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Darren Wershler-Henry / TECHNOLOGIES OF DICTATION: Typewriting and the Toronto Research Group

"We've always typed." So writes the Toronto Research Group, a collective pseudonym for the Canadian poets bpNichol and Steve McCaffery, in their aspect as investigators into the mechanics of the more abstruse corners of experimental narrative. The description that they provide of their writing process is illuminating in a number of respects, so I'm going to quote it at length:

> We've always typed. We type with maybe one of us typing what's in our mind and then we kick the idea around. And then maybe I dictate to Steve, while he types. And maybe I'm typing, and he's dictating to me. And I'm adding something as I think of it. And then we go over it, and go over it. So it happens at the time of writing. And part of it is just getting that moment together. Preliminary talk, what we are unhappy with in it so far, 'Boy, doesn't this seem to ramble,' 'Yeah.'....
>
> Partially, it's also a tension between Steve's type of language and my type of language. He likes the technical, academic – I don't mean that in a bad way – scholarly language. That comes out of his doing his MA up at York on Christopher Smart.... I like going for a simpler phraseology on the whole. If I use a word, I will use it because of the sound and because it fits, absolutely, into the spot. Those are differences between Steve and me. So you get that tension at work too. And we try to leave room for that, as opposed to me superimposing my voice or Steve's. I find it obfuscates things for me.[1]

The subject matter of this passage is an ostensibly straightforward description of the process of collaborative typewriting. Someone dictates; someone types. Sometimes they trade places. Sometimes the typist transcribes the dictation faithfully; sometimes the typist edits and emends the words as he types them. The compositional process the text describes (with each individual taking turns as dictator and amanuensis, and the amanuensis occasionally changing the substance of the dictation) is variable to the point that it begins to affect the grammar itself.

It is at the level of grammar in this passage and the context in which it appears that things become complex. But it's worth working through those complications now because they reappear in virtually any description of someone typing. (This discussion will require a short digression into the nature of dictation and authorship, but the status of the author is also something that's worth scrutinizing because the mechanics of typewriting alter it in interesting ways).

The TRG is an author in the sense that Foucault describes in "What Is An Author?" – that is, it is a designation for a series of functions rather than a proper name pointing to a particular individual. It is a deliberately constructed means of classifying texts by differentiating them, both from the many other texts that comprise the archive of twentieth-century poetics, and from other works produced either by bpNichol or Steve McCaffery as individual authors. Like all authors, on close examination the TRG proves to be a complex and contradictory entity, an agglomeration of discontinuous elements that perform often contradictory (and sometimes even unsuccessful) functions.

For example, Foucault notes that one of the primary functions of the author is to serve as an "object of appropriation" that determines the legal status of certain kinds of texts.[2] Yet this is one of the areas where "TRG" has most explicitly failed to do its job. The TRG archives currently reside with the bpNichol archives at Simon Fraser University, yet McCaffery, an equal partner in the TRG, is very much alive and active. Further, one of the two major collections of the TRG's work, *Canadian @Pataphysics*,[3] is actually a bootleg reproduction of the "Canadian @Pataphysics" issue of *Open Letter* magazine,[4] produced by unknown parties in the Coach House Press bindery, without the knowledge of at least McCaffery, probably the press manager, and perhaps of Nichol as well. Authors do not always authorize.

On the contextual level, the description of the TRG's compositional practices at the typewriter presents further complications for our notion of what "TRG" represents, because there are several layers of ventriloquism (or possession, depending on your perspective) at work. The passage itself is actually a quotation from an interview with bpNichol, speaking as an individual about the TRG ("We have always typed") in the absence of McCaffery. Yet it is this passage that McCaffery selects after Nichol's death to epitomize the TRG's compositional process in the Introduction to *Rational Geomancy: The Kids of the Book-Machine*, the TRG's selected writings. It may seem surprising now, but this kind of "possessed writing" where an absent or even dead dictator speaks

through an amanuensis/typist is typical of the function of writing in general and typing in particular.

