

Readers, meet the Readers.

What a digital language-centred poetic
critique might look like.

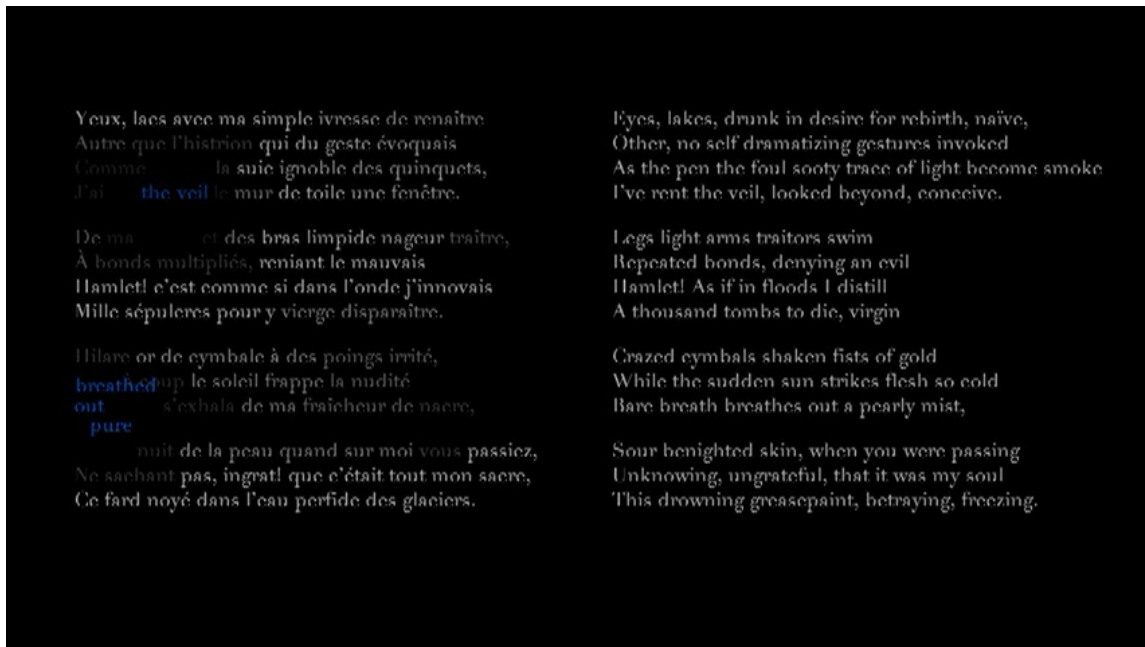
Theoretical musings on my workshop with John Cayley
at e-poetry 2011.

Penny Florence

Les contemporains ne savent pas lire ...

Stéphane Mallarmé

"Le Mystère, dans les Lettres" (1896)¹



Screen grab of one version of a Reader in action, showing the transposition of two translations, one of which is on the right, into the original French. The original words (in white) fade as the translations appear (in blue). In other versions, two poems appear side by side, and words from each appear in different colours in the "tears" (fades, or holes) in the original text.

This little essay about our workshop at e-poetry 2011
seeks to introduce the work I have been doing with

¹ Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898), *Divagations*, Paris, Charpentier, 1897 (pp. 283-291).
Also freely available in the original French and in translation online and in books.

John and with his digital "Readers". These Readers are programs that scan a given text for elements that can be quite simply decided upon and set in motion to recreate the text on screen to aesthetic or critical effect, or both. ("Readers" with a capital "R" in what follows means these programmable Readers). The concept is beautiful in its simplicity, and the results can be elegant, complex and innovative. Equally significant is the way the process of working with them opens on to new ways of thinking about poetry in general, and e-poetry in particular.

My aim here is to give the merest sketch of an idea of the new poetry and the new critique they enable. In so doing, this essay gestures towards reading and its history. Or words in time. It asks us to think carefully about what the visual element of e-poetry is, suggesting that we attend more closely to reading and to language. Concrete poetry, for example, is of very limited relevance because it is not dynamic temporally (not about words in time, only in space), and so it creates no resonant intervention in language.

