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Displaced metaphors: Poetic engagements with language in a digitised world

Abstract
This practice-led paper discusses an ongoing creative and conceptual collaboration between three authors, in which poetry is approached as a means of exploring how lived experience and language are being transformed by the rapid evolution of digital devices and technologies. We reflect on our use of poetry to explore and interrupt the increasing invisibility of metaphors such as 'cloud' and 'screen' as applied to technology, by re-foregrounding the disjunctions between metaphor and what it describes. Engaging with the work of Paul Ricouer and Maurice Blanchot, we consider the unique operations of literary language and the ability of poetry to invite critical encounter in ways that foreground physical sensation and the free association of signifiers. We explore how such poetic engagements offer an important means of approaching questions concerning the implications of digitisation, via language and lived experience on what we perceive as the 'real.' In this context, we consider Baudrillard's dystopic postulations regarding simulacra and hyperreality, and Susan Stewart's perception of digital modes of communication as inducing a nostalgic longing for the immediacy of pre-digital reality. As this paper will discuss, such possibilities, at once dystopic and mournful, are at once complicated and offset by the generative potential of creative engagements with digitisation, which have exciting possibilities for creative practice.
Keywords: metaphor, poetry, digital technology

Introduction: metaphor and the virtual

'The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture,' observes Emerson in his 1844 essay on poetic theory, 'The Poet.' Here Emerson attests to the capacity of language to lose the spark of its original meaning, become redundant over time, and even attain a runic irrelevance, as seen in languages without living adherents. Emerson continues:

> Language is fossil poetry. As the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images, or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin. (Emerson 1844)

The notion as explored here by Emerson, that language is an organism ever-evolving out of its own 'dead matter' – be this archaic grammar or tired metaphors – is of course well established, as is the converse, less emphasised by Emerson, which is the capacity of language and its speakers to reanimate old meanings and words to reflect radically new contexts, and in doing so to

preserve the suggestion of earlier meanings like fragments in amber. This practice-led paper is specifically concerned with the possible implications of 'dead' or for our purposes, 'displaced' metaphors in the felt experience of writing and reading poetry which engages with questions arising from the rapid evolution of Information Technology (hereafter IT) and its associated lexicon. More specifically, this discussion concerns the possible implications for poetic practice of virtualised and digitised modes of experience (including the act of writing itself), with a focus on the infiltration of IT terminology into everyday language, and its capacity to capture, overlay, or displace pre-existing meanings by lending radically new virtual and digital contexts to words such as 'desktop', 'cloud', 'web', 'mouse', and 'Java'.

Dead metaphor is broadly defined by *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* as '[a]n expression that was originally metaphorical but no longer functions as a trope and is now understood literally, e.g. "tail light," "foot of the mountain," "head of state"' (Friedman & French 2012: 337). If 'living' metaphor draws its power of comparison from the essential difference between tenor and vehicle, 'dead' metaphor can be understood to have lost this sense of animating difference through overuse. (It must also be noted here that the term 'dead metaphor' is itself exactly that, reflecting the way in which even non-poetic language is inherently metaphorical in its structure and usage.)

This paper considers the way in which the ever-changing sphere of IT appropriates language and creates functional metaphors which overshadow earlier meanings tied to the physical world, conflating the difference between signified and referent in a manner suggestive of the above definition of dead metaphors. More specifically, this paper examines the implications of digital technology as a mode of experience and driver of linguistic change by reflecting on the authors' shared efforts to explore and critique these realities by writing and collectively interrogating each other's poetry. This shared practice-led inquiry has also led us, via the work of Ricouer and Blanchot, to reflect on the unique qualities that poetry offers to the consideration of the virtual on the level of language and experience, just as we have discovered engaging with questions of virtual experience and language to offer productive possibilities for poetry.

In discussing the critical and emotional registers implicated in our poetic engagements with digitisation, we consider Baudrillard's dystopic postulations regarding simulacra and hyperreality, and Susan Stewart's perception of digital modes of communication as inducing a nostalgic longing for the immediacy of pre-digital reality. We will argue that in spite of the capacity of digitisation to radically reconfigure the significatory processes which determine what we think of when we hear a word such as 'cloud,' its fast-changing lexicon nonetheless poses affirmative possibilities for creative engagement, when the space of creative attention allows the difference between signified and referent to appear again, to be 'made strange', and for effects of oscillation between disparate meanings of the same words. The capacity of poetry to 'hold open' such differences within the same space, to allow for a multiplicity of meanings without foreclosure, can be used to trouble the questions surrounding the intervention of technological language into everyday and literary language, and extend creative engagements with technological change. Such engagements in poetry, not to mention other art forms, are well underway in a variety of diverse manifestations, as evidenced by recent publications such as *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (Dworkin & Goldsmith 2011) and *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (Bray, Gibbons & McHale 2012). The following discussion, however, is necessarily limited to considering the potential of poetry in responding to the interventions of technological language on pre-existing language structures.