Dictation and Haunted Writing

In her discussion of the relationship between Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and his friend and assistant, the writer Johann Peter Eckermann (the German Boswell), Avital Ronell develops a theory of dictation which can be expanded to describe several important aspects of the machinic assemblage I'm calling "typewriting." While the overall tone and focus of Ronell's writing is more deconstructive than discursive, what interests me is the discursive aspect of her argument – the relationship that is being outlined and the rules under which the process of dictation occurs. Ronell recognizes that what she is describing is outside of the purview of close reading and textual analysis when she writes that "there can be nothing simply and exclusively literary where the parasitical asserts itself."[5] Dictation is not speech, not writing, but an assemblage that determines the conditions under which writing takes place.

One of the questions that arises when considering the applicability of Ronell's theory of dictation to typewriting is, why begin from a model of dictation based on Goethe? Friedrich Kittler, in his chapter on the typewriter in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, uses the epithet "the age of Goethe" to characterize the period immediately preceding the invention of the typewriter. For Kittler, Goethe's name serves as a synecdoche for the rules that govern not only German Romanticism, but the production of discourse in general from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century: "authority and authorship, handwriting and rereading, the narcissism of creation and reader obedience."[6] During Goethe's own lifetime (1749–1832), many new writing-machines were being invented. While, as Kittler observes, many of these machines, especially those based on pantographic principles, only reified the rules governing discourse "in the age of Goethe," but cumulatively, they were a major factor in the creation of a new discursive formation, one that held sway until the emergence of the computer. Goethe is thus the ideal place to start.

Ronell's *Dictations: On Haunted Writing* presents dictation as an assemblage that links at least two figures together in a kind of "radical copulation" (Ronell compares it to a DNA double helix[7]) which renders the writing styles of the figures involved as indistinguishable from each other.[8] Citing Derrida, Ronell

summarizes the dictatorial relationship as "an experience of quasi-possession" in which one party "is given over to the other, to the extent, indeed, of being prey to the other."[9] The party that becomes prey – the secretary/amanuensis, or, in our case, the typist – is the more "shadowy" of the two and acts as a "conduit" for the other, dictating party.[10] A kind of death or diminishment is omnipresent. The party taking dictation begins as already subordinate, "double and half-dead or at least presumed dead"[11] – echoes of the opening of William T. Vollmann's *You Bright and Risen Angels*: "Oh, my bright and risen angels, you are already in your graves." However, the dictatorial relationship functions even (especially?) when the dictating party is absent or dead, because the amanuensis incorporates and objectifies it.[12] The question is, which party is possessed and which is doing the possessing?

Although dictation is a "parasitical" relationship, the parties are obligate parasites[13] – neither can exist without the other. Further, though the dictatorial relationship is dissymmetrical, in the classic mode of Derrida's logic of the supplement, it is always also reversible.[14] To drive the point home with a labyrinthine series of dictatorial reversals, I cite Ronell's citation of Eckermann reciting to Goethe a line that Mephistopheles speaks in Goethe's own *Faust*: "in the end we do indeed depend on the creatures we have created."[15] This chain of assemblages demonstrates that the dictating party is far from sovereign or singular because it is always an assemblage connected to other assemblages to what Guattari would undoubtedly call its own mad vectors.[16]

Moreover, it is the assemblage that produces the text, rather than the individuals. For both Ronell and Derrida (of whom the former, it should be noted, is implicitly comparing her relationship as the latter's sometime translator and frequent commentator to that of Eckermann and Goethe), the scene of dictation informs the conditions under which all writing takes place: "writing always comes from elsewhere, at the behest of another, and is, at best, a shorthand transcription of the demand of this Other whose original distance is never altogether surmounted."[17]

What I propose to insert into this assemblage (Ronell's model of dictation) is the typewriter, itself another assemblage that functions on a variety of levels to create the conditions under which typing takes place.

First, the typewriter functions as a conduit that joins together the dictator and the amanuensis. The conduit is not necessarily one-way; either party can take turns typing or dictating. Nor is the model binary or even bipartite;

multiple parties can dictate, and multiple parties can type, synchronically or asynchronically, centrally spatialized or totally decentralized. The typewriter also links other assemblages into this relationship: tape machines, dictaphones, and broadcast technologies such as intercoms, telegraph, radio, and television; carbon paper and the apparatus of duplication; the office and typing pool, and so on.

