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Word For Word: Encoding, Networking, and Intention

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Abstract

Is it possible to argue for an underlying "intention" of a networked assembly such as the online literary journal Word For/Word? The very nature of its digital medium invites non-linear, non-sequential readings, thus making it problematic to think of its assembled works only as discrete, autonomous texts. I propose that one way to answer this question is to rethink "intention" in terms of textual encoding. Intention, in this regard, is not a by-product, or end-result, of writing, nor the manifestation of an author's "original" idea, but an always on-going textual drift. My project explores the methods in which JavaScript can clarify this dynamic and seemingly infinite drift of textual intention by encoding and particularizing its recombinant processes.

In the essay "Utopian Plagiarism, Hypertextuality, and Electronic Cultural Production," the digital performance group Creative Art Ensemble argue that a "primary value of electronic technology…is the startling speed at which it can transmit information. As information flows through electronic networks, disparate and sometimes incommensurable systems of meaning intersect." Is it possible, then, to argue for an underlying "intention" of a networked assembly such as the online literary journal _Word/ For Word_, which I have been editing for the past year? The very nature of its digital medium invites non-linear, non-sequential readings, thus making it problematic to think of its assembled works _only_ as discrete, autonomous texts. I propose that one way to answer this question is to rethink "intention" in terms of textual encoding. Intention, in this regard, is not a by-product, or end-result, of writing, nor the manifestation of an author's "original" idea, but an always on-going textual drift. My project explores the methods in which JavaScript can clarify this dynamic and seemingly infinite drift of textual intention by encoding and particularizing its recombinant processes.

Roman Jakobson has famously suggested that the "poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination." My program engages this notion of textual intention by using JavaScript to encode the

contents of the first two issues of *Word For Word*. The program works in three stages. In stage one, the program selects from the storehouse of possible texts in the contents of *Word For Word*. For example, here are some sample texts from the second issue of *Word For Word* culled by running the program:

(1) "The Hand as Harbor," by Cole Swensen

That would be the holding hand
       so I'll stay here. And of the trees
full forth on the sea, a hand is every one. And while we're planning the future

A vague starfish watermarked into the letter, a starfish burning on the window.
For every ship that went down, they'd speak of the hands-- *"All hands on deck "*
and *"All hands were lost. " "*I made a ghost of all my hands *"*watching
the walls rock, we'd read the lists in the morning paper.

(2) "King's English," by Karen Garthe

     Ere & before Saxon
       save & except Romance

      King me!
     I'm telling you slipshod.
      -- It's more than wonderful
      malaprop in the ascendancy

   We suggest that lies between six & ten reverential objections

      So much is clear. . .
     Sr. Ganganelli would never
  have been poisoned
  provided the surface & the underlying meaning were the same. . .
"If"

      is a small district in the kingdom

(3) "Example," by Sheila Murphy

Shear the top of flocked own intersperse. Renege on flowers, renegade. A trip trump triumph glorifies the day-old overcast. This, too, shall lapse, as quiet form of overlap. The long arm of a shuffled feast exuberates the raw mist of the seventh sea. Interpretive domains release our pearly glee. Trimmed fame lords it over flat-lined space and fangled ivy. Vineyards purse our lips for us. The porous ship shape follicles denude the dreamed-of fease. The fall of de-rocked roll commenced to have been salted. Troops to call on openly remained a fact of force. Narration to prop up underage indulgence. Stray from clarity when sticking to the unction rapt. The safest repertoire continues to uphold indemnity. A forecast dupes the unused levers to appease track records of escape from every hatch. Exasperation trains the psyche to go limber. Follow on with necessary openness to stop beyond these days.

Infancy at its most sublime, corrosive sheets of lapse, some bylines balanced next to power

(4) "a falling in autumn," by Noah E. Gordon

Felt as a mistake in translation, *leave* for *leaf*,
so the tree is an exit, a door into weather,

a symmetry in the spectrum & the stasis
of an open page. Here, morning unfolds

from moment. Recasting the body in sound.
The trace of objects. Echoes. What's

lost in the margins. Another X filling its box.
All told, a centering of sorts. A sphere reflecting

or spun to refraction. Webs, cross-stitched in the corners
& the leaves, unlatching. Desire is the watermark

of sight--a soaking-in. The absence of song
or the absence of sin. Noise isn't what's been lost

on ears, roots or dying limbs. It's impenetrable.
& this is the silence we're playing back to the sky:

In stage two, the program further parses the source texts and combines them:

For every ship that went down, they'd speak of the hands- 'All hands on deck' and 'All hands were lost.' provided the surface & the underlying meaning were the same.

