

Ian's 575s by Lawrence Upton

The name "Ian" was suggested by my partner's son as a way of indicating a third or other mind apparently created by the writing process I employed. It could have been any name, I suppose; but he chose "Ian".

Ian was a program I wrote in a dialect of Logo.

It arose from an assessed project given to me as a post-grad student at Kings College, London in 1988. The project itself was to write a program which generated rhymed verse.

One had to achieve specific demands, which did not include aesthetic quality, although that was hardly forbidden, but one might add additional features.

I wrote a separate system, additional to my required work, so that the first item on the menu was a program which met the assignment's criteria while the second item on the menu was a similarly constructed but more complex program to write haiku.

In this case, a haiku was deemed to be a verse of three lines with lines 1 and 3 having 5 syllables and line 2 having 7 syllables.

Each word known to the program was attributed a part of speech and a number of syllables.

Each line in anything it wrote was constructed on a random selection from a set of syntactical structures. Words were chosen by random selection from vocabularies for each part of speech. Lines which added up to syllable counts other than 5 or 7, as appropriate, were discarded.

Very mechanistic; but, because I controlled the vocabularies, it did not look like that because I still had a writerly influence over it. Or, rather, it did not look like that when I had edited the output.

Left to itself, the program would produce hundreds of verses in an instant; and that was unmanageable. When I added a process to put on screen one verse at a time, and with the ability to save or discard, the output was transformed in its usability.

However, I never did make much of a start at mechanising the processes by which I evaluated a poem after!

My primary interest, as an artist rather than as a student, was in making poetry by whatever means came to hand. I had written poetry for years. I had produced it by cut up. I had found it. I had extemporised it. I had built up layers of voice in studios. And so on. Now, I was mechanising one process, to some extent, but – of necessity given my programming methodology – combining that with the predetermination of the vocabulary it would use.

It was extremely interesting work to put together vocabularies and sentence structures; and I learned a lot.

The mechanisation seemingly took me out of further decision-making until output stage and showed me all the possible combinations of those words, within the

syntactical rules I had set, rather than letting me impose my judgment. Of course, I had chosen the vocabularies in the first place.

Unsurprisingly, the output was largely rubbish, by my judgement, but it did provide considerable surprises and gave me a sense of that other mind which was yet also my own which had previously been conjured in collaborative writing and in cut up.

It was that extension of expression beyond my own which intrigued me. By “my own (expression)”, I mean what I might write by inclination, an inclination considerably determined by prejudice, habit and convention, what is often called “self-expression”.

Much of that was eliminated by the abstraction of the code-writing process.

Leaving Kings, at the end of my studies, meant losing access to the interpreter, otherwise I might have refined the program repeatedly beyond the few changes that I made after submission of my work for assessment.

As it stood, one had to change the code to add a word or a syntactic structure – to change or add anything – and that was burdensome; otherwise, I might have extended further my learning in that direction.

Instead, I made a completely new program in Pascal which utilised word-processing thesauri for its vocabularies; and, instead of pursuing stylistic experiments as such, I subjected myself – in solo performance – to some of the fierce speed of the micro-processor, selecting words for the text I was writing from a list offered more quickly than I could consider it, though, obviously, it was still greatly slowed down compared to the potential speed.

That occupied me for a while until the poem I was writing with it, **Stone Head**, reached 200 pages; and then I questioned whether there was a need for more of much the same! (I should point out that **Stone Head** was not really planned but rather emerged from running the program.)

By then, I was already experimenting with structuring the output in ways beyond the scope of the program; that is, I was rewriting the output to some extent; and to stay longer with the program seemed rather backward and formalistic. I still see what a computer can do, as it is at present and available to me, as an optional tool set.

The program for **Stone Head** utilised arithmetical progression and I went on to pursue that as an operational procedure rather than worrying about mechanisation as such. That is, I began to lose interest in automating processes in general and concentrating on the effect of being presented with choices of words at speed.

Increasingly, I did a lot of the work of composition in my head: modifying my code as I went; trying to hold multiple progressions in my head rather than machine memory; and inventing rules to cope with the inevitable errors which I made. The errors interested me. The computer had produced what looked like errors but which were, in fact, rock solid responses to what I had told it to do.

That poem was called, amongst other things, **Verbals**¹. (The programs themselves went by their ad hoc file names, limited by file name restrictions at that time.)

Really, all these pursuits, which went on intensely for about four years, were repetitions of what I had learned and practiced at Kings.

Then non-artistic events had their day. My partner ended our relationship, which could be survived; but, instead of following through and going her own way, she acted out the film “The War of the Tates” – I quote her – and that went on for years, occupying much of my time and most of my mental energy. A couple of months later, I was promoted to Head of Academic Computing at my college, which was welcome but an added burden.

I mention these events to make clear that there was something like an earthquake in my life, rather than my having made an aesthetic or procedural decision.