'Substituting the signs of the real for the real': Baudrillard

Baudrillard's conception of simulacra and hyperreality is of evident relevance to this creative-critical inquiry into virtual modes of representation and experience, and their bearing on perceived material reality. Our concern with the rapidly evolving IT lexicon's appropriation of metaphors which, if not already 'dead', become so in their absorption in this virtual sphere, intimately relates to Baudrillard's consideration of the collapse between representation and reality entailed in what he conceives of as the third and fourth order simulacrum. According to Baudrillard, in the face of the hyperreal, '[s]imulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality (Baudrillard 1994: 1). In the hyperreal, Baudrillard suggests, 'the map precedes the territory' (1994: 2); the substitutable, reproducible representation precedes any real referent. Such inversion, and an apprehension of some perversity inherent in it, accompanied our earliest discussions – in which we noted how the word 'cloud', particularly pervasive in our university contexts (in which online learning management systems have become essential), seemed almost in danger of overtaking its original meaning.

The idea that at some point soon, the cloud in the web – so devoid of the substance, immediacy and sensuousness of clouds in the sky – could come to precede the latter as the first mental apparition invoked by the word seemed, to us as poets, an inherently worrying one, in which we instinctively discerned dispiriting implications for language and lived experience. Certainly, we acknowledged that language has always and will always be a reflexive organism, ever-evolving in response to the culture of its users – technological developments included – and intimately recognised the way in which this very evolution offered an irreducible and palimpsestic richness of references, associations and echoes on the level of the word and its iterations through time. This richness was suggested in one brainstormed fragment by Lucinda, which lists some divergent meanings of the word 'shift':

> *Shift:*
> a petticoat
> a lurch
> a gearstick
> a house move
> now a button
> on a keyboard

However, we also recognised our present moment as one in which the pace at which language, and its resonances for us as poets, is being harvested and transformed by one particular facet of culture, virtual technologies, is advancing at an unprecedented rate. Our concern was, instinctively perhaps, with the kind of diminishment that ensues from the collapse of the very difference that animates literary language – the difference that allows metaphors to do their conjuring work. This same concern resonates in Baudrillard's prescient lament, in 1981, of the loss of distinction between being and concept in the hyperreal, characterised by 'a liquidation of all referentials [and] their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs' (1994: 2).

Unlike the sign-system of language, in which it is the very absence of the real referent which conjures meaning, the hyperreal portends a scenario in which the proliferation of signs, and signs of signs, for the real is so total that the animating distinction between sign and referent; being and concept, is

practically effaced. This threat of a collapse between the real and its simulations was explored by Ruby in 'Icons', a poem in which the traditional icon painting, and the digital desktop icon, are contrasted as a means of troubling the differences (and possible collapsing of) the boundaries between the analogue and digital/physical and virtual as modes of experience. As will be further discussed, 'Icons' voices the fear of virtual or hyperreal experience being 'ever/ removed from the feel of/ earth'.

This fear resonates with Baudrillard's suggestion that in the slide of simulation which consumes the difference between 'the real and its concept', it is the very notion of the real itself which is eroded. In this way he discerns:

> [a] hyperreal sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and for the simulated generation of differences.' (Baudrillard 1994: 2-3)

Baudrillard here articulates a sense of the broadly dystopic potential of IT's onslaught as it continues to transform modes of psychological, social and political experience. However, the questions we considered during this project as poets were more bounded: Would the appropriation of words such as 'cloud' by IT somehow impoverish the richness and heterogeneousness that we so revered in language? Would the increasing mediation of direct, materially-grounded experience via digital media (endless screens, video games, Wii, and so on) pose a threat to the very modes of 'real' experience which we saw as the wellspring of art? Our questioning occurred via poetry, the very medium whose richness we worried might be diminished by an advancing virtual lexicon and its attendant modes of mediated experience. We examined our emailed responses to the shifting operations of the poems we were writing like diagnostic tests, interested in using our experiments to interrogate more broadly the aspects of poetic artifice (sounds, forms, tropes and images) that make poetry a fertile space in which to encounter, reckon with and make strange the dissonance between the real and the hyperreal.