. . 'If' is a small district in the kingdom Follow on with necessary openness to stop beyond these days. Infancy at its most sublime, corrosive sheets of lapse, some bylines balanced next to power Felt as a mistake in translation, leave for leaf, so the tree is an exit, a door into weather, a symmetry in the spectrum & the stasis of an open page.

Thus, the first two stages of the program works by selection and combination. If the program were to stop here, it would simply mimic, or recreate, what's already found in *Word For Word*, which could be of interest in itself, as it clarifies this type of encoding *as writing*, but what I am trying to investigate is the notion of textual intentionality, or the intention underlying and networking within and between the texts.

Therefore, in stage three, the program uses a simple algorithm to parse the recombined text according to vowel distribution. First it parses words that contain A, then E, and so on, and then distributes the reselected words according to a randomly determined pattern. Thus, the program generates its output based on only one of innumerable possibilities**:**

(a)

that   speak   hands-- hands and   hands
surface meaning same.   a   small necessary
days.   Infancy at   lapse, balanced
                    as a mistake
    translation-   leave
                        leaf,
                        a weather, a stasis, a
                        page.

(e)

speak
the   openness
        underlying   the deck
the meaning   were
the same.   Felt the same.
beyond these
            were
                the same, the deck
    corrosive
            were

sublime,
went sublime, corrosive deck

(i)

in
kingdom
meaning   provided   sublime
     bylines: corrosive
district   is
    provided

with underlying
mistake

(o)

to stop
beyond
translation,   provided
to power down, to
power translation, to power
translation,
     on
translation, corrosive of

(u)

      surface &
    underlying sublime
     spectrum

The finished output is thus not an arbitrary unraveling of the source texts, but instead foregrounds textuality in the sense of texture, a kind of fabric that can be infinitely cut and rewoven along multiple threads and multiple extensions, in a way similar, I would argue, to Jakobson's idea of metonymy. As Lyn Hejinian suggests in her essay ″Strangeness,″ ″While metonymy maintains the intactness and discreteness of particulars, its paratactic perspective gives it multiple vanishing points. . . . Metonymy moves restlessly, through an associative network, in which the associations are compressed rather than elaborated ″(″Strangeness ″38-9). In such a network, minor variables, those minutia that are central to the writing

process, but which are ordinarily missed, repressed, or held in check, are galvanized and allowed to form new associations. Tracing such a process would be altogether unthinkable without encoding. As Loss Glazier suggests in his book *Digital Poetics*, digital space is "a space where the minor matters: with monolinearity blocked, peripheral vision may again resume activity." Thus, the JavaScript, as it strings through its source texts, runs askew and askance, but gathers considerable force as it condenses the links between vowels. Peripheral patterns are brought to the center of a new text.

Admittedly, this sort of compression risks undermining the appearance of any sort of normative pattern by which the reader can navigate the associative network. If poetry is language charged with meaning, how might one find meaning amidst such meanderings, misfires, and renderings? To remedy this, Marjorie Perloff has argued for a "generative poetics," to which I would agree, so long as this does not entail *only* the generation of static, fixed texts. Such a poetics would be altogether blind to the recombinant aspects of encoding, as well as to the fact that intention need not be necessarily reduced, nor exiled, to an unmovable first-mover of poetic meaning. Or, as Glazier again suggests, "E-writing is not fixed; it is not just an arrangement of static symbols on a fixed page; it does something." Digital poetry, then, is poetry engaged in a particular activity. I would suggest that this particular activity generates something that *can* be read as poetry--as a lyrical and formal arrangement of words. More importantly, however, this activity can help account for the vast and largely uncharted textual intentions that are active during, and long after, a particular poem has materialized on the page--digital or otherwise. Because this continuous space resists monolinearity and stasis, fully charting it is neither likely, nor at all desirable. What we need, then, is a re-generative poetics, a poetics of encoding, which can account for both the continuous, recombinant process of intention, as well as its particular results.

With this in mind, then, I would like to take a closer look at the sample outputs generated by the JavaScript. First, I would argue that the outputs generated by my program can (and should) be read as poetry, in that they often contain instances of considerable and surprising lyricism. For instance, the conclusion to section A of the sample output is marked by a particular and engaging rhythm:

translation--   leave,
                         leaf,
                         a weather, a stasis, a
                         page

The single and heavy stressed lines "leaf" and "page" are punctuated by the interceding line with its lilting pattern light and heavy stresses. The result is not only playful, but places special emphasis on the words "leaf" and "page," linking them

both visually and rhythmically. Plus, this connection is further developed in that the lines could easily be read as a commentary on the poetics of their own encoding in this digital process. The process begins initially as a particular kind of translation in which texts are galvanized and recombined in an associative network, a network that functions lyrically, as evident in the repetition of "l" in "translation," "leave," and "leaf." This is in sharp contrast to the plosive and terminal "p" in "page." Thus, the liquidity of this particular instance of consonance, which begins as pure force -- or the act of translation, the divergent act of "leaving" -- grinds to a halt as the attention turns to what could be taken as the "end results" of the process: a leaf, the weather, a written page, all in moments of stasis. Thus, the lines enact a problematic "reversal" of the process of encoding: a lyrical, galvanizing activity is rendered as a static page.