I had, since I left Kings, been studying computer graphics; and I intensified that; whilst, in poetry-making, I went back to paper and pen almost exclusively for some years – though I was word-processing many of the results.

That study led on to other activities too numerous and disparate to go into here.

Stone Head was to have been tried out as a performance script by myself, Alaric Sumner and a third and maybe fourth to be selected. Sumner and I decided that in a long talk in Totnes, Devon at the start of March 2000. By the end of that month, he was dead of a heart attack; and that was the end of that project.

Verbals later became the starting texts for a set of text-sound compositions by myself and John Levack Drever.

Verbal Iteration 3; 19 minutes 30 seconds; *The Hub*, Plymouth as part of *Sonic Arts Network Expo 2007* June 2007.

Verbal Iteration 2; 20 minutes; *Le Divan du Monde*, Paris, as part of *e-poetry 2007* May 2007

Verbal Iteration 1; 30 minutes; *Live Garden Initiative - Artist Review Series: Immersivity, Art, Architecture, Sound and Ecology* on 20th January 2007 at *Goldsmiths College*, London

Which brings me back to **Ian’s 575s**.

I continue to experiment with the form, trying to avoid using the word “haiku” because I find most of the negative responses rather unproductive.

I know that what I am writing, however I do it, is very unlikely to be acceptable as an example of a haiku per se. I know that when I extend the 575 with a 77 couplet, I have got it wrong if one thinks in terms of Japanese verse forms.

It’s not that I don’t understand, although I am happy to admit to some ignorance. But I am playing; and so I prefer the numerical title which declares an element of the game but makes no claim to traditional authenticity.

I have made a few visual 575s as well.

Some of it has been published; more of it has been circulated in *samisdat* and *e-samisdat* form – and I know I am abusing the term “*samisdat*”.

¹ *Writers Forum*; July 2007; ISBN 978 1 84254 107 4

Sometimes, I confuse the 575s that I wrote with the 575s that Ian wrote. I have added punctuation to his words, punctuation being one of those processes that I have found to be impossible to mechanise; but generally I have not rewritten them. They are his, after all.

Lawrence Upton

Scilly, January 2011

Samples of Ian's output

The tree is glowing.
We eat; and carry ideas.
Watery autumn.

Watery autumn.
We eat; and carry ideas.
The tree is glowing.

Army - appearance
of bees, swarming heaviness
devastating all

Small stone, sun's cat's eye,
Watch back the light, reflecting
sight beams from my face.

Is peace so easily obtained?
What might not spring from stillness?

White stones, thin bright eyes,
look back the light, reflecting
sight beams from my face.

You see what the prey must see,
The world's jaw embracing you.

I can't hear the wind
from the auditorium.
My guts enthrall me.

Do not mix up your senses.
Avoid the big performance.

Actors multiply,
alighting on their own hopes,
to tell truth and fly

Actors multiply,
alighting on their small hopes.
Tell me the truth! Fly!

How you'll change as wings open!
How shall we know you up there?

If it is love smiles,
why is the smile sinister?
Complete the gesture.

Laughter moves across her face,
sunlight come off hot Venus.

The tree is burning.
You walk or 'pick up' pictures.
Dry rhododendron.

The field is burning;
they talk and take over books:
concrete characters

The field is burning.
They look and take over looks
with insouciance.

Cataclysmic moon!
We prattle and pick up loves.
The house is dying.

Cold rhododendron.
I sleep; I think of ideas.
The field is dying.

The field should be wild;
I carry or dream ideas.
Cold rhododendron.

Fields could be wild.

They wander to delay hope.
Blood-red nausea.

The trees are burning.
You talk or look at pictures.
Dry rhododendron.

Head's an enclosure,
an abandoned castle wall;
moss grows round the skull.

I have forgotten,
perhaps, if I ever knew,
what I am doing:

shuddering outline shouting
picks itself out of shadow

Shuddering outline shouting
picks itself out of shadow:

a silent movie;
hissing accompaniment;
I sit where I am.

Memories differ

with snowflake precision;
resolution fades.

The halting cold world whites out;
my picture of it stumbles.

The halting cold world whites out;
my picture of it stumbles.

Senses capture noise.
Spaces between teeth fill up
with unwanted words

secretly inside
empty to chance, chaotic
terribly drowsy

several young men
in a deserted village,
hopeless, in one place

the worldly wisdom
savagery isolated
bloodshed horrors

more complications

surprise concealed politely
news with nods and winks

kept interrupting
the train rushed on at full speed
throwing up grey snow

endless passengers
the world isn't big enough
animals jostling

negotiators
in occasional silence
inaudible friends

edge of the village
in the middle of the road
two in the morning

my handkerchief sharp like ice
smell of cut grass and apples

looking round the room
dissolution touching him
there's plenty of room

human achievement

buildings rise like snails eyes

envy's periscopes