Engaging with displaced metaphors through poetry

Our creative work in this project sought to use poetry to stage encounters between two iterations or referents of a word or experience – one anterior to the other – as a means of prising open for reappraisal and reanimation the charged space of difference and distance which animates not only metaphor but lived encounters with all representation, and which simulation can be seen to collapse. Several poems, for instance, resulted from Ruby's exploration of IT terminology, which in the frame of poetry were permitted to suggest multiple meanings at once. The tone that emerged was often ironically playful, as in the following examples, which present as poetry real factoids pertaining to computer systems and internet operations, by utilising poetic lineation and enjambment:

> A null character
> is one whose bits are set
> to zero, sometimes used
> as a space filler
>
> Only when a visitor is absent
> from an address for twenty-four
> hours does that impression
> count as unique

These small poems attempt to emphasise and extend multiple registers of meaning inhering within words such as 'null character,' and 'address,' by rendering the narrative, spatial, and/or grammatical context in which they appear indeterminate. In the functional flow of ordinary discourse, the multiple possible iterations of such words are not generally permitted to suggest themselves together at once, as the context in which they appear is already presumed, rather than in question, giving the speaker/writer/reader less cause to pause, and rendering their meanings self-evident. In the words and phrasings of the poems, the disparate meanings of words pertaining to both concrete and virtual contexts are permitted to co-mingle and inhabit the same ambivalent space, making each other strange. Terms from the vocabulary of computer programming colour a code-like instructional voice, which conjure not only images of computer programming and digital browsing, but also seem to speak ominously to the fate of 'null' or perhaps vacuous people, and travellers who are not adequately absent.

Other attempts yielded a more mournful tone, as in the following example, emerging from a vivid photographic screensaver on Ruby's computer:

> Autumn forest
> of a single day
> unblinking on
> my home screen

This poem attempts to briefly conjure the tension between the immediacy of a living, breathing forest, and a pixelated simulation of that forest, frozen via a camera's lens on 'a single day' and held indefinitely as a screensaver's digital mirage. Ultimately, perhaps these and other poems we wrote testify to the ways in which, increasingly, to speak of separation between the real and the virtual, the material and the digital, is to speak of an illusion, a postmodern nostalgia, of which more will be said shortly.

It is unsurprising that poetry presented a productive medium through which to explore these intersections of the material and the virtual, in language and experience. This is especially true considering that the operations of metaphor emerged as our focus in this technological context – its capacity to shift over time and thus reflect the living evolution of language, to become tired, or to be reanimated and regain its capacity to surprise via an image. It is via poetic language, of course, that the potential of metaphor as a trope and as a mode of sensory encounter is most fully available. More broadly, poetry offered a means of approaching questions concerning virtual language and experience across the registers of creative practice, open reading, and more critical self-reflexive reading, leading us to unexpected findings by foregrounding sensory encounter and felt experience. Poetry also offered a means to trouble questions of language and experience from within its bounded aesthetic space, in which language is released from the endpoint of functional reference, wherein meanings and associations otherwise taken for granted can be re-envisioned, abstracted, defamiliarised and thus made possible to experience and appraise with greater immediacy.

Poetry offers these possibilities due to the formal qualities which traditionally separate it from prose, and which can be broadly categorised as forms of poetic artifice. Poetic artifice encompasses a constellation of methods through which to concentrate multiple and simultaneous levels of meaning and allusion, and visual, aural and imagistic effects, in addition to its semantic content (Castile 2012: 89). The trope of metaphor is one of many forms of poetic artifice, including synecdoche, simile, prosody, lineation, and figuration, to name a few. Such devices mobilise poetry to render the familiar strange, trigger sensory

response on the level of the body in the manner of an encounter, and to evoke a sense of palpable immediacy on the page in response to phenomena both abstract and concrete (via allegory and figuration, for instance). The possibility of producing such effects renders poetry an ideal medium through which to encounter and question meanings, functions, and experiences which are commonly taken at face value. The entanglement of digital modes of communication and experience with routine daily existence (at least in the technologically privileged West) is such that it is easy to no longer register the relative newness, initial strangeness, and transformative properties of developments like Skype, cloud storage, YouTube and Twitter. In the same way, it seems that it doesn't take long before the new application of a word to describe some digital entity, activity or function is taken for granted, a grammatical commonplace, earlier meanings readily displaced in new yet quickly familiar contexts.

In the above poems, various words are invoked whose meanings change radically depending on whether the context in which they are used is digital or analogue (or 'real world'). In their resistance to being framed unambiguously within one of these contexts to the exclusion of the other, the multiple meanings of words like 'visitor,' 'address,' and 'home screen' are suggested simultaneously. The divergent yet contiguous aspects of multiple associations collide: 'visitor' as a living, speaking, embodied guest or traveller; 'visitor' as an anonymous register of hits to a webpage, recorded in code.