The particular activity of encoding is more fully registered in the poem's various repetitions: "hands-- hands and hands" in section A, plus the recurrence of "corrosive," which functions much like a refrain throughout the middle sections of the poem. In section E, "corrosion" is paired with "deck" in a linguistic exchange that pits a seemingly stable structure against the force of corrosion that ultimately reveals the "openness" underlying the deck. In fact, the poem concludes in section U with a similar idea: the presence of a varied "spectrum" underneath a seemingly static surface, a point reinforced by the concrete arrangement of the lines on the page in which the "spectrum" literally lies beneath the "surface." With such a wealth of possibilities beneath a static linguistic surface, one need only break the surface to generate and regenerate meaning. Thus the poem suggests that when words are so galvanized, it is impossible not to generate meaning. The result is no less surprising for being so inevitable.

Therefore, the outputs have traditional poetic "meaning;" however, they also function as an analysis of their source texts. For instance Karen Garthe's poem explores the contingent nature of historical and political authority, a contingency determined, in part, by an inevitable accumulation of linguistic variation and error. Section I can thus be read as both a translation of Garthe's poem (for what is translation if not a transference of contexts and linguistic codes?) as well as its analysis. The analysis works by combining elements of Garthe's poem with the others. Much of Garthe's original lines remain intact, notably "kingdom," "district" and "underlying," all of which are key words in Garthe's poem. Here, however, they take on new resonance. In Section I, the official structure of the kingdom provides "bylines," marks of official documentation and identity. Yet the kingdom is subject to corrosive and dividual districts, a parceling, or replication, which exposes the official structure to underlying mistakes.

The process of encoding thus affords a previously undisclosed glimpse of Garthe's poem. This is, of course, similar to John Cage's process of using procedures for "reading through" Pound's *Cantos*, Thoreau's *Journals*, and Joyce's *Finnegan's*

Wake. I would suggest that this is a valuable literary tool, but is nothing altogether divergent from conventional literary analysis. Russian Formalists have long maintained that clarity through estrangement is the predominant, and foregrounding, function of literature. In Cage, this is not only a literary function, but also an analytical tool. His "reading through" of Thoreau's journals, in particular, clarifies much of Thoreau's liberationist politics and aesthetics. In the case of *Word For Word*, the poems, existing as they do in their digital environs, are given free reign to interact. This recombinant process is thus a process of analysis. As the poet George Oppen has suggested, "things explain each other, not themselves."

However, the outputs also function as a textual intention, which makes particular sense if one considers the outputs as simply one stage and one instance of an ongoing process of encoding that is always at work within the seemingly fixed and static texts of *Word For Word*. This is the most exciting and productive aspect of the project, and this is where I see it most radically diverging from print-based poetics. For instance, it would be difficult to talk about the textual intentions of *Word For Word,* as I've defined it, without this sort of encoding, a process in which the program parses the source texts according to specific vowel distributions. The result is not merely chance-based, but determinedly recombinant -- an instance of one textual weave among innumerable possibilities. Intention, in this light, is *text*, in the sense of "texture," a vast fabric whose active and recombinant minutia comprise a vast storehouse of possibilities and potentialities. Ann Lauterbach describes this activity in her essay "On Flaws" as "the abraided and indefinite accumulation of an infinite dispersal of sums." Fully accounting for such a textual drift would be altogether unthinkable without the process of encoding.

Therefore, the point here is not that the outputs generated by the JavaScript *could have been* a "Karen Garthe poem." I am not talking about individual intention, but rather the underlying textual intention of an online assemblage such as *Word For Word.* There are innumerable textual strings drifting in and throughout these collected and networked poems. Just as the JavaScript drifts and strings through its array of source texts, so does an underlying textual intention.

I would like to conclude by returning to the essay "Utopian Plagiarism, Hypertextuality, and Electronic Cultural Production," which argues that digital media can help restore "the dynamic and unstable drift of meaning by appropriating and recombining fragments of culture." Collective intention is thus wrested from stasis and rendered an accessible and reusable material. Obviously, my JavaScript program cannot make such a grand claim, nor would I wish it to do so, as my target has been one fragment of culture isolated in the network of *Word For Word*. However, I would suggest that its process of encoding and its capacity to allow for the recombinant can afford at least one glimpse of this new and compelling terrain.