Second, reinforcing its importance in the assemblage of writing, the typewriter-as-machine tends to absorb both the dictator and the amanuensis into itself. The term "typewriter" itself is a metonymy, but a reversible one. At one point, "typewriter" signified the machine's operator (the amanuensis); the machine itself was the "typewriting machine." As the machine claimed the name, the amanuensis was seemingly absorbed whole into its operation. On the other side of the circuit, the dictator in the scene of typing is, as is the case in writing/dictating in general, often either absent or internal. When a writer sits "alone" at their machine, who is dictating? Writers who type will repeatedly use the same trope to describe this situation: the writing comes from or through *the typewriter itself*, indicating that the typewriter – a plural noun – is somehow haunted.

Third, these connections to voices "outside" the typewriting assemblage, point to another aspect, the desiring aspect of the machine: a longing for connection with other typewriters. This is the point at which the logic of typewriting begins to lose sway and the logic of the computer keyboard, a logic of networks, and connectivity, begins to replace it.

Shifters: The Structure of Typewritten Dictation

From the relative beginnings of the typewriter, the same major elements appear in any typewriting assemblage. There is a dictator – the source of the words that are being typed. There is a typewriter – that is, an actual writing machine of some sort. And there is an amanuensis. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes, an amanuensis is "One who copies or writes from the dictation of another," from *servus a manu* "hand servant" + *-ensis*, "belonging to." Though "dictator" has some negative connotations and "amanuensis" is an awkwardly latinate and stodgy-sounding word to contemporary ears, my choice of this specific terminology is deliberate. These terms allow for the various possibilities that typewriting creates, while differentiating both roles from the

machine itself. When I refer to the "typewriter," I am specifically referring to the writing machine. When I refer to "typewriting," I mean the set of discourses, rules and practices that relate to the functioning of the entire assemblage, as opposed to "typing," the act of using the typewriter to produce text. The need for this degree of specificity will become evident shortly, when all the terms begin to collapse into each other despite all of my best efforts.

As Emile Benveniste famously noted, the act of speaking – and, I would argue, of dictating as well – simultaneously defines the position not only of an individual, but also of their partner in the creation of discourse. These positions, flagged by the pronouns "I" and "you," are variable empty forms which speakers occupy by turns: when I speak, I'm "I" and you're "you," and when you speak, it's your turn to be "I."[18] McCaffery deals explicitly with this theoretical notion in *Shifters*, an early typewritten chapbook published by Nichol's ganglia/grOnk press[19]:

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in us

in us as we
are

you move out to
where you are
most

"you are"

(you)
in you're here there
you're "here"

where i am
still

where "i am"[20]
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There is always an erotics to the poetry of "i" and "you," but "i" and "you" is also always the basic diagram of a power structure. Erotics + agonism = writing. Typewriting, moreover, creates a situation where which person occupies which

position (dictator or amanuensis, top or bottom) is more malleable and fluid than ever. In his analysis of Franz Kafka's first typed letter, Friedrich Kittler spots twelve typos, over a third of which involved the German equivalents of "I" or "you," "As if the typing hand could inscribe everything except the two bodies on either end of the... channel."[21]

So: despite the apparent idiosyncrasies of two avant-garde poets hunched over a typewriter (and I'll return to the TRG's various typewriter-related performances later), the TRG embodies all of the basic structural elements and exemplifies the rules that are specific to the scene of typewriting.

A Fragile Contract

Because my concern is not to determine with which subject the TRG writing "actually" originated, or with the establishment of a hard and fast *oeuvre* (discursive analysis is interested in neither, except as a function of expression[22]), I'm not particularly concerned with sorting out who occupied which pronominal position at any given time. What interests me instead are the conditions and rules under which typewriting emerges from an always-nebulous assemblage of dictators, typists and machines.

