
Amaranth sasesusos Oronoco initiation secedes Uruguay Philadelphia: the first sentence that was usually tap-tapped into typewriters to ensure proper alignment after manufacture (p. 137), and one among many fascinating, quirky, and memorable details uncovered by Wershler-Henry as he scavenges through the “cultural detritus of typewriting” (p. 286). This nonsensical character-string of a sentence, composed with efficiency and precision in mind, not poetry or meaningful communication, is shown to represent one facet of the logic—the rules and relations—that not only shaped and controlled the practice of typewriting, but, more broadly, “structured almost two centuries of writing” (p. 13).

Wershler-Henry’s history is well crafted throughout and cleverly book ended by accounts of artworks that not only feature typewriters, but that bind the chronicle methodologically and emblematically. The first, *Royal Road Test*, a performance piece and artists’ book by Ed Ruscha, Mason Williams, and Patrick Blackwell (1966), enacts and documents a Royal Model X typewriter being flung from the window of a speeding Buick LeSabre. This detailed account of a typewriter’s destructive undoing provides an appropriate launch for Wershler-Henry’s “fragmented” history, both highlighting the existence of the typewriter as a shifting assemblage that occupies and encompasses a multiplicity of positions and relations, and prefiguring its demise and eventual afterlife, as a haunted object of nostalgic desire.

His site of investigation encompasses accident, crime scene, and archaeological dig. His method and objective is to reconstruct the type-writing machine by uncovering, piecing together, and analyzing the discursive archive that surrounded and shaped the apparatus, along with its variable social functions and meanings as articulated across a variety of sