What the Critics say: "Perhaps, what I shall call here the poetry of radical artifice will just disappear. Perhaps, but in the meantime, it keeps turning up like a virus: in Canada, where the Concrete poetry movement of the fifties and sixties and the emergence of sound-text poetry and performance work have generated, often without direct connection to its U.S. counterparts, [there is] the very rich and vital experimentalism in evidence in such journals as Rampike..." — Marjorie Perloff (Stanford University)

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EXCERPT FROM: *THE IRON WHIM*
by Darren Wershler-Henry

The following text is an excerpt from Darren Wershler-Henry's latest book *The Iron Whim* (McClelland & Stewart). In this book Wershler-Henry examines the typewriter and its role shaping literary expression.

*** *** ***

"The Poet's Stave and Bar"

Like the other technologies of the industrial revolution, typewriting moulds bodies into useful forms in order that they might actually *do* something productive. So it may seem odd, at first, that there are so many associations between the key figures in the history of typewriting and contemporary society's least useful members – poets.

The Wonderful Writing Machine's purple description of Christopher Latham Sholes reads like an attempt to use the word "poet" as many times as possible in one paragraph: "[Sholes] looked more like a poet than any of the things he was or had been. His eyes were sad, like a poet's. He was tall, slender to the point of frailty, with long flowing hair, a short beard, and a medium-length mustache, and he loved poetry although he didn't write it. He also loved puns. His idea of the world's best joke was a poetic pun."[1] Even early typewriter salesmen were apparently worthy of the poet's laurels; the book goes on to describe typewriter salesman C. W. Seamans as "looking like a combination poet and revivalist-meeting preacher."[2]

When Marshall McLuhan writes in 1964 about the boon that typewriting bestowed during "the age of the iron whim," he too turns to the poets for ammunition: "Poets like Charles Olson are eloquent in proclaiming the power of the typewriter to help the poet to indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspension, even, of syllables, the juxtaposition, even, of parts of phrases which he intends, observing that, for the first time, the poet has the stave and the bar that the musician has had."[3]

McLuhan is simultaneously emulating Olson's style and paraphrasing his famous poetic manifesto, "Projective Verse," written in 1959. What McLuhan omits, though, is more telling than what he includes. Olson writes, "It is the advantage of the typewriter that, *due to its rigidity and its space precisions*, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends" (emphasis added).[4] Here again is the language of discipline: the typewriter enforces rigidity and distribution in space as a means of creating exactitude, of quantizing even empty spaces on a page as a metaphor for breath in a line of oration. And powering and guiding this new regime of control is the "intent" of the poet, herding unruly words into shape. There is little room in such a poetics for the admission of indeterminacy or the role of the reader in the creation of meaning; for Olson, the poet is a master technician in control of every aspect of his or her writing. Not only does a poet "record the listening he has done to his own speech" in a poem, he also indicates, with the help of the preset blanks of the typewritten page, "how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work."[5]

At the same time, Olson instrumentalizes both the body of the poet and the poem that the poet produces into channels for the transmission of information. For Olson, the production of poetry is a matter of utility and relations, and the writer is one component in a larger network shot through with forces and laws:

> It comes to this: the use of a man, by himself and thus by others, lies in how he conceives his relation to nature, that force to which he owes his somewhat small existence . . . [I]f he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is a participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share. And by an inverse law his shapes will make their own way.[6]

Olson's language is the language of discipline applied to the task of producing poetry. Through the practice of "Objectism," he plans to dispense with "the lyrical interference of the 'subject' and his soul,"[7] to turn the poet into an efficient channel for the communication of lived experience. The poem is the circuitry that connects the poet-as-recording-device to the reader as receiver: "A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it . . . by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader.

