Will Montgomery – *Legend* presentation.

Talk given at Translated Acts no. 2, University of Southampton, 9 May 2009.

*What follows is the text of a short presentation I gave on the Legend CD. Thanks to Caroline Bergvall for asking me to take part in the seminar.*

I was approached with the idea of a collaboration a couple of years ago by the writer Brian Marley. Brian was best known to me as a music critic – we'd been writing about similar music for the same music magazine for years. I also knew of him as someone active on the small press poetry scene of the 1970s and 1980s. Although he had since switched to prose, I was sympathetic to some of his reference points in American writing.

*The Legend* began with a picture of an empty cabinet taken by the improvising harpist Rhodri Davies. Brian's five-part text [reprinted in the CD notes] is a series of denials: it announces what the mysterious cabinet has *not* been used for.

[IMAGE]

Rhodri asked Brian to write a text in response to the image. This was published by the New York-based small press Tolling Elves in 2006. Brian then passed the baton to me. I was to do something – anything I liked – with his text or his voice. So it's really a non-collaboration: hence the square brackets around Brian's name on the artwork. I chose to translate the already-translated image from words into sound. I recorded Brian reading his text one day in my flat. It took around four minutes.

[EXTRACT FROM ORIGINAL RECORDING]

I spent quite a long time processing the recording in various ways. Voice is extremely distinctive and our ears seem to be primed to distinguish it from other kinds of sound. Even fairly extensive electronic processing doesn't seem to quite evacuate the voice from sound. At a recent event I co-organised, Cathy Lane talked about some electroacoustic composers – Paul Lansky, Trevor Wishart – who sought in various ways to 'humanise' the computer. I was working in the opposite direction, trying to winnow out the human voice from the audio I was working with.

I made lots of versions of the four-minute recording with various bits of software. I didn't edit the underlying source recording so the patterns of rising and falling intonation, silences between sections, and so on were in the same order underneath all the processing. Sometimes, in my versions, the resemblances between versions can be seen, sometimes the processing has blurred the dynamics and the patterns of emphasis beyond recognition.

[PICS OF AUDIO FILES]

I became interested in a particular plug-in that produced quite dramatic effects. I began running all my processed material through this plug-in and varying the parameters this way and that. This meant that I was beginning to arrive at a homogeneous sound for all the various versions of Brian's reading. I chose the best 10 and sequenced them in a way that moved from deep to light, replicating the theme of emptying-out that seemed important to both text and image.

Along the way, the humour of Brian's witty text was completely lost. But then I am completely without humour so that's OK. Was Brian's voice rubbed out along with the meanings of all his words?

[EXTRACTS – TRACKS 4 & 5; 9 & 10]

Not really: there were, particularly in the higher-register versions, traces of emphasis and faint shadows of the impact of some consonants in the original reading. These residues of Brian's voice exerted a definite

pressure on the sound that I was making. There might be an analogy to the pressure the source language exerts on a literary translation. I had not quite emptied the audio of voice. The dehumanisation was unachieved.

There's more to the project. I also made a recording of my flat when it was empty. In urban situations there's a great deal of ambient rumble from traffic, machinery and other human activity. Many digital recorders and some microphones have switches that allow you to cut out all frequencies beneath a certain point. With my empty-flat recording I cut out everything *above* a certain point and was left with a throbbing rumble that I found very attractive. Here was another kind of unachieved emptiness: an empty room that was alive with sound. This was not only the unheard background to Brian's reading but the background to my daily life.

The version of Legend that was released last month [ie April 2009] contains 10 translations of the original audio. The final track is the room after Brian had left the building. It was released by Entr'acte in a pack that included both the original text and image, and a short description of the working process. This contextualising information was essential, we felt, to the project.

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The above outline of the process has a retrospective cogency that smoothes out the wrinkles and uncertainty of the actual hands-on work. It formalises ideas that were certainly around, but not always explicit, as the work was made. What follows is a brief reflection on the resulting sounds.

The pieces are not intended as music, exactly. But they can be heard that way and they sometimes sound like that. They are certainly not 'noise' if that's understood as some kind of 'other' to music. However, their only structuring principle is provided by the human voice – the intricate reflections of the movement of Brian's text. Any apparent repetition in the pieces is not machinic – there's no looping involved. It's dependent on the language rhythms of the original audio (even where these have been smashed into pieces).

Sometimes, as for sound poetry, the poetry of non-meaning looks to the expressive potential of the body. *Legend* goes the other way. Instead, it works to shatter the corporeality of Brian's performance, leaving only a faint residue of rhythm and timbre. It would not have been difficult to rid the audio of 'Brian' altogether (and sometimes that is what I thought I was doing). Yet, although the speaking voice is felt only as a kind of shadow in the work, it's felt all the more strongly because of this. The marks that the physical body leaves on the individual voice are not quite lost in the processing. The strange singularity of the human voice in distinction to all other sound is just discernible. Brian's words *are* present, but in a highly attenuated form that both reflects and enjoys the encroachment of technological processes on our means of self-representation. My hope is that the resulting audio hangs in some sort of limbo between sound and music, text and performance, the human and the technological.