal process which refers to both e-composition and decomposition and which links the two together. In relation to e-literature in general and the functioning of digital text, 'performance' is a useful term, partly due to the number and limited usefulness of the alternatives.

A variety of terms are used to describe someone interacting with e-literature – typically, 'user', 'reader', 'writer', 'accessor', 'visitor'. It goes without saying that the strategies appropriate to the reading of/responding to page-based text, (which, whether we like it or not, is still the default position within the Western tradition) are not appropriate to the stratified form of textual display which constitutes *...Reusement*. In general, the various terms for engagement (reading/writing using/accessing/visiting) are not wholly satisfactory. 'Accessing' and 'visiting are too passive. 'Using' too instrumental. What you see being enacted in the video both is and is not a writing and a reading. Performance would seem to be an effective term for the gamut of requirements, decisions, gestures and understandings needed to 'animate' this piece of digital text. (For a discussion of the reader/writer, see Aarseth 1997, 162 ff).

In order to examine the performative elements of this digital piece I want to make reference to a notion of Performance Writing, '…an unstable and exploratory term that attempts to hold in tension both writing and its performance, performance and its writing.' (Allsopp 1997, 60) Within performance writing, as articulated by Allsopp (1997), Bergvall (2000), Hall (2007), inter al., a distinction is made between 'writing for performance, which [begins] to

suggest a sense of writing in the service of performance, and writing as performance.' (Allsopp 1997, 61)

We can begin with some commonplace observations. Writing for performance generally implies the existence of a script, albeit in a broad sense of the term, and there is obviously a process of scripting at work here. In fact there are two specific scripts that should be mentioned. The first is the Java program which drives the applet and determines the display of the content of this digital textwork. This 'inscription technology', to use N. Katherine Hayles' term, is inaccessible and indecipherable (at least by me), and fixed. The set of instructions does not appear on the surface or at the place of performance. It does not instruct the performer. It makes the computer perform, and to that extent, without this script the performer would not be able to perform.

A second script, this time written in Basic, designates the sequence in which the layers are made available to the performer. This program is pre-written by the programmer as a template but is completed by whoever composes with the technology (myself in this case) – a sort of collaborative 'writing for performance'.

There is a third set of instructions which could also be thought of as a script, a pre-text to performance. These are the instructions necessary to the performer who comes to this technology for the first time, which tell them how to use the applet. They are the equivalent of the implicit paratextual instructions about how to manipulate a book, for example, which we learn before we have even learnt to read the words on the page. Thus ...*Reusement*, despite its simplicity of execution provides an example of a system of interconnected scriptings none of which appears on the surface, all of which could be said to 'decompose' in performance (Hall 2007, 6).

Oddly enough, despite the presence of this complex interplay of scripts, when the performer actually sits in front of the screen, the resultant performance tends to be largely improvisational. This is out of necessity, at least for the first-time performer, in that s/he has little

idea of the location of each new text on the screen, or even if a new text layer is going to appear or not. The texts have to be sought out and retrieved. During subsequent performances, the performer may remember where certain texts are located and in what sequence, and make decisions accordingly, as if the performance was beginning to coalesce into something more recognisably scripted – a meta-improvisation. But this is in the nature of much improvisation which often includes pre-existing or habitual phrases and sequences.

Now we are in the region of writing as performance.

Firstly, the performance writing of …Reusement is very much writing as an embodied practice. It is somatically engaged in a way that scanning text and turning a page is not, or at least not to the same extent. It is 'ergodic […] nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text.' (Aarseth 1997, 1) The performer is not immediately presented with the text on each layer. It has to be dis/uncovered. The cursor operates like a physical tool, a scraper. The uncovering of text is done sometimes gently and meticulously, in the manner of an archaeologist, sometimes in a careless or even irritated manner, perhaps like a gardener turning over soil. This is an unearthing (a particularly apt term in relation to memory) and in that it is also a making, a making that is felt within the body.

As an aside, this area of performance touches on an element which is of key importance to the notion of performance writing – that of materiality. Following theorist Serge Bouchardon, (http://elitineurope.net/node/12) the materiality of digital text exists on at least two levels:

- On the level of what occurs in the machine, calculation being a material process
- On the level of what occurs in the interaction with the user, a symbolic and behavioural interaction, in which the system acts on the user and is acted on by the user.

Similarly N. Katherine Hayles:

> …materiality depends on how the work mobilizes its resources as a physical artifact, as well as on the user's interactions with the work and the interpretive strategies she develops – strategies that include physical manipulations as well as conceptual frameworks. In the broadest sense, materiality emerges from the dynamic interplay between the richness of a physically robust world and human intelligence as it crafts this physicality to create meaning. (Hayles 2002, 33)

Considerations such as typography, typeface and type size, use of colour etc. constitute an important element of the materiality of the piece. The choice of typefaces, for example, points to a contrast between juvenile orthography/writing within constraints on the one hand and a more sophisticated design on the other, while the different colours are intended to contextualise the piece vaguely within a modernist aesthetic which also helps place it historically. These elements in varying ways inform a reading of the performance of the work.

The temporal or durational qualities of the textwork also play a significant role in its performativity. It is not simply that the performance is time-based, but temporal shifts are easily discernible within its performance. There are shifts in the pacing and phrasing of the moves and gestures made to reveal the text. The cursor stops, delays, lingers, hovers before moving again. These are moments of pause filled with consideration in the performance are revealed through gesture. As such might be opposed to the 'empty' moments which is a durational feature of much digital media when a user is passively waiting for the machine to carry out an operation, for a page to download, for example.

As with temporality, there is also an engagement with spatiality; more specifically, with points of entry to and exit from the textual layers. Although much of the reading is still in the standard form for this alphabet from left to right top to bottom, it may be that certain fragments of text are read backwards from right to left and from

bottom to top because of the way they are happened upon in the performance. This is even true of individual words. It is clear that the standard strategy of entering the text at the top left hand corner of the page and exiting it at the bottom right is not the most effective in this work. There is no standard point of departure, except the click that will allow access to the next layer. What the piece brings the performer up against are the particularities of spatiality in this digital work. One might even evoke the notion of 'choreographing' the digital page in this context. As Rita Raley comments:

> Digital textuality is able to achieve a spatial and temporal fluidity precisely because it is able to activate and manipulate the resources and complexity entrapped within language itself. Within analog text these spatial and temporal resources remain present, but only as potential and possibility.

Consideration of temporality and spatiality of digital text indicates the extent to which composition and performance cannot be separated.

In sum, it is clear that to a large extent, control of making the text of *...Reusement* is in the hands of the performer, who undertakes a number and variety of functions, being responsible for a writing, (sometimes using the cursor to literally inscribe the surface with handwritten text), reading, editing, direction, choreography and composition, in the sense of changing the shape and relationships of the textual components on the screen. S/he can also set and/or test out the limits of readability, examine the point at which a mark becomes a letter, or a series of marks becomes a word. Conversely s/he can examine the point at which the letter decomposes into a mark, or the word decomposes into a series of marks. There is a clear overlap between the notion of the e-composition of *...Reusement* and its performance. In its performance lies its composition. In its composition, and recomposition, lies its performance. These are not separate, or indeed separable, processes.

5. Decomposition

As alluded to above, a third term (in addition to e-composition and performance) is simultaneously at play in *...Reusement.* What emerges from any performance of this work is an intriguing tension between e-composition/performance and decomposition. I want to consider decomposition in *...Reusement* under three headings:

Firstly, the term can be used in a straightforward, almost literal way, to refer to the visual decomposition of the texts in the event of performance. One of the consequences of the layering process is that in order for a new piece of text to appear, it is frequently necessary to decompose the text which is already present, or at least portions of it. Text is often decomposed in searching for the location of the fragment of text on the next layer. There is always a decision to be made between how much of the existing text is decomposed in the composition of the new text and how much remains. At moments, the performer is happy to leave new text partially or wholly un-covered in order to retain elements of the existing composition. At other moments a whole layer is decomposed in order to reveal the entirety of the next.

Secondly, there is the sense of decomposition as used above in reference to John Hall's essay/lecture *13 Ways of Looking at Per-formance Writing*. Here the term refers to the process by which writing disappears (or not) in the event of performance. Hall poses as a consideration of any performance the extent to which the writing/ script remains in the transition to performance, and to what extent it decomposes. In this respect there is a link between decomposition and an extended notion of translation with its concomitant theme of loss. The fact that *...Reusemen*t exists as a bilingual text, based on a cross-language misreading, means that there is scope for an investigation of the effect of decomposition across languages. In fact, due to the technology of this e-composition, the text is sufficiently unstable at every moment to open up all sorts of possibilities for

plurilingualism. Thus there are moments when words which appear in the context of one language can, through decomposition (the removal of letters or even an accent, for example) become words in another language. 'Rainures' can become 'rain' or 'inure', 'pièce' can become the English 'piece', or 'pie' or the Spanish 'pie', and so on. The plurilingual potential of this stratified technology can be explored and developed with each new performance of the piece.

Thirdly, immanent in the piece is a notion of 'composition through decomposition', or rather the idea that decomposition is a pre-requisite for composition, which leads us to Derrida, or more specifically to Derrida's notion of decomposition as inflected by Gregory Ulmer in his *Applied Grammatology*. In other words this will be another perlection, a reading of Derrida *through* Ulmer.

Derrida's project of developing a new writing entails the setting up – in opposition to the standard 'philosophemes' of idealization and appropriation – of two alternative processes; 'articulation' and 'decomposition', (Ulmer 1985, 36-67). In this context, de composition is used in an attempt to undermine the founding metaphors of the western tradition, related as they are to the senses of sight and hearing which both act at a distance upon the object of perception and idealise it. The aim of decomposition is to extend articulation to the chemical senses by finding analogies for thought that do not depend on sight and hearing, foregrounding touch (which has only to do with a material exteriority: masterable objectivity), taste, (consumption which dissolves the objectivity in interiority) and smell (which allows the object to dissociate itself in evaporation).

The central aspect of the chemical senses seems to be their evanescence. This is why the olfactory is added to the sense of taste as a metaphor for the structurality of writing.

As Derrida writes in *Glas*:

The essence of the rose is its non-essence: its odour as it evaporates… And yet the text itself does not entirely disappear… This suspension of the text

which delays a little – one must not exaggerate – its absolute dissipation, could be called effluvium. Effluvium designates in general decomposing organic substances, or rather their product floating in the air, that sort of gas which preserved awhile above marshes… The text is thus a gas. (Derrida, quoted in Ulmer 1985, 55)

According to Ulmer, the theoretical senses (sight and hearing) leave objects free to exist for themselves 'unconsumed'. In this respect these senses set up a division between theoretical interest which lets things be in their liberty and desire which seeks out consumption.

For our purposes, among the chemical, non-theoretical senses, taste and consumption are of particular interest. This may seem odd, except insofar as the principal feature of these senses, as well as their evanescence is dissolution, and by extension, transformation. The object is transformed through the process of dissolving.

As Ulmer states it:

The dissolving action of the chemical senses, involving the breakdown and transformation of substances, offers a model for a methodology of decomposition by means of which the limits of theoretical philosophy might be transgressed. (1985, 57)

Obviously the organ which is most closely associated with this modelling of a new methodology is the mouth. The mouth which bites, chews and tastes.

Ulmer again:

The first step of decomposition is the bite. To understand the rationale for the interpolations, citations, definitions used in Glas, Derrida says, one must realise that "the object of the present work, its style too, is the 'morceau'". [bit, piece, fragment, mouthful]. (1985, 57)

So this term – le 'morceau', meaning the piece, the bite – is allied to this notion of decomposition and the chemical senses. There is of course an interesting homophone here in the context of digital writing – the byte as a unit of measuring information and memory storage and the bit as a contraction of 'binary digit'. This connection,

which returns us to the materiality of digital media, has no currency in page-based writing and is not available in French. It could be said of *...Reusement* then that the byte is a pre-requisite for the process of decomposition.

Another meaning of 'morceau' relates the notion of the fragment. There has been much said on the fragmented and fragmentary nature of digital text in particular and modernist texts in general. My own particular interest in the fragment turns on its relation to decadence, which is at least in part not unconnected to notions of decomposition and decay. In fact we can go back to the early 19th century to find a link between fragmentation and decadence. In 1834, Desiré Nisard published his *Etudes de moeurs et de critique sur les poètes latins de la décadence*. Although a work on late Roman poets, it is clear that Nisard's target was in fact romanticism. His view was that a decadent style of writing places such emphasis on detail that the normal relationships of a work's parts to its whole are destroyed, the work disintegrating into a multitude of overworked fragments. But of more immediate interest is another link back to applied grammatology. The process of assembling often disparate fragments is effectively that of collage, and according to Ulmer, collage is to Derrida's grammatological investigation what Greek tragedy was to Aristotle's articulation.

See Raley:

> However, the new media technologies have brought us to a point whereby collage is not simply a "feeble name" for the assemblage of discontinuous parts – as Jameson suggests in the context of his reading of Nam June Paik's video installations, which he uses as an illustrative example for the geometral optics of the postmodern aesthetic, practiced by viewers who try impossibly to "see all the screens at once, in their radical and random difference". Collage, also, is too material for a postmodern aesthetic and digital textuality alike.

It might be argued that the underlying principal of *...Reusement* is décollage rather than collage. This emphasises not only the stripping

away of text, but also introduces a metaphor of flight, a taking-off, in the sense that 'décoller' is used of a plane taking off. In fact, it is difficult to tell whether the underlying process at work in one of removal or addition, erasure or overlay, of rendering the text absent or making it present.

I'd like finally and briefly to turn to another notion within Applied Grammatology which has some relevance to ...*Reusement* – that of the hidden. It is obvious that within the digital work there is a constant tension between the concealed and the revealed – revelation often entails or results in concealment. This links in with another of Derrida's central concerns – that of the latent and manifest in dream-language and dream content, and the psycho-analytic process as it relates to a writing practice where the subject is both absent and present. (Ulmer 1985, 79) A video of a performance of the unerasure of a pre-existing writing supposedly by the maker of the text who borrowed and translated the text from another writer writing autobiographically about his younger self and the indeterminacy of memory and a moment of revelation when he realised that language was systemic – that would seem to engage in certain ways with the interplay of absence and presence.

The choice of found texts within the context of this layered digital technology again proved to be fruitful here. The impetus for the incident recounted in the first chapter of Leiris's *Scratches* rests upon the uncertainty of his memory, the traces left, the way memory decomposes over time and how false memory is created with the fragments of other memories. As stated above, the effect is one of collage where with each re-performance of this episode in Leiris's life, fragments of memory find themselves spatially and contextually associated with other fragments and traces of potential memory. With each re-performance the context changes slightly. In this digital form, Leiris's memory of the event, which is already indeterminate (marked by the persistent use of the question mark and 'or') is rendered even more uncertain by the action of the

performer of the text and their capacity to erase layers of text either partially or wholly.

5. Performance/Perlection

The aim of this paper is not to understand the work in question, or digital text in general. The intention is to provide a context for reading such layered textworks which might be more fruitful than assuming the standard strategies of reading analog material. In the same vein, this final section is not intended as a set of conclusions. Rather the intention is that the preceding discussion opens up new possibilities of thinking about the reading/writing/performance of e-literature. In order to illustrate this, I would like to return to the word which appears at the head of this article – perlection. This term can be understood in two senses of 'reading through'. Firstly that of reading 'to the end', 'carefully and fully', and secondly, 'by way of' or 'via'. The first of these meanings is of less interest. The notion of a careful or full, or maybe close reading is important. But any presupposition that there is a reading to the end, that there is some final text of *...Reusement* that the performer arrives at through the process of perlection is counter-productive. What should be clear in this textwork is its almost infinite mutability.

In terms of reading by way of or via, this is not a single process. We can talk of 'perlections' in this instance. A series of 'readings through' are taking/have taken place: *...Reusement* has been read through the layers of text-image with make up its performance. It has been read through this paper and vice versa. Leiris has been read through both digital remediation and through translation, i.e. from page to screen and from French to English. In this paper Derrida has been read through Ulmer, etc.

And other perlections present themselves which could be the start of another engagement. One such is a reading of *...Reusement*

through Derrida reading Freud reading through the mystic writing pad – a device which itself requires perlection. In *Freud and the Scene of Writing*, nearly every page of that essay contains sentences which seem to resonate in this context and would provide the starting point for further readings:

> We must account for writing as a trace which survives the scratch's present, punctuality, and stigme (Derrida 1995, 224)

Or:

> Traces thus produce the space of their inscription only by acceding to the period of their erasure. (Ibid., 226)

Or again:

> The subject of writing is a system of relations between strata, the Mystic Pad, the psyche, society, the world. (Ibid., 227)

One could argue that all reading is a perlection. We are always already reading any text through layers and layers of other texts. There are obvious connections with the idea of intertextuality and the palimpsest. The purpose of foregrounding it here is simply because of the nature of this particular digital textwork where, as you have seen, the layer is the basic unit of structure.

This emphasis on a multi-layered, stratified approach is not intended to give an account of the work, but rather because I want to learn from this writing. It exemplifies an approach to research whereby any practical writing project starts out as something of a probe and initiates a set of readings/responses which are not necessarily foreseen at the outset. And this can be extended to the writing of this paper. I set out to produce a paper which was intended to be read through a performance of the digital textwork itself. Insofar as the paper itself is a perlection it constitutes a performance of its own premise, and in that respect is also a piece of performance writing.

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Footnotes

[1]   The text/image distinction is not a clear one, however. The layers are in fact jpg's i.e. image files. It could be argued that there are no words in this piece, only images of words, although what the difference is between a word and the image of a word is a moot point and not one I will engage with here.

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