Metaphor in poetic language: 'the surprise of discovery'

We have not sought to fix or repair meanings in words, but to use our writing as a 'field of play' (Richardson & St Pierre 2008: 489) in which we could trouble the disjunction between tenor and vehicle in metaphor, specifically located in the space between the 'real' and 'virtual,' apprehended on both a sensory and semantic level. Etymologically, the word 'metaphor' itself connotes this traversal of semantic and psychic space: *meta-* meaning 'over, across', and *pherein*, meaning 'to carry, bear' [1]. As established by thinkers such as IA Richards (1965), and Lakoff and Johnson (1980), we recognise that metaphor is pervasive in all language. As Richards asserts, 'most sentences in free or fluid discourse turn out to be metaphoric. Literal language is rare outside of the central parts of the sciences' (Richards 1965: 120).

In figuring the operations of metaphor distinctly within poetry, to understand its potential in practice-led poetic inquiries such as our own, we turned to the work of Paul Ricouer. Ricoeur investigates the possibility of what he calls 'a psycholinguistics of imaginative illusion' (Ricoeur 1994: 207) in relation to metaphor. He conceives of such a theory as a means of conceptualising the operations of metaphor which encompass 'the properly sensual aspect of the image' (1994: 207) in a way that transgresses the bounds of traditional semantic theories. Engaging with the work of Marcus B Hester (1967), Ricoeur discusses several factors relevant to understanding metaphor as a phenomenon which mobilises and is mobilised by a mental image in the mind of the person apprehending it, or as he writes, 'its power to "set before the eyes,"' thereby referencing Aristotle (1994: 207). Ricoeur, following Hester, acknowledges that questions pertaining to the affective reception of metaphor of course relate to corresponding considerations in the field of poetic language studies more broadly, which (unlike semantic studies of the grammar of metaphor) foreground 'the sensible, sensorial, even sensual aspect of poetic language' (208). These are identified as the 'fusion' between meaning or sense and the senses' in poetic language, and its consequent quality of 'density,' for language

to be rendered 'stuff' in its ability to surpass a merely referential function, a means to the end of making-sense; an artefact 'closed in on itself' (209). As Ricoeur states, '[i]n poetic language, the sign is looked at, not through' (209). As a result of these qualities, poetic language in its transgression of referential function is capable of conveying 'fictional experience,' or a 'virtuality of experience,' or what could also be termed as the evocation of felt life through the conduit of poetic language.

Ricoeur goes on to discuss metaphor and iconicity in relation to these points, likening the 'verbal icon' (209) to the traditional painted icons of Byzantium in which the sacred figures represented were believed to literally animate the object itself, in a mystical convergence of sign and referent. Iconicity in poetic language, through metaphor and other tropes, mirrors in a less literal way this congruence, or as Ricoeur writes, 'this fusion of sense and the sensible,' which allows for the transmission (in reading and in the writing-act) of 'an experience that is completely immanent to it' in the closed circuit of poetic language (209).

Engaging further with Hester, Ricoeur foregrounds the obvious importance of the act of reading itself in the production of images and meaning arising from verbal icons, noting Hester's comparison of reading with Husserl's concept of the 'epoché.' (209) The latter concept as described by Ricoeur denotes a 'restor[ation] [of] the original claim of all the data by suspending any position with respect to natural reality' (209). Ricoeur suggests that the act of reading itself enacts a comparable 'suspension of all reality' and, quoting Hester, '"an active openness to the text"' (131, 210). The 'openness' and 'suspension' which characterise the act of reading a poetic text, and the openness of the poetic text itself in its transgression of fixed or foreclosed meaning, allow poetic language to enact its chief function of evoking images, released from the bounds of referential function and so free to take on unlimited meanings, including those divorced from traditional or literal referents, allowing for abstract, multiple, and simultaneous associations and images (Ricoeur 210). What draws together the dimensions of the semantic and the sensuous in the process of reading poetic language, Ricoeur suggests, is the 'experience-act' (213) of 'seeing-as', a term derived from Wittgenstein and extended by Hester. This term describes the way in which the tenor and vehicle in a metaphor converge in the form of an image in the reader's mind, seeing the vehicle as the tenor, in a palpable manifestation of at once their similarity and difference. The strangeness and power of 'seeing-as' is derived from the ability of the successful metaphorical image to preserve and foreground the heterogeneousness of the tenor and vehicle even as it evokes with sensory immediacy the similarities that fuse them. In the best cases, this moment of 'seeing-as' evokes 'the surprise of discovery' (Ricoeur 213).

