Stochastic Acts: the search string as poetry

Mark Young

Reality, my reality, is a set of alternate realities. As are your realities. & yet, even if we gathered up, created a set of, all the sets of alternate realities in the world, it would never be complete because a set cannot contain itself. So, therefore, another set, & then another, & another. Infinite Chinese boxes if you like. Kurt Gödel's Incompleteness theorem in action. Zeno's paradox.

What do I mean by alternate realities? Think about the news channels on cable TV. Fox, Sky, CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera, ABC, TVNZ. Think about their takes on events. Think how differently, depending on their bias, they present the same story. Flick across them & it's sometime difficult to realize it's the same story they're presenting. The Libyan uprising as seen by Libyan State TV, by other Arab States, by the various voices of Western democrazy. Think about those who aren't given a chance to see it.

Think about how stories are often displayed. Concurrently. Thumbnails on the screen, maybe half a dozen. Add a text box with another story. Add a subscript tickertape parade that scrolls six word summations of these & other stories across the bottom of the screen. So much information presented to us in a single sight bite that it seems impossible we could process it all at once. & yet we do. We might not make sense of it, but at the very least we make a sense out of it.

Let's sidestep for a moment, backstep 50 years. "Take a page of text & trace a median line vertically & horizontally. You now have four blocks of text: 1, 2, 3, and 4. Now cut along the lines & put block 4 alongside block 1, block 3 alongside block 2. Read the rearranged page." William S. Burroughs. & 40 years before that, Tristan Tzara cutting up newspapers, putting the pieces in a hat, then drawing them out at random. & 40 years before that, Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. & just how long has collage been around?

Now back to the multi-layered screen. Think about how much contemporary information is being captured & kept, & how much is added to the storehouse every day. Think how much of the past is being digitized to augment the contemporary. Consider the speed with which new content is scavenged & made available. I publish a post on one of my blogs: within a minute, a link to that post can be found on Google.

Now think about how we access all this information. If we're searching to find all articles related to keywords in a particular area of scientific activity, we might use a database like Scopus, but they tend to be resticted in both content & access. Most of the time we'll turn to Google or Yahoo or Bing, those non-discriminatory, non-sequential, repetitious search engines, corrupted by advertising, misspellings, deliberate placements, & with porn around every corner.

The search engine is a powerful tool for finding news or flights or hotel rooms, for doing research or seeing how your house is presented to the world. It runs the gamut from gene banks to genealogy & definitions of genuflection. It's also a powerful tool for generating poetry.

The simplest form of Google poem is the list poem, the output of a search for a single word or phrase. An extract from kari edwards' *get*:

> get lucky
> get more ass than a toilet seat
> get mud for your turtle
> get naked
> get off
> get off at Redfern

or from my *Energy*, which includes a bit of substitution:

> Energy is flirting with making twice-divorced metrosexual wannabe Rudy Giuliani its presidential nominee.
>
> Energy appears on the Miles Davis / Gil Evans album *Sketches of Spain*.
>
> Energy gained weight following a growing tallness.
>
> Energy lacks a confirmation popup.

The next progression again makes use of a single search term, but this time the poem is shaped rather than being left as a list, even though that's what its component parts started out as.

> **sonnet**
>
> Disk space is fundament-
> ally a dialectical construct,
> a grown-up version of a
> child's sweater, a humorous
> parody of the ultimate
> warrior. No wonder her
> red box of memories rejects
> renaissance ideas, compares
>
> them to a summer's day as
> it transmits data in packets
> of bytes, trying to decide
> between a life on the streets
> & a career in theater. Can a
> videogame be like a poem?

That the title & form reflect the search term is a bit of self-indulgent overkill, but the poem itself uses two techniques that play an important part in what I am going on to talk about. The first is parataxis, the juxtaposition of phrases or dissimilar images or fragments that have no clear connection with one another. The second technique is something I'll call varietal or news-channel parataxis, seeking out phrases that have the potential to create an alternate reality through their juxtaposition .

Raising mangoes in today's
climate is probably
aviation's biggest challenge.

So far we've dealt with the output of a single search term. Let's move on, to talk about multiple search strings & a method of handling them, of turning them into poetry. It's what I describe as a stochastic process.

First off, what is a stochastic process? In probability theory, a stochastic process, sometimes called a random process, is the counterpart to a deterministic process. In a deterministic system, each successive stage can be predicted — determined — with precision. Aging is an obvious example: if today is your twentieth birthday, then tomorrow you'll be twenty years & one day old.

In a stochastic process, instead of dealing with only one possible reality of how the process might evolve under time, there is some indeterminacy in its future evolution. This means that even if the initial condition (or starting point) is known, there are several, sometimes many, possibilities for the next step on the path the process takes, though some paths will have a higher probability than others. Weather in the dry season, the stock market in a time of economic stability.

In poetry, the output of the initial search string should be treated as the entrance to a garden of forking paths.

Take a couple of words, Google them, search the initial page for a sentence, a phrase, a few words, even a single word, that catches the eye. Copy & paste the results. It's sometimes a good idea to repeat this on this first screen in order to provide a slightly wider range for the next search.