First, the gesture towards reading and its comparatively recent history: when at the end of the nineteenth century Mallarmé published his most radical experimental poetry yet, in a career largely made up of radical moves, he was, predictably, attacked. With characteristic irony, he replied as above - my contemporaries don't know how to read.

Do ours? Since Barthes, say, do we know what we need

to know about reading?² I'm saying I think we don't, but that the Readers John Cayley is developing with me and with others show ways to take us further, because they reconfigure the reading process.

As far as I know, this is the first time the activity of reading has been brought into the forefront of e-poetry, both in terms of the programming and of written language. The Readers relocate reading between minds in the plural and the technologies of reading in the plural as intersecting force-fields, foregrounding reading as an interpretive activity. This means that the choices the reader makes are automatically brought to consciousness. It hardly needs emphasis that this conscious play with language is one of the joys of poetry, and one of its essentials. Poetry is made of words, not of ideas (Mallarmé again); that is, reading poetry is itself about embodied language; thought, not information or concepts (the former not at all, and the latter only secondarily).

Now that we have digital words that can do some very new and dynamic things, we potentially have a new poetry. As e-poetry comes of age, we will think more about how it works on, in and between language/s, and, furthermore, we will pay attention to all the technologies of reading: manuscript, print, typewriter, hand set type, the page, the

² The principal landmarks by Roland Barthes are *The Pleasure of Text* and *S/Z*, also freely available in translation. Originally published as: *Le Plaisir du texte*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1975; and *S/Z*, Paris, Seuil, 1970. Both have been much commented and both are indispensable to understanding the literary theory of the late 20th century. This isn't the place to try to be exhaustive, but I can't quite not mention his dazzling 1953 début with *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (*Writing Degree Zero*).

paper, collage and so forth.

The choice of Mallarmé as the basis or starting-point is because his work has been a touchstone of my own for a very long time and because it is often referenced in e-poetry and in visual poetics.



³The way it is referenced, however, can be misleading, because the reasons given, or the context, lead away from what the "visual" is doing in the work, or, most importantly, from the

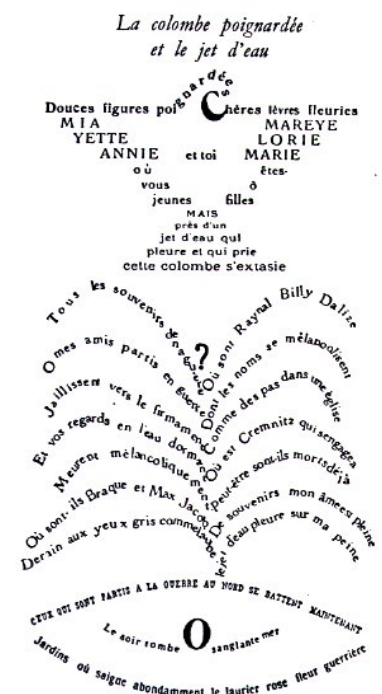
particular kind of reading it demands.⁴ That move from what the visual is doing (dynamic) to what the visual is, or an observed visuality (static), is, at least in part, why it came to be seen as concrete. It is not. Language is what governs Mallarmé's work, and it is the assimilation of the visual into how language is understood that is the concerns of the work, not some move towards 'visuality'. Part of the issue is the singling out of 'Un coup de dés' as radically different from the sonnets. While it clearly makes a quantum leap, the advance is to take the logic further, not

³This is just one page from the poem, which has 13 pages, all different, and incorporating a number of typefaces, some letters specially adapted. See the booklet accompanying my interactive CD-Rom (Oxford, Legenda, 2000).

⁴Even more recent approaches that are closer to this than some of those of the 20th Century can still be unclear. See, for example, "'Un coup de dés' Writing Turned Image. An alphabet of Pensive Language" Sabine Folie (ed.) for Generali Foundation Wien. Texts by Anna Sigridur Arnar, Jacques Rancière, Gabriele Mackert, Michael Newman, Sabine Folie et al. Germ./Engl., 250 pages, 150 color and b&w illustrations. The title itself is indicative, and in some of the text ("poetry becomes imagistic"- blurb) the attempt to generalise slips further.

to alter it. It is arguable in a manner that can be usefully compared with interpretations of Wittgenstein's shift, for example, when some believe he revoked the arguments of the 'Tractatus' in favour of the language-based analysis of 'Philosophical Investigations', while others see continuities.⁵

Apollinaire's (1880-1918) "Calligrammes" (pictured left)



and Gertrude Stein's (1874-1946) prose are more useful comparisons than almost any concrete poem, because they are about language and the visual impact of letters as integral to their symbolic. Despite the apparent literalness of aspects of the Apollinaire, the move remains linguistic. It is a form of paranomasia.

⁵*Philosophical Investigations*. London, Blackwell 1956/2001; *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, (first published in German 1921), C. K. Ogden (ed.) London, 1922. Routledge & Kegan Paul, parallel edition including the German text on the facing page to the English text: 1981. The comparison can be taken quite a lot further, including most obviously Wittgenstein's "picture theory".



The fabulous 1913 collaboration between Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay-Terk, *La prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France* (Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jehanne of France), also belongs here, with the landmarks of the early modernist language

transformation. Blaise Cendrars is a nom de plume, meaning, roughly, burning ashes, a revolution in language.⁶

At its simplest, the issue is that the one represents, the other presents. Concretism represents. The contemporary equivalent of this is the animated poetry that requires no change in how to read. The modernist pioneers (of whom the above is a brief selection), Mallarmé, and e-poetry that reaches to its full potential, present.⁷

Contrary to prevailing opinion, some of it more informed

⁶ Blaise Cendrars = Frédéric Sauser (1887-1961), polymathic writer and filmmaker, Swiss. Sonia Delaunay (1885-1979), Ukrainian in origin, and also multi-talented and underestimated, despite being well-known. The image is of the last section and shows the Eiffel Tower (1889).

⁷ I don't mean to imply by this leap that no other work presents in the same way. As I said at the beginning, this is the merest sketch, and the terrain is vast and varied.

than others, I think that the digital has the potential to make us all better readers, at least in this sense. I may need to emphasize this, so strong is the belief. Yes, I did say that the Net could be making us better readers. It's a provocation to say this, of course, but read on.

Reading is the most extraordinary thing, yet it is now, in the developed world, usually taken so much for granted that it can seem a chore. Many younger people now complain about having to do it, while older people complain that the young don't know how to read deeply any more. I don't think either is quite right.

Reading is a technology that has always traversed the material and the immaterial, capable of taking you right past conscious processes to another space and time. Read poetry, and you also read the blanks, what is not said, what is not there on the page, but evoked by what is. To paraphrase Mallarmé's words, you don't depict things - yet his poems are, apparently, full of them - but rather their effect: "Peindre non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit". Effect depends on light. Cendrars commented that the Transsibérien was "printed on sunlight". Reading is light. There isn't any one correct way to see either, and the more ways you can refocus, the better.

At the moment of perception, reading just is. It goes to your self without your noticing. It forms part of who you are. To put it more theoretically, it constitutes your Subjectivity. Most people now underestimate the Impressionists because (among other things) they show us sunlight

through ordinary activity. Yet light is the medium of the mystics, of those who focus on expanded awareness, or perhaps augmented reality. Reading combines not only inner and outer light, but it emanates from more than one Subjectivity. If you want to reach beyond things, you focus on light. If you want to reach beyond individual Subjectivity, you have new potential in e-poetry, which relates to the collective and to the technologies of reading in expanded ways, some of them quite new, but that also puts us back in touch with ancient ways of understanding.⁸

The early part of my collaboration on the Readers with John was via a couple of Skype conversations and Googlewave - the latter, sadly, sidelined by Google, but at the time of writing, still accessible if you know about it. It was very useful for our purpose, not least because it allows exact tracking of who wrote what and when (a literary historian's dream). I would still like to be able to explore this feature more as itself a reflexive poetic device.

The following is taken directly from this part of the collaboration. It's from me to John.

I have in mind something inspired by your "Translation". But it would involve 2 poems of Mallarmé's. "Le Pitre châtié" and stanzas 3,4 and 5 from "Prose (pour des Esseintes)".⁹ The idea includes a critical dimension -

⁸ Again, this is very compressed. But I'm throwing out pointers to historical trajectories, long and short.

⁹ *Le pitre châtié* (c 1864, published 1887); *Prose (pour des Esseintes)* (c 1884/5, published 1885). *Des Esseintes* was the aesthete hero of the highly successful Decadent novel *A Rebours* (J.K. Huysmans, 1884).

that is, literary critique - so that the new work would be an electronic poem in its own right but with a kind of self-conscious criticality that would have been anachronous in the original. The music element would derive from Debussy's "Chansons de Bilitis". The thought is to transliterate the one poem over/under/through the other via English - but with some form of intervention by reader-performers in different locations. I'm very interested in this comment of yours in "Dichtung: Digital": "For example, I would claim that the iterative transliteral morphs between related texts - texts that might be seen, for example, as rewrites in differing styles - will reveal abstracted underlying structures supporting and articulating the 'higher-level' relationships between the texts." As you know, I'm no programmer. But I know what I'm after critically and aesthetically. The multi-site part of the idea may be a bridge too far? I wanted it to "perform" the doubling of identity in the two poems. Is this too complicated technically?

So - to the event at e-poetry. What we did was along the same lines as above, and indeed involved two poems, side by side on the screen. *Le pitre châtié* was on the left and on the right, the three stanzas from *Prose (pour des Esseintes)*.

The presentation enacted a series of doubles: between source and target languages; between sound and image; between John and me; and between textual Subjectivities. Both poems articulate a "double (un)conscious" that reverberates throughout their structures. This obliquely

reflected, multiple (un)conscious can only be understood as thematic at the first level. What counts is the effect, at which point the doubling has always already been passed through and beyond.

These refraction effects influenced the apparently eccentric choice of a sonnet and part of a poem in rhyming quatrains called a "prose". In one sense, it seemed more rigorous a test to experiment with very different poetic forms and syntactic moves, but still more, these two poetic extracts foreground a complex topology that begins with a doubling that is not an opposition, and very quickly brings into being the most complex of constellations in motion.

The way the two passages from Mallarmé are layered over and through each other via English is aligned with certain of the processes in John's earlier work, such as those underlying his "transliterated morphs" in that the translating Readers do also reveal "abstracted underlying structures supporting and articulating the 'higher-level' relationships between the texts" (in John's words). But 'Mirroring Tears' renders a visualization of moving dynamic Readers that were developed in John's collaboration with Daniel Howe, The Readers Project (thereadersproject.org). Whereas, in John's earlier work, the text was transformed or transliterated, here it is displayed and read, by procedural software entities that move through the text in a manner that models aspects of our own reading. For 'Mirroring Tears' the 'higher-level' relationships were composed, in this instance, by myself and by John, but they could be arbitrarily plural and incorporate any reader's poetic or

scholarly perspectives/ They could be multiplied rather than doubled, as it were. The relationships are abstracted from translations, critical interpretations—readings. Once they are given and informed by these readings (technically, by way of grammar files) the Readers of ‘Mirroring Tears’ perform these relationships with a dynamic visuality that I am arguing goes beyond concretism or animation.

In this iteration of the Reader, what was seen on the screen at first was just the two poems. The workings of the Reader first became visible with "tears" (or holes) appearing in the fabric of the poems. This follows the last line of the first stanza of *Le pitre châtié* in principle, but not in specifics: I have torn a hole in the curtain wall ("J'ai troué dans le mur du toile une fenêtre"); the reader and Reader both read through the tearing, or rupturing, rather than look at, or interpret, any kind of representation of a wall or a window. Words or phrases began to appear in coloured letters through and around the holes.

In the earliest versions, these words and phrases were relatively straightforward transpositions from one poem to the other, via English translations by both John and myself. (See screen grab at the beginning). The element of translation, or transposition, is integral, not arbitrary, and it sets into play further language metonymics, more dynamic operations of language forming and re-forming layers of sense and "lines of flight" (to borrow Deleuze's well-known phrase). This is one of the ways John's observation referred to above, to the effect that the "iterative transliteral morphs" might reveal underlying structures and a higher

level relations, seems vital in relation to what we were doing at e-poetry, to the Mallarmé text, and, more broadly, avant-garde writing.

Furthermore, the actual ways the Readers can trace pathways and networks that reveal how texts are related at a higher level has the potential to reveal much more about what Mallarmé meant by "Le Livre", or the Book. Why does this matter? Because it demonstrates explanatory power when it comes to virtuality and to the transposition of language into new technologies. You could say, productively, that the Book prefigures the Net. But it isn't the Net. That differential requires both respecting and exploiting in the growth of e-poetry as avant-garde (or as replacing the avant-garde, for those who want to abolish the term and its connotations). The Readers also allow far greater understanding of how evocation works in digital space, because this is a very precise aspect of poesis, possibly almost the most exact (*pace* he who said "un sense trop précis rature/ta vague literature" – roughly, if you get too precise, your vague literature disappears).

Everything Mallarmé said about this Book is characteristically oblique - peindre non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit - but it is exact, and it is clear that it would reveal a new kind of universal (I'm tempted to write "universe-al"), which would not be about essentials, but rather about relations. He meant this at a very high level of abstraction indeed. He *meant* the relations between everything. Put like this, it sounds vague. It isn't. Relations between everything means, for example, that human

relations are understood in through an interconnectedness that traverses, say, animate life, consciousness and the stars. It is an old, old idea in its newest incarnation. The difference, perhaps, is that the connotative is now both structural and foregrounded.

So the Reader at e-poetry 2011 was the first attempt at a more detailed criticality, if I may put it like that. The whole project puts the notion of critique into play, but this Reader attempts to make visible the relations imaged at the higher level in the poems, moving both closer and, potentially, much beyond. It was also the first I had actually programmed myself, rather than discussing with John and then leaving him to it. For the third identifiable time, I got really excited about where it could lead. (The first was when we collaborated on a series of events at Tate Modern in London, and the second what when I saw John's Translations project). Because although I knew from the first Reader I saw that it could perform a kind of criticism and make a kind of poetry that were not possible before, I didn't know exactly how.

So in my first attempt to do the programming myself, I tried to follow chains of images to show how they form cognate groups. This was far too literal, but it was a productive error. The false start came from my previous critical habits, and it made me realise I had to think more dynamically to be able to do it. So I shifted to programming it to transpose meanings originating in various elements of syntax, morphology and meanings ("memes") according the larger abstract structures that underpin the actual words.

Focussing on this abstract of structures raises the idea of music in language. My original idea in this collaboration was to use music, and at present, there is no music. I'm not sure that I now want to pursue this idea, though I will experiment further before deciding. It may be another example of literal-mindedness (though I do like sometimes to think of the "literal" as "according to the word"). There is also no subjective reader intervention in the sense that the movement of the language between poems is programmed, and there is no interactivity or intervention by the reader into the movements of the Reader, once activated.

Mallarmé's true radicalism lies in a philosophical, embodied poetic that is neither dualist nor Platonic. I disagree with many readings and interpretations of his work and of his place in histories of poetry, literature and the avant-garde, because they don't recognise this, or, if they do, they don't follow through. This matters in the present context because it is why John's Readers are so appropriate and effective as a creative and critical approach to radical poetry, and to e-poetry. The kinds of abstraction and universality we are exploring have nothing to do with a return to the generalisations of transformational grammar, or structuralism, or the old revolutions such as that of Cendars, where you destroy everything in the name of the new. It is the more subtle, nuanced maturing of cultures in relation to one another in a new spatio-temporality and in accommodating to accelerated change. Potential

applications open on to new developments of a really exciting field of digital poetry in multiple languages and scripts.

In a recent interview about his new book on information, James Gleik observed that preliterate societies did not have a sense of the word as a unit of meaning. Mallarmé's poetry experiments with the limits, not only of the word, but of all units of meaning, including the poem itself, and, ultimately, of meaning itself. Gleik, of course, is a science writer who came to fame with his book on chaos theory, and it is interesting that he has now turned to information, which is becoming at least on some levels analogous in complexity. Mallarmé, of course, abhorred "information" as the antithesis of poetry, the province of those who can't read (the literate who don't really know how to do it, that is).

So - when it comes to reading e-poetry, and its critique, I have often wondered whether we really know how to do it. The Readers look like one way. I hope we'll take up the challenge many of us spoke of at e-poetry 2011. Without losing the wonderful playfulness and invention that characterises so much of our work and our meetings, we also need to get as serious about innovative critique centred on poetic language as we have already been about other aspects, such as the broader technological and cultural discussion.