This 'surprise of discovery' is what we sought to spark in our poems, the surprise that is lost when a metaphor's comparative context, the way in which it allows for the 'understanding [of] one thing in terms of another' (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 5) becomes forgotten over time. Yet as C suggests of the well-known dead metaphor 'leg of a table': 'We call it dead but it comes to life very readily' (Ricoeur 1965: 117). This 'bringing to life' of words bearing multiple disparate resonances, yet which are routinely used as functional metaphors devoid of the frisson of surprise, was our aim in the short poems that we each wrote during this shared inquiry. We hoped to draw out these competing resonances and registers of meaning, for reappraisal, reanimation and reattribution, in the democratic space of poetry where these meanings could co-exist and bifurcate in strangeness. One attempt at this occurs in Lucinda's poem, 'desktop', in which the titular phrase is used as a kind of signal through which to draw various competing associations, analogue and digital, apparent to the author collected under that sign. In this poem, the sensuous tactility of an

old-style school desktop, and what it might contain, is animated in a vivid collision of imagery, which celebrates the singularity of material objects and their existence as phenomena marked by time and lived experience:

> desktop
> is a word
> slammed shut
> open it
> and you will find
> a dusty leather map
> fingerprint dappled
> teardrop splattered
> monocle-ringed by me
> in my cups
> and starred with sequins
> from a Vegas costume
> I should sew
> a burnished timber rim
> and a fine brass plaque
> seminary-screwed
> manilla folders with
> pillow slip corners
> the scalpel Leonardo
> sketched on flesh
> point secured
> in a blob of putty
> a kimono sleeve
> of white petals
> under a stick crammed
> jam jar
> a lamp that pools
> hot amber light
> a soldering iron for
> melting lead
> pencil shavings from
> Californian Redwoods
> a soldier lying
> face down
> tiny cows, belted Galloways
> a broken chair, dolls-house made
> a cold golden crane
> with scissor beak
> oily pastel smears
> mauve and green
> Degas wiped his fingers there
> a battery, all emerald crusted
> and last
> a lump of clay
> a child
> has pressed into
> a lily pad
> desk top
> take out the space
> and all this feels
> like nothing
> but a window. (McKnight 2016)

In the associative leaps of the above poem, the various objects contained under the desktop summon disparate, distant realities: 'the scalpel Leonardo/ sketched on flesh'; 'pencil shavings from/ Californian Redwoods/ a soldier lying/ face down/ tiny cows, belted Galloways'. In this way, the desktop of the poem is made to cross index the world, until the elegiac coda which faces the prospect of another 'desk top', in which such richness is diminished: 'desk top/ take out the space/ and all this feels/ like nothing/ but a window'. The later application of this word as a sign for a sign – the metaphorical desk top of the computer screen, with its virtual contents which can only be touched at a remove through the clicking of a keyboard – is presented as ineffably secondary, impoverished, diminished in comparison to the more immediate incarnations preceding it in the poem. As a result, the poem appears to be underscoring, and reaching after, the loss of the primacy of these things, arguably diminished or superseded by the simulated desktop and the hyperreality it portends. This apprehension of, and preoccupation with a loss related to the encroachment of the virtual in lived experience, of which its impact on language is one sign, emerged in many of our poems. The remaining discussion attempts to examine this sense of loss further, while considering also the generative potential of poetic engagements with technological language.

Longing for the real

The proliferation of displaced metaphors in computer speak occurs at a pace commensurate to the need of technology to find ways of conceptualising the constant onslaught of new hardware, software, actions, and processes. In doing so, it appropriates words already in use, lends them an entirely new digital context, and as such at once creates and constricts metaphor.

The IT lexicon creates metaphor by casting an extant word, such as 'cloud' as the metaphorical vehicle through which to connote the meaning of a virtual data storage repository (the metaphorical tenor). Yet this metaphorical construction remains haunted by the apparition of the originary material referent of the word 'cloud'. In being appropriated from extant words with pre-existing image-associations/ 'real world referents', digital vehicles such as 'cloud' are vehicles twice-removed. Additionally, the functional nature of digital metaphors is such that these originary associations are generally left to lurk beneath the surface of the functional metaphorical meaning-circuit, rather than being properly felt or interrogated. In blithe, everyday references to the virtual 'cloud', the idea of the 'real' cloud is seemingly by default cannibalised and negated by, and conflated with, that word's most recent derivation – the hyperreal cloud; the simulated file-storage cloud. Because of the functional frame of reference in which digital metaphors such as 'cloud' are created and used, the dissonance between vehicle and tenor (between 'cloud' and virtual storage) which might spark Ricoeur's 'surprise of discovery' is notably absent, bypassed in the aim of functional reference. We refer to such digital metaphors as displaced rather than dead, because they were never 'living' in the first place. We propose that the opportunity offered by poetry in view of such digital metaphors is one through which to invite surprise and discovery by looking for what it is they hide, which we suggest is a fertile source of critique about not only how changing realities can alter language, but how language can construct and re-construct reality in particular ways.