Pick a couple of words from the results. Google them & repeat the procedure. Repeat until there's most of a page of extracts to build from. Occasionally the search may start looping, especially if software or gaming or scientific words or products become incorporated. Occasionally the search may end up in a desert. In those cases, go back & pick another couple of words.

Here's a small one I prepared earlier. I've only included the search terms I started with, because, in retrospect, I can't remember or work out what I used after those.

trades hall

a national treasure and a symbol of the aspirations of the
Wheelchair access is available

treasure wheelchair

calamari and scallop dishes

dish scallop

and bearing no maker's mark

he was trying to find the door handle
Perl hashes are case sensitive
Carve out vital personal time
Negotiations on the reunification of Cyprus have been going well
so-called confidence-building gesture to jumpstart
a metabolically matched diet plan

> *geographies*: Nicosia
>
> Negotiations have been
> going well. Gift of a
> door handle. Confidence-
> building. Jumpstarts the
> metabolically matched
> diet plan of calamari
> & scallop dishes. Aspi-
> rational. National
> treasure. Bears no
> maker's mark. Wheelchair
> access is now available.

My biography notes that I started writing poetry when I was 17. What it omits is that I'd been trying to write science fiction for, probably, five years before that. I grew up on science fiction. It helped shape my political views. It influenced my writing style. &, as it shifted from possible futures to alternative presents—& renamed itself specul-ative, rather than science, fiction—it assisted my ability to conceptualize.

I describe a number of pieces I have written since coming back to poetry as *ficciones*, a term I've usurped from Jorge Luis Borges. (& as an aside, a couple of pieces of trivia. The first story by Borges to be published in English, *The Garden of Forking Paths*, appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, & William S. Burroughs' first novel *Junkie* was brought out by Ace Books, who were the leading publishers of SF & the first to publish Samuel Delany's novels.) These *ficciones* are historically accurate. What I've done is fill in some of the holes, to present alternative pasts, all written in the third person.

There are also a number of similar poems, some of which date back prior to my return, in which the persona of the I who cannot temporally be me turns up, mixing it with Frank O'Hara or Rimbaud amongst others. Again *ficciones*, but, once again, I'm working from the outside in.

A Philosophy of *Ficciones*
for Thomas Fink

The history of
history is one

of spaces, some
empty, some filled,

but every one ready
to be re-written.

I also consider many of the stochastic poems to be *ficciones*, but this time, with the exception of *Genji Monogatari*, written from the inside out. Instead of using Google as a reference source, I have used it as the source itself, generating both irritant grains of sand & the means to coat them— though one is never quite sure which is which— &, through assemblage, attempting to create from those fragments of reality, be they fact, fiction or factoid, a set of reconstituted realities or, perhaps, revisioned realities.

The Festival of the Cherry Blossoms

The relativity principle
holds only inso-
far as the reduction
in biodiversity in the
rice paddies can be
attributed to the over-
use of agricultural
chemicals. Otherwise
time is compressed to
a single point in space,
can no longer tell us how
the big bang gave rise
to the universe as we
used to know it. The
longbow moon is met
by the silence of crickets

> & frogs, provokes the
> rhetorical koan: do
> flowers blossom when
> no-one is there to see
> or smell them? *I have*
> *drawn* Spring *from the*
> *Urushi box,* said Genji.

Genji was written from both directions, taking the Lady Murasaki's original novel as the space to be filled, but, at the same time, building a sequence of stochastic poems as if the original was being written now. Each poem in *Genji* contains a sliver of text from, & attempts to remain true to, the corresponding chapter.

The sliver of text is a technique I'm also using in the series of *A line from . . .* poems I've been working on for the last few years, but in these poems there is no attempt to remain true to the source or nature of the original quote. Nor do my *geographies* necessarily have anything to do with the place they're named after. Random names— Google Maps have a lot to answer for—random quotes, random extracts, put together in what I hope is a poetic fashion, to point out the inherent weirdness & contradictory nature of the eco- & info-capitalist world we're living in, a world where so little makes sense that we might as well be living somewhere else altogether.

It's virtual bricolage. It's recycle heaven. Nothing is wasted. What's not used from one collation gets put into another, to be used later. & if that doesn't work, then there's always the

Leftovers

> A tiny bird sits looking up at the cycle
> next to a box finished in red baked
> enamel with large lettering left by a
> mourner. The accompanying folded
> sheet is positioned in a reclining chair
> about ten feet away from the model. Very
> animistic. Women in another epoch
> taken out of that down-cycle environment
> would have remained awake with their
> eyes closed indulging in wonted sorrow
> despite the successful seduction. But why
> is the phone on fire? Maybe was once
> a wobbly table & four chairs gifted by
> an aunt. Now a temporary mirror
> that matches her well-chosen outfit
> perfectly. He treated her like a normal
> human being. This does not indicate a
> relationship. Merely an obscure awareness
> of the quiet, dark shades, the stone under
> foot, the master of unfinished business.

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