

Of Programmatology

John Cayley is part of a small subset of poets who have sought out the programmable and procedural possibilities of computers – following on from Cage, chance, and other forms of random generation. Here he talks with his colleague and former publisher, John Welch

My conversation with John Cayley took place at his home in North London in February of this year. In 1975 I set up a publishing imprint, **The Many Press**, to publish editions of new and innovative poetry, and in 1993 I brought out the work of John's referred to at the beginning of our interview. Among John Cayley's other publications are *Wine Flying* (Wellsweep, London 1989), *An Essay on the Golden Lion* (Morning Star, Edinburgh 1995) and *Ink Bamboo*, a full-length collection of poems and translations (Agenda/Bellew, London 1996). John Cayley is also a publisher – his 'Wellsweep Press' has brought out finely designed and produced editions of Chinese literature, both classical and modern, prose and poetry. He is a skilled designer and typesetter and in that capacity has given me much assistance with my publishing venture. John Cayley's work with computer-generated texts relates to an area of experimental writing that I became interested in, in the 1970's, and this provided a starting-point for our discussion.

*I come to your work as a person familiar, both as consumer and practitioner, with the modernist art practice that it relates to, but with a limited understanding of computing – something which I daresay will be only too evident as we proceed. As a publisher I brought out your **Under It All** in 1993. I wonder if you'd like to say a few words about that piece and the procedures it involved.*

I started doing these sort of procedures and manipulations of text shortly after leaving university when a friend of mine sent me a letter which I originally thought was written in a sort of code. He had replaced every letter with a word that began with that letter. It's a simple acrostic procedure which other writers have employed, though I didn't know that at the time, most spectacularly Jackson Mac Low, and John Cage – though not exactly the same procedure – and I was very taken with it. At that stage, I was already mucking around with personal computers and it was quite an easy procedure to programme, so I started making and experimenting with

poetic texts, using these replacements. Emmett Williams is another writer, an important poet who has experimented with similar procedures, whose work I wasn't aware of at the time. *Under It All* is another variety of this kind of work, called mesostic, a technique both Mac Low and Cage are known for, where letters in a text are replaced by words that contain those letters in any position. In my work there are additional constraints which tend to make the generated language read more like natural language.

Yes, you explain some of these points in the Afterword and I'd like to quote if I may your definition of what you call, by analogy with 'hologram', a hologogram. You say it is 'a pattern of language produced when the words or the order of words of a base text are glossed, paraphrased, etymologised, acrostically or otherwise transformed, and such transformations are allowed to interfere with the base text; a set of rules, a machine or a computer program which defines or displays such a pattern.'

What I've done subsequently has grown out of these sorts of engagements. And then with the advent of the Internet in 1994, when the worldwide web came into prominence, there was very suddenly a broad audience, not just the possibility of publishing the results of such procedures, such as Cage and Mac Low published, but working programmes that actually generated texts 'on the fly'. Since then there have been a number of people working in this area, which I prefer to call 'writing in networked and programmable media' – I don't have a short phrase for it. *Under It All* is for me an early example of writing in programmable media, not networked, but in a published form and, because you kindly allowed me to insert a page in each copy which was unique to that copy, the booklets reflect, better than most printed publications of this sort of work, the nature of the procedures I was using.

*Another piece of yours that I saw was a very haunting piece, **Windsound**, which was shown in the Platform Gallery in Spitalfields, London. Here you used sound and animated text projected onto a screen – so that's a sort of advance?*