In the Introduction to *Rational Geomancy: The Kids of the Book Machine* (the collected reports of the TRG), Steve McCaffery characterizes their typewriting system as a *general economy in dialogue.* He describes the relationship that makes the TRG composition process possible as a "fragile contract" that binds one person into the role of "enunciator" and the other as "transcriber."[23] The fragility of this contract stems from "the loss of certainty around independent judgment." In other words, each party assumes that their words will be transcribed faithfully, knowing full well that this is not always the case, but proceeding to dictate nevertheless: "Steve is dictating his thinking, thinking Barrie is typing this dictation. However, Barrie is typing out his own thoughts on the matter and Steve doesn't know it." In other cases, this process resulted in a kind of shorthand transcription of what was dictated rather than the verbatim text.[24] As long as the contract receives lip service, it is possible for this relationship to continue producing text.

It's also worth nothing that the technological component of this assemblage – the typewriter – is not a neutral conduit facilitating the process of dictation. It has its own rules, and requires that the bodies of its users adapt to

them to facilitate smooth dictation Failure to comply with these implicit rules results in a change in the process. McCaffery remarks that "Neither Barrie nor myself were touch typists and so dictation resulted in a deceleration in the speed of oral delivery."[25] McCaffery believes that while the deceleration of dictation brought an overall greater degree of care in terms of the enunciator's selection of words, that it did not decrease the number of instances where the typist recorded something other than exactly what was spoken, by dint of either error or choice.

From McCaffery's perspective, the uncertainty surrounding the dictatorial process is a desirable state of affairs, part of an attempt to produce a writing that moves beyond "thought's proprietary nature."[26] He describes the whole assemblage – enunciator, machine, typist – as a "synthetic subject based on a We-full, not an I-less paradigm" or a "third 'ghost' locator."[27] The text this synthetic subject produces is never quite the product of one mind; there is always some degree of error, summarization or deliberate deviation at work. At the time of the writing of the introductory material for the TRG book, McCaffery considered his difficulty in assessing which thoughts had originated with which writer as a degree of the project's overall success.[28]

McCaffery also alludes to nostalgia that is a result of the technological regime change that writing is facing after the demise of the typewriter as the writing tool of choice. "An obvious side effect of the current regime of personal computers has been a quantum leap in material nostalgia. The handwritten manuscript, the hand-corrected typewritten page, the patchwork paste-up, clipped with scissors and Scotch-taped together, are now the valued by-products of an obsolete mode of production, superseded by a mode of writing whose new locus is a hyperspace."[29] Though bpNichol was an inveterate computer hobbyist, and produced some of the world's first animated concrete poems,[30] the TRG never inserted a computer into their compositional process. Had they done so, McCaffery acknowledges, the results of that process would have been entirely different, as the rules governing the text-producing assemblage would have been entirely different.

Ghost Writing: Nary-A-Tiff

But what happens when there are (as there frequently are, and as the etymology of "amanuensis" suggests) inequities in the relationship? Foucault notes

that all relationships are on some level *agonistic* – there are always imbalances of power, and there are always struggles, even between the best of friends.

In the descriptions of the TRG's composition process, for example, Nichol and McCaffery always use "enunciator" instead of "dictator," as if to cosmeticize the inevitability of the power relations that course through their texts. Further, both are straight white men of the same income bracket; gender, class and race, major factors in the description of power relations in the scene of dictation, are not issues here. Nevertheless, at least one of their own texts, the *fumetto* (photo-comic) "Nary-A-Tiff,"[31] which deals explicitly with questions of voice and influence, dramatizing the high stakes that accompany the question of who speaks, even under idealized circumstances, and, despite the claims of *Rational Geomancy*'s "Introduction."