In seeking, through poetry, to stage reanimating encounters between digital metaphors and the antecedent associations and meanings which these metaphors appropriate and displace, we enacted a process which could also be conceived, via Baudrillard, as a kind of seduction. Writing about seduction as a

means of comprehending our fascination for certain images, Baudrillard suggests that '[such a seduction's] sole strategy is to be-there/not-there, and thereby produce a sort of flickering, a hypnotic mechanism that crystallises attention outside all concern with meaning' (Baudrillard 1990: 85). In the process of drawing out and cross-indexing displaced metaphors within poetry, we attempted to seduce ourselves and each other as readers, but also language itself, in prising open and troubling the space between meanings and experiences which are real and virtual, physical and immaterial, poetic and utilitarian. The oscillation which occurs between these meanings in many of our poems underlines the way that poetry allows multiple disparate meanings to be present at once within the same space. We recognised the way that poetry's ability to encompass a multiplicity of meanings permits a cross-referencing of signification in reading, which can incite new meanings and associations which (at best) recast aspects of the everyday familiar as radically strange, alive, and correspondent.

In contemplating, through writing poetry, the disjunctions between digital metaphors and the pre-existing meanings they appropriate and displace, we also apprehended and explored a sense of loss and longing connected to a perceived loss of the 'real' in Baudrillard's sense. This loss is what Baudrillard's hyperreal enacts, in its 'generation by models of a real without origin or reality' (1994: 1). What hyperreal simulation displaces is the earthy, tangible, tactile materiality which words originally referred to and evoked, and which is reduced when co-opted by the virtual. In this way, we traced a melancholic longing for a perceived original experience, anterior to its mediation or displacement by virtual representation and communication. This longing for a lost or displaced 'original' reality or referent, which accords on the level of language with the desire for congruence between signifier and signified, or 'word and world' (Steiner 1991: 93), can also be understood through Susan Stewart's conception of nostalgia. For Stewart, '[n]ostalgia is a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience' (Stewart 2007: 23). In this way, we could perceive our desire to somehow account for or restore the precedence of the 'real' over the virtual as a romantic longing for longing itself, a prelapsarian ideal that never was.

Poetry presented an ideal space in which to trouble such feelings, and to invite encounter between the palimpsest-like meanings – old and new, with referents both 'real' and 'virtual' – of words such as 'desktop', 'icon', and 'column'. Most of our poems stage a kind of oscillation between the 'original' meanings of such words and more recent or emergent meanings, prising open a space in which multiple resonances can be considered at once, playing with metaphor, allegory, puns, and visual space. In this sphere, variously elegiac and ironic, the original meanings resonated more deeply for seeming ghostly, in their increasing pervasion by virtual contexts.

In Owen's playful 'displace', it is ostensibly the physical immediacy of a wooden 'desk top' being sanded, an apparently real 'mouse/ under the door', a literal 'hard drive home,' and a spoken password of the boy-scout kind uttered by one live body to another which are foregrounded, even as the virtual metaphoric meanings of these words haunt and are haunted by these apparitions of the 'real':

displace

another hour sanding –
will it ever be finished?
desk top

a hand wrapped up
it feels like forever
the web

breaking the rolling pin
mouse
under the door

the net flashes –
ten cents
per cabbage white

two more
windows gone
garage football

365 miles,
game abandoned . . .
the hard drive home

crawling in
to hedge camp –
what's the password?

