Lezing

'Being Dissolved'

Erasure and Destruction in the Digital Text

Yra van Dijk

Zo nu en dan wordt in Frame *een eerder voorgedragen lezing gepubliceerd. Dit keer is de beurt aan Yra van Dijk; haar lezing "Being Dissolved" sprak zij uit tijdens het symposium "Questions autour des poésies numériques/Question on Digital Poetry" gehouden aan Université Paris IV op 7 en 8 februari 2008.*

The new genre of *digital* literary texts[1] has in recent years been studied from different angles. Technical questions have been put as to *how* it is made, literary-historical questions as to in which tradition the genre inscribes itself, et cetera. One of the problems that have been discussed but not yet solved is as to how this poetry can be interpreted.

I feel that before we can begin to approach this issue, we should try and make a model of the possible structures of meaning these texts have. *How* do these intra-medial, moving and often infinite works bring meaning across? I would like to discuss one of the possible mechanisms of meaning: the process of self-erasure in digital texts.

Of course the image of a text that erases itself is hardly new –

1 By which I mean: literary texts that could only be created on a computer and which can only be read from a screen.

it was an important aspect of modernist poetry. We all know examples of fragmented poems, of lines that were suddenly brought to a stop, or of crossed out words. More and more 'white' was introduced in the poem during the twentieth century, so that nothing but a few scattered fragments on the page remained – we can think of the French poet André du Bouchet, or of the work of Paul Celan. The poems of the latter waver between speech and speechlessness, which is expressed by their fragmentary form. Often it was the problematic relationship between language and reality which was at the core of this self-destruction of the poem.

But the process of auto-destruction seems more present than ever in recent digital texts. Erasure and self-destruction are central strategies here. I will talk about both *how* this happens and maybe try to say something about *why* this happens. Rather than drawing the parallels with modernist poetry, and tracing the origins of the procedure all the way back to Mallarmé, emphasis will be put on what is happening here and now, and on what the meaning of this form of poetry may be. Three possible ways of self-destruction will be discussed, each one illustrated with a brief example. Firstly: replacing the words by other words; secondly: erasing words to form a blank space; and finally: crossing out a text with other words.

I. Replacing the words

This first strategy is the least 'aggressive' one of the three. Words are not blotted out entirely, they only make way for new words. This may be the least destructive form of erasure, still it is in a way the most revolutionary one, because this was hard or even impossible to do in a paper form. Instead of just one work, we have many different possible works.

An example of this process can be found on the website of the most renowned Dutch poet in this field, Tonnus Oosterhoff. Before he started working in Flash, he already commented often *in his poems* on the process of their conception.[2] Writing and correcting, and continuously changing the work was already a theme in his paper work: the indefinite character of the process of composing a work was continuously commented on. Only in Oosterhoff's digital work this has

2 See for example the poems "Kritiek" or "Soms zingt hij."

become an integral part of the poem. Here we see erasure: the existing text is replaced by new text.[3]

This is a form of writing and re-writing: the process of the work has *become* the work. What could be the function of this process? The obvious reason for it seems to be that closure may now be avoided: the poem becomes the domain of infinite possibilities. Anything that is said may at any moment become un-said, which gives the *whole* text (even the parts that remain the same) a dimension of instability and temporariness.

Additionally, the poem becomes circular rather than linear. The process of weaving and unweaving makes it an infinite work. The poet has become like Penelope waiting for Odysseus, doing and undoing the work all the time.

As I said, 'traditional' modern poetry tried to achieve the same thing, but obviously with different means, and therefore with different results. Poems were often circular, for example, with the head biting the tail. It is stunning to see how many modern poems end with words that have to do, not with an ending but with a *beginning*. As Timothy Bahti pointed out, these poems were often *chiastic*, their ends turning into non-ends, into beginnings (13). In a way this is a form of erasure as well: crossing out the work that is done and re-beginning. Bahti remarked that these ends could be called 'utopic,' because they send us to a place that is always somewhere else. They are forever *becoming*. This eternal 'becoming' has been radicalised in digital poems which use this procedure of permanent erasure and re-writing.

II. Erasure to form a white, empty space

The second type of destruction of text is the most classical one – an extremely important procedure in regular modern poetry. Again I mention the scattered fragments of Paul Celan's work. The many white spaces indicated clearly that words were not always capable of expressing adequately. But also in other modern western oeuvres

3 For example: see the second page of the poem "Slaaplied" ("Lullaby"). A metaphor is tried out: "Eyes like stones," and rejected: "like stones" is replaced by a new phrase. Also the word "zeildoek" is tried out but erased. Another example is the work by Brian Lennon, who added an interactive component: here it is the reader who may decide when a word can make way for another.

the ellipse or whitened space is crucial. How is this in digital literary texts? Much less so, it seems. The white also had a function in creating temporality, rhythm, silence and space: all of these can now be achieved in other, visual and aural means.