In the comic, which opens with both poets digging through the library "[i]n the palatial offices of The Toronto Research Group,"[32] McCaffery quotes a text to Nichol, whose author (Beaumont and Fletcher – a dual author-function, like the TRG itself) "anticipate De Sade."[33] Nichol initially accuses McCaffery of "justifying moral weakness as 'excess,'"[34] but after physically attacking McCaffery, he delivers his ultimate accusation: "All you do is plagiarize the French anyway!!"[35] Though Nichol does not articulate a preferential influence of his own, Peter Jaeger writes in his discussion of "Nary-A-Tiff" in his study on the TRG, that "Nichol desires a transcendental figure (the 'father' and 'Lord' of *The Martyrology*) who negotiates with but ultimately upholds the inverse of McCaffery's critique of conventional morality."[36] McCaffery proceeds to stab Nichol in the heart with a letter opener, disposes of the body and returns to his research... but the comic concludes with a shot of a ghostly Nichol staring in the window, presumably contemplating revenge on the blissfully unaware McCaffery.

Thematically, the text's concern is with questions of literary influence: not only their moral and philosophical validity, but also the correct manner to incorporate those influences in one's own writing. From the perspective of the Nichol of "Nary-A-Tiff," McCaffery, under the metaphorical lash of Fletcher, Beaumont and De Sade, exhibits *too much* fidelity to his personal dictatorial voices, and slides over the blurry line that divides precise citation from plagiarism.

On the meta-narrative level, "Nary-A-Tiff" is a sophisticated dramatization of the complexities of dictation. When Nichol, who is, after all, at least

sometimes another of McCaffery's dictating voices, articulates a differing philosophical viewpoint from McCaffery's continental dictators, "Narry-A-Tiff" paradoxically reifies the influence of McCaffery's dictators by staging a violent narrative pantomime à la Sade. But even though the Nichol character is murdered, the text still cannot be rid of his influence, which asserts its vengeful presence in the very last pane of the cartoon, staring in through another (window)pane in a manner that evokes one of Nichol's own comic strips, full of Byzantine arrays of nested frames.[37] And outside of the work, at the scene of production, the two men are busy literally putting words in each others' mouths as they paste word balloons down onto the photographs. Outside of such fleeting moments of elementary school-style craft production, though, typewritten dictation is rarely simple, and it is never innocent.

NOTES

[1] From Caroline Bayard and Jack David, *Outposts/Avant-Postes: Interviews Poetry Bibliographies and a Critical Introduction to Eight Major Modern Poets* (Erin: Press Porcépic, 1978), 31-32. Also quoted in Steve McCaffery and bpNichol, *Rational Geomancy: The Kids of the Book-Machine* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1992), 10.

[2] Michel Foucault, "What Is An Author?", *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977), 113-38; 124.

[3] Toronto Research Group, ed. *Canadian @Pataphysics* (Toronto: Underwhich Editions, [1979?]).

[4] TRG, ed. *Canadian @Pataphysics. Open Letter* 4.6/7 (1980–81).

[5] Avital Ronell, *Dictations: On Haunted Writing* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 1993), 65.

[6] Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter,* trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), 188.

[7] Ronell, 89.

[8] Ibid., 78.

[9] Ibid., xiv.

[10] Ibid., 90.

[11] Ibid., 199.

[12] Ibid., 92.

[13] Ibid., 89.

[14] Ibid., 107.

[15] Ibid., 157.

[16] Ibid., 119.

[17] Ibid., xiv.

[18] Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. May Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables: U of Miami Press, 1971), 227.

[19] Steve McCaffery, *Shifters* (Toronto: ganglia/grOnk IS 6, 1976).

[20] Ibid., 13.

[21] Kittler, 223.

[22] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (NY: Pantheon, 1972), 24-25.

[23] Steve McCaffery and bpNichol, *Rational Geomancy: The Kids of the Book-Machine* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1992), 10.

[24] Ibid., 11.

[25] Ibid., 12.

[26] Ibid., 10.

[27] Ibid., 11.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid., 16.

[30] bpNichol, *First Screening* (Toronto: Underwhich, 1985).

[31] TRG, "Narry-A-Tiff," *Rational Geomancy*, 210-22.

[32] All text in the comic is in capitals.

[33] Toronto Research Group, "Narry-A-Tiff," 211.

[34] Ibid., 212.

[35] Ibid., 214.

[36] Peter Jaeger, *The ABC of Reading TRG* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1999), 94-98.

[37] bpNichol, *bpNichol Comics*, ed. Carl Peters (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2001).