In Ruby's 'Icons', a semantic and visual equation is drawn between two interpretations of the same word. This equation, between a singular, physical painting on larchwood, and a constellation of stylised virtual images repeated on millions of screens, is open-ended, and is presented in two columns which can be read vertically and separately, or horizontally as a whole:

Icons

a dark church in lighted windows
shelters a painting foxes and flags
on a panel of long-dead speakers and notes of
larch music
which knows the stillness patient in silence
holds the weight poised for opening brazen
weighs the hours
of centuries since echoes
its making ever open
to the days describing the singular thing
dimming robes this open book
eyes scarlet and gold that particular clock
the hope of congruence unmoored
between image and thing now figures
witness in a shared dream
to witness ever removed from the feel
of

open
earth

Throughout our poems, such as 'desktop' and 'Icons,' such a mourning of 'the inauthenticity' of virtual forms, which are immaterial and multiple, can often be traced, in parallel to a longing for the material and singular 'origins' of these interactions – the 'real' desk top, icon, and window, which are not (as suggested at the end of 'Icons') 'removed from the feel of/earth'. Such a response accords with Stewart's observation that:

> The inability of the sign to "capture" its signified, of narrative to be one with its object, *and of the genres of mechanical reproduction to approximate the time of face-to-face communication* leads to a generalized desire for origin, for nature, and for unmediated experience that is at work in nostalgic longing. (Stewart 2007: 23-4, emphasis ours)

Here, Stewart articulates the way in which the structure of language itself mirrors and underwrites the disjunction or rift between mechanised or virtualised, and 'face to face' experience. Just as the existence and meaning of the linguistic sign depends on 'the absence of its animating presence' (Hart 2000: 12), so do digital simulacra like the Java coffee cup icon or IT coinages like 'mouse' and 'cloud' draw their meaning from, and in the absence of, their precursory referents which precede the digital world. Our experience of using a mouse or a cloud storage system is consequently inherently structured by the absence and negation of these precursory phenomena. Moreover, the medium of poetry could be seen to at once mirror and render more palpable the sense of disconnect between sign and signified in these digital experiences. If, to echo Blanchot, poetic language already enacts a kind of double negation – a making-absent of the referent additional to that of everyday language as suggested above by Stewart – then our summoning of words whose ancestral meanings are in the process of being negated in reality perhaps throws this process into further relief.

For Blanchot, the negation that takes place on the level of literary language is additional to the functional negation by which everyday language is structured. In the case of the latter, the meaning of the signified is delivered via the disappearance or effacement of the real-word referent or 'thing', and well as of the signifier itself (the word, written or spoken). In 'Literature and the Right to Death' (1981), Blanchot articulates how the significatory processes which occur via the medium of literary language, namely poetry, take this negation further while also subverting it. In this second movement of negation, it is the referent and its signified or concept which are negated, while the signifier or word is foregrounded. In this way, Blanchot suggests that literary language 'observes that the word cat is not only the nonexistence of the cat, but the nonexistence made *word*, that is, a completely determined and objective reality' (Blanchot 1981: 44). This articulation corresponds to Ricouer's understanding of the materiality which poetry allows words to take on, and the ways in which poetry renders metaphor 'palpable'.

Creative possibility

Despite the fact that our poems more often suggest melancholy than mobilisation or celebration in the context of virtual experience, there is paradox in the way we enact enablement even as we lament its loss, by putting these displaced metaphors to work in our poetry. Even if melancholy sounds the strongest note, along with weary resignation, for example to 'the hard drive home', there is also a sense of potential and possibility, as in the opening of 'Icons':

> In the window glowing
> these signs hanging
> the fox the folder the sheet
> of paper the flag the note
> of music the speaker
> waiting to be opened brazen

echoes
of the real.

This poem seems to speak of capacity; these icons anticipate us. Simultaneously passive and agentive, they at once obey and transgress. They are waiting, and yet they are bold, seeming to invite encounter. The poem attempts to open a space where the real and virtual collide, a space in which the tensions between 'real world' metaphors and digital metaphors can play out and be felt. The poem also visually depicts this space, with two columns of text, one about religious icons, on the left, and the other quoted above, on the right, so that we move from what is given, or familiar, to what is new (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006) and then back and forth. What is gold, what is scarlet, what glows, what is powerful, what waits and watches in 'the hope of congruence' becomes blurred. In this way, the strange distance yet congruity between the image of a living fox and that of the Mozilla Firefox browser icon – or between a smooth, foldable sheet of paper and the disembodied clickable image of a document icon on a computer desk top – might be registered by the reader with fresh feeling. These images of the 'real' fox and the 'real' sheet of paper are, after all, the vehicles which animate the Firefox icon and the document icon, which make us associate a certain meaning with their stylised forms – albeit for prosaic and functional ends. Having been created for functional (rather than poetic) intentions, these are not metaphors in a real sense, not metaphors that ever really 'lived' by way of an originating spark of strange dissonance and similarity, allowing for Ricoeur's 'surprise of discovery' (1994: 213). Neither are they icons in the Byzantine sense of congruence between sign and referent, although as Ricoeur notes, the aesthetic frame of poetry can confer iconicity to language, a sense of convergence between form and content in the reader's experience (1994: 209). Encountering these 'displaced metaphors' within the space of poetry allows us to draw out the strangeness of living metaphor, to discover in them what is surprising, while also considering what the disjunction between the 'real' and 'virtual' signifies on the level of language and the body. The poem's attempt to open or suspend rather than to foreclose the referential function of its signifiers occurs by way of poetry's capacity to destabilise and defamiliarise its signifiers, so that images and associations are released from the fixed contexts of everyday reality which prevent them from being freshly encountered and seen. In such poems we attempted to offer a frame in which, to reference Ricoeur, 'the sign is looked at, not through' (1994: 209).

A similar sense of mobilisation and possibility allowed for by our poetic engagements with displaced metaphors underpins Lucinda's previously discussed poem, 'desktop'. The final words of the poem, 'all this feels/ like nothing/ but a window', frame the preceding catalogue of non-digital associations of 'desktop' in mournful comparison to the virtual desktop, which apparently bears none of the material richness of the preceding denotations. As the sign under which the multiple associations of the word is placed, the digital 'desktop' invoked at the close of the poem appears at once to not only proceed but to precede these non-digital applications of the same word, just as Baudrillard's 'map precedes the territory' (1990: 2). In this way, the poem's own structure suggests the totalising potential of digital signs, the dystopic potential of Baudrillian hyperreality in which referentials are 'liquidated' by their simulations (1990: 2), and a sign of a sign becomes the major referent in the chain of signification. Yet however ambivalent or mournful the poem's representation of the virtual desktop seems, paradoxically it is in fact the idea of the virtual desktop which is positioned as the trigger for the poem's generation. The comparative space of the poem, which invites the free cross-association of signifiers, allows for a fruitful and unbounded conversation between digital and non-digital frames of linguistic reference and experience.

As these examples suggest, the affirmative possibilities poetry offers through its open-ended space for felt encounter with, and reappraisal of, the impacts of digital technology on language and experience contradict the misgivings with which we approached this inquiry.

Conclusion

We apprehended something spectral and dystopian about the prevalence of digital metaphor in our everyday, technologically privileged lives, colonising our language while displacing or threatening to render less immediate other meanings rooted in the real, material world. This apprehension is tied to the way such metaphors are portents of Baudrillard's hyperreal, in which reality becomes indistinguishable from its simulation; in which signs of the real become the real (1994: 2). At the same time, the process of exploring these metaphors via poetry caused us to recognise the ambivalence and paradox that troubles attempts to characterise the real and the virtual, or the material and immaterial as opposing sides of a binary, a subject to which we could dedicate a separate paper [2].

By inquiring into the digitisation of language via poetry, we have attempted to open a space through which to consider not only how emergent digital experience is transforming language but how language perpetually resists being totalised by any fixed frame of reference. In the space of poetry, where the agency of language is permitted free reign to suggest multiple simultaneous associations and to act on the reader's body, the otherwise functional metaphors of IT are permitted to become strange. In poetry, digital metaphors such as 'desktop' and 'icon' can collude with the meanings they customarily displace, animating what was negated and being animated themselves, to elicit 'the surprise of discovery' and at the same time, to gain the immediacy and materiality of non-reference, where the word is 'looked at, not through', which their functional use outside poetry precludes.

Ultimately, the displacement of earlier meanings enacted by such digital metaphors is not about stasis, but change. Freed of their relations to real world objects, these metaphors are open to reinvention and interpretation. Staging our inquiry through poetry served to move us beyond a binary of live and dead metaphors, and into a space where agency is more complicated, while affirming the generative potential of poetic engagements with digitisation. As an account of a practice-led inquiry which remains ongoing and contingent, we offer our own experience and critical dialogue (alongside examples of our research poems) to the growing body of creative-critical engagements occurring at the nexus between digital technologies and poetic language, in the hope it might be of interest to other practice-led researchers. Perhaps more than anything else, our poetic inquiry has served to underline the ways in which 'the brilliant picture' which Emerson notes was once alive in even 'the deadest word', is never truly foreclosed by that word's ongoing 'secondary use' as a familiar trope. Rather, the very process of mourning the dead or displaced metaphor in poetry can serve to recall and transform the animating image that once made it strange.

Notes

[1] For this insight we thank our anonymous referee. return to text

[2] As the expanding discourses of posthumanism and new materialism fruitfully suggest, the increasingly messy, interconnected, and interdependent relationships of humans to other-than-human life forms and forms of matter destabilise such distinctions, as does the difficulty of quantifying or delimiting what constitutes matter and embodiment. return to text

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