What does happen, however, is the breaking up of words by white spaces, to form syllables or often just letters. Language is destructed and brought back to its material base. For an author like Samuel Beckett, this was the only way of trying to say something, as he wrote in a letter to Axel Kaun. Language had to be destroyed, he wrote, in order to be able to say something: "a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it." And he continues: "as we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another into it, until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today." Beckett wonders why the surface of the word is not at all infiltrated, whereas music does have the possibility of silences: "Is there any reason why that terrible materiality of the word surface should not be capable of being dissolved […]?" (171-172)

Of course this is exactly the kind of dissolution taking place in many digital literary texts: the words are taken apart and the letters are left to speak for themselves. They have regained their materiality. One can have a look at "Nine attempts to clone a poem" by Jason Nelson, for example. From most of the 'attempts' one can choose, the poem exists of fragments.[4]

It is important, however, to emphasise that this destruction is in most cases the *state* of the poem. The word 'destruction' is misleading in a way, since it suggests that there once was a 'whole.' Maurice Blanchot reminded us that we should think rather in fragments that were never a unity. He writes: "whoever says fragment ought not to say simply the fragmenting of an already existing reality or the moment of a whole still to come. This is hard to envisage due to the necessity of comprehension according to which the only knowledge is knowledge of the whole, just as sight is always a view of the whole" (307). Blanchot mentions that a fragment in this conception always designates something that has

4 See for example: option two.

been or will be a whole. "Our thought is therefore caught between two limits: the imagining of the integrity of substance and the imagining of a dialectical becoming." It may be these new digital texts that confront us with a way out of this limited conception of fragments.

III. Erasure with words, ending in illegibility

The third form of erasure is just not stopping to write *in the same place*. If one keeps putting new words over the old words, the text ends up being illegible. In a way, this is the most interesting form to discuss here, because it is the one that is best expressed in a digital way. The poem "Wanen" by the Dutch poet Jan-Willem Anker was remediated by Xavier Roelens. In this remediation, words are piled up at the bottom and top of the page, thus becoming more and more illegible.[5]

This is a procedure which was, like many of the digital strategies, tried already by the avant-gardists. Recently even a contemporary novelist like Jonathan Safran Foer experimented with this in his novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, in which some pages are typed over and over so often that the text has become illegible.

However black the screen becomes in the example of Anker and Roelens, it functions like a blank page: as a silence. As Octavio Paz pointed out, there are two kinds of silences: a silence of vacancy and a silence of fullness. Of course this strategy could be described by the latter term; it is a silence of fullness.

Anker and Roelens confirm this idea by a phrase that appears on the screen: "White does not need to be silent / like a paper igloo." In fact, this is a kind of 'white' which is not silent at all, but an endless tattering.

This may be true, and after 'silence' this is the second *meaning* I would like to give to this procedure, a comment on the fact that each word is written in a echo of old words, that there is no originality, but only re-writing and intertextuality. In fact, this stance might be taken by Anker and Roelens's work. After a while, it ends in a black spot, on which new words could be written in white letters. It is a strong image, expressing the idea that originality is impossible, and each word inscribes itself in the old.

5 Another example of the procedure is Tonnus Oosterhoff's "Monster."

We have now seen three different strategies of self-destruction and just as many reasons for it: the creation of an infinite work, the regaining of the materiality of language, the creation of a 'silence of fullness,' and finally: a comment on the intertextuality present in every text.

On a higher, philosophic level we may again refer to Maurice Blanchot in order to fully understand the implications of these new poetic strategies. In *The Infinite Conversation* (*L'entretien infini*, 1969) Blanchot explains what he means by the idea of *le neutre*, the neuter. Now, first of all, why would I want to dust off an old and complex term of Blanchot's to describe *new* work? The intention is not to show that this is what Blanchot had in mind when he described the neuter, and that it all fits wonderfully. It would rather show that literature touches upon something crucial and existential, which both poets and philosophers try to approach each in their own way. By juxtaposing the work of the two, I hope that not only the poet, but also the philosopher may be understood better.

Maurice Blanchot characterizes the neuter as the "déplacement sans place" (Blanchot, *L'entretien infini* 458) ("displacement that is without place" [Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* 312]). This concept seems to describe much of what takes place in digital poetry. The neuter is hard to define because it escapes and displaces oppositions as visibility and invisibility, presence and absence. It is a radical limitlessness of literature, which is exactly what we see in this process of erasure. The presence of text is usually opposed to the absence of text, the white of the page, but here the two are no longer opposed: one sees this most clearly when a blank melts into a word, and vice versa. As Blanchot puts it with typical obscurity in *The Infinite Conversation*: "I am seeking a way, without getting there, to say that there is a speech in which things, not showing themselves, do not hide. Neither veiled nor unveiled: this is their non-truth" (29).

The point is that we should not just turn around the usual oppositions, since in doing so we would remain imprisoned in the dialectical scheme (De Brabander 69). Instead Blanchot argued, on the basis of Heidegger's work, that "[t]he writer who wants to say the inexpressible being, that is to say (the) nothing, should turn towards it and away from it simultaneously" (De Brabander 70).[6]

6 The Dutch original reads: "De schrijver die het onuitsprekelijke zijn, dat wil zeggen

One could say that the procedure of writing and erasing a text at the same time is a way of overcoming the dialectical scheme, and that therefore this literature seems to point towards a realm where one can understand the literary expression outside the usual oppositions of speech and silence.

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(het) niets wil zeggen, moet zich tegelijkertijd ervan af- en ernaar toe wenden." The translation is mine.

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Yra van Dijk *(1970) obtained a doctor's degree in Literary Studies on* Leegte die ademt, het typografisch wit in de poëzie *(Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2006). She is a (poetry) critic for* NRC Handelsblad *and teaches Modern Dutch Literature at the University of Amsterdam.*