Okay. Then the poem must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy--discharge."[8]

Olson is a pet example for McLuhan because his poetics reinforces one of McLuhan's major contentions, that mid-twentieth-century technologies such as the typewriter, the telephone, the phonograph, and the radio were not merely about extending the control of man, the sovereign subject; they also signalled a "return" to a "post-literate acoustic space."[9] Olson's contention that "if a contemporary poet leaves a space as long as the phrase before it, he means that space to be held, by the breath, an equal length of time" epitomizes this sensibility, the following even more so, as it is mediated by the grid that the typewriter imposes:

> Observe him (i.e., the poet), when he takes advantage of the machine's multiple margins, to juxtapose,
> Sd he:
> to dream takes no effort
> to think is easy
> to act is more difficult
> but for a man to act after he has taken thought, this!
> is the most difficult thing of all

Each of these lines is a progressing of both the meaning and the breathing forward, and then a backing up, without a progress or any kind of movement outside the unit of time local to the idea.[10]

For Olson, what is important about the typewriter is its immediacy. He sees the machine as "the personal and instantaneous recorder of the poet's work,"[11] and a tool with which to restore to both writer and reader the sense of the poet's presence in the finished work, a presence stripped away by the conversion of manuscript to the printed page.[12]

In order to present typewriting in this way, though, Olson has to ignore some explicit evidence in his own examples that typewriting is never about immediacy and breath but always about mediation and writing. It's already implicit in the "invisible" tab stops of the example above, but becomes explicit and visible when Olson writes:

> If [the poet] wishes a pause so light it hardly separates the words, yet does not want a comma – which is an interruption of the meaning rather than the sound of the line – follow him when he uses a symbol the typewriter has ready to hand:
>
> What does not change / is the will to change[13]

The insertion of the virgule (/) is the graphic mark of mechanical mediation in every sense, a solid black bar signifying that there is something in the channel between writer and reader blocking the way, something that both McLuhan and Olson choose to ignore in order to advance an argument for emancipation through rigour.

And what if its insertion was a typo? Even for poets – *especially* for poets – there is always noise in the channel.

One Finger Typing

The idea of the typewriter as a prosthetic that enables writing is not new to this discussion. It is present from the beginnings of the machine's history as a writing device for the blind, and it persists through McLuhan's notion of technology as "the extensions of man" and in science-fiction scenarios of writing cyborgs. All of these narratives, though, focus on the efficacy of the machine to produce writing. In texts written by the people who actually have little choice but to use the typewriter to communicate, both the writer's mastery over the machine and the ability of the machine to channel the writer's desires are pushed to their limits.

American poet Larry Eigner had cerebral palsy due to a forceps-inflicted injury at birth.[14] His vast oeuvre (more than forty books and hundreds of magazine articles that influenced several major movements in contemporary American poetry) was produced entirely by one-fingered typing with his right index finger. Eigner was strongly influenced by Olson and William Carlos Williams, as he relates in an unpublished letter to Ina Forster:

Before I read of "energy construct" or maintenance in Charles Olson's "Projective Verse" in the early '50s, in *Poetry New York* (1950), I thought myself that immediacy and force have to take precedence over clarity in a poem (this in reaction to my mother, though I tried or wd've liked to follow, agreed with her insistent advice to be clear), and about the same time there was Wm Carlos WIlliams! "A poem is a machine made of words" (he was a medical doctor *ein Arzt?* but he said "machine," not "organism," hm). A piece of language that "works," functions.[15]

To an extent, Eigner agrees with Olson and Williams, viewing the typewriter as a device that preserves a precise record of the poet's thoughts and feelings in a finished poem. Eigner's first encounter in person with Olson was also mediated by typewriter: "I / and my brother visited him once or twice (in '57 or 8 when / I showed him a poem, right away he pulled out his portable / typewriter and copied it!!)"[16] e. e. cummings, Eigner writes, "was really the first to utilize the possibilities for accurate notation – registration – by the typewriter."[17] But there is also a difference in Eigner's poetics born of the fact that writing was not just a metaphorical but a real struggle for him, that truly accurate notation was rarely possible, that writing required real force, real work, to produce a piece of language that worked.

An interesting intersection characterizes Eigner's writing, and the typewriter sits in its middle. On one hand, despite being able to type "fast enough back then to be familiar enough with the keyboard to work in the dark or the dusk with one finger,"[18] the typewriter was barely able to manage the flood of ideas in Eigner's head. "There've always been so many things to do," he writes, noting the reason for his characteristically dense prose, *in* his characteristically dense prose, was that "letters get crowded just from my attempt to save time, i.e., cover less space, avoid putting another sheet in the typewriter for a few more words as I at least hope there will only be."[19] On the other hand, typewriting offers a solution, of sorts, to the problem of its own inability to process the rush of his thoughts: Eigner often resorts to two columns when he writes prose. "It'll be from not deciding or being unable to decide quickly anyway what to say first, or next. Or an afterthought might well be an insert, and thus go in the margin, especially when otherwise you'd need one or more extra words to refer to a topic again."[20] Typewriting may not accommodate *everything* Eigner wants to commit to paper, but the compromise between the two helped to forge a unique poetic style.

Jazz Hands

Poets aren't the only ones enraptured with typewriting in the QWERTY world.

David Sudnow is a sociologist who taught himself jazz piano. In *Talk's Body*, he describes a personal phenomenology of "keyboarding" based on his "daily life on a swiveling chair between two keyboards, that of my piano and that of my typewriter."[21]

Sudnow's guiding trope for both kinds of keyboarding is jazz improvisation. He is not interested in breaking down his music-making movements into therblig-style time and motion study units in order to make keyboarding fit "some existing circuitry model." Instead, he is interested in producing "a new sort of descriptive biology" that might replace the mystifications behind typists' claims to be receiving dictations from ghosts, aliens, muses, giant insects, and other forms of "guidance from above."[22]

There are similarities as well as differences between Sudnow's model and the other perspectives on typewriting examined in previous chapters. Despite the obvious incongruities between a linear keyboard that operates according to a system of major and minor keys, requires the use of foot pedals, and relies heavily on chording effects, and a quadruple-row system of keys of equal value that operate in discrete fashion, Sudnow is determined to demonstrate some congruity between pianos and typewriters. While he's interested in a materialist biological theory of inspiration that would replace the idea of an Outside dictating voice, Sudnow still sees the keyboard as an extension of a sovereign subject, but his model of typewriting is at times closest to the biology of Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch*.

The other major important difference between Sudnow and Olson and the typists that I've already discussed is that the former are *generative* typists. In other words, they compose as they type. They have internalized not only the disciplinary system of touch typing, but also the dictating voice. Whether or not they choose to mystify the dictator and his attendant systems for disciplining the body of the amanuensis into a ready and receptive instrument by presenting that voice as the muse, an alien intelligence, or something else depends entirely on the predilection of the generative typist in question, but it is unquestionably still present. It is in fact the very thing that allows the typist to write, training and informing his or her movements, and always demanding further practice.

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Typewriting, for Sudnow, is *embodied* knowledge. He rhapsodizes about "the intelligence of the integrated knowing hand, which guides as it is guided, singing from place to place, making melodies in a network of spatial contexts that are grasped and tacitly appreciated in the most intimate and still mysterious ways."[23] Via a system of touch typing, he trains his body to the point where it responds almost automatically to the keyboard. Once an individual reaches this state, where the disciplinary system has been entirely internalized, he is paradoxically "free" to use both his newly instrumentalized limbs and the typewriter to which they are almost seamlessly joined to compose.

If control begins as a spatial architecture (such as a prison or classroom) designed to transform individuals by progressively objectifying them and subtly partitioning their behaviour on an increasingly fine scale, then that architecture first has to become a set of disciplinary practices that can be internalized into the bodies of the subjects themselves.[24] Even when the architecture itself remains, it is not always necessary. Train a prisoner to believe that he is always being observed, and it is no longer necessary to observe him constantly. Likewise, train a body to type, and it no longer needs to relate to the keyboard as an external architecture. Sudnow types the following:

> When I type the letter "t," my finger does not search for the locale where the "t" is written. Once upon a time, I learned to bring a finger to where "t" is written and then I forgot about its placement in such terms, so much that if I have to fill in a diagram of the typewriter keyboard from imagination today, I must mimic the production of words to rediscover the named keys. When I go for "t" now, I reach, in the course of aiming, toward saying "this" or "that," aiming toward the sounding spot where "t" merely happens to be written. And if I reach for this spot and get somewhere else by mistake, I - needn't look at the page to tell. I can feel I have made a wrong reach, just as I can tell I am tripping without having to watch myself.[25]

Sudnow has interpellated the machine's disciplinary systems so thoroughly that he is loath not only to describe his "hand's knowledge" in terms of the "topography of the keyboard," he won't even use the language of music to describe the spatializations his body has imagined as musical "notes" because "these [terms] divide the keyboard from the body."[26]

Sudnow's sense of what he is doing is not all that different from Olson's Objectism; both assume a more or less unproblematic transmission of direct experience as content from writer to reader. Sudnow claims that if you "use the touch-typing method to copy over the sentence you are now reading . . . you get almost as close to a recoverable notation system as you can get." Sudnow does note that typescript provides no clues as to the temporality of the writing; "I can produce the sentences you are now reading in fifteen seconds or fifteen minutes, produce the first portion in a rapid fire and the rest after a coffee break, and you cannot tell." For him, handwriting still is the privileged sign that indicates the passage of time. In order to gain some knowledge of the "temporal structure" of a piece of writing, Sudnow claims "You come still closer if you try to reproduce sights such 'as these' [the words are in cursive text] in their particularity."[27] However, Sudnow does not account for the very distancing factor that Olson bemoans: mass print publication, which turns "these words" into yet another infinitely reproducible sign, even if it is a sign that evokes handwriting. Jacques Derrida famously makes this same point at the end of his essay "Signature Event Context" by reproducing his own signature to demonstrate that the very things that Olson and Sudnow champion – the effects of performance, presence, and speech on a text – presuppose the very things they hope to exclude: error, slippage, reproducibility, and multiplicity – the effects of writing, typewriting included.[28]

Regardless of the flaws in Sudnow's argument about what is transpiring, the statements that his text makes are still fascinating. All of the discipline he exercises on himself goes to an interesting end: the aesthetically pleasing but decidedly non-utilitarian creation of a body capable of making art: "[W]hen fingers in particular learn piano spaces in particular, much more is in fact being learned about than fingers, this keyboard, these sizes. A music-making body is being fashioned."[29] Note that as Sudnow accedes to the discipline of his two keyboards, his grammar also becomes passive, and his descriptions of his own body become increasingly objective:

> [M]y articulating organs are now set up in a precise spatial scaling. The finger feels the width of a key at the piano, perhaps assessing the key's extent by feeling the edge of the next key. The hand is now toned up for such sizes all through the domain. The depths and textures of the places are known. The hand accordingly assumes a sort of roundness and balance appropriate for speaking.[30]

Once Sudnow has explained his process, he performs it for the reader. The entirety of chapter 36 of *Talk's Body* is an improvisational performance, a jazz for the typewriter, documented with a video camera (or so the text tells us – shades of Gilbreth here). The act of typewriting itself becomes a performance. That written performance record is replete with signs of discipline attempting to steer a wayward body toward a desired end. Sudnow has left in all typos, included spaces, and has left the right-hand margin ragged; he asks that the reader "treat the errors here as a signt t t signt that sa a struggle is taking place."[31]

However, these signs *remain* as signs of a struggle that perhaps took place elsewhere, in another medium, if it indeed took place at all. Even assuming that this text is not a simulation, the physical qualities of a typescript are very different from those of the printed book, and translating the former into the latter inevitably creates all sorts of slippages and gaps. Despite the aforementioned attempts to make chapter 36 evoke a typescript, it bears the unmistakable signs of typesetting, including, most tellingly, ligatures that link multiple letters together into one character (for example, ff, fi, fl, ffi, ffl).

Like many typists, Sudnow struggles to use the rigour of typewriting to produce art, in the hopes of producing truth through art's beauty. But, to return to an earlier theme, typing has a problematic relationship to truth, even though we often assume that it will produce it for us. It's time to take a closer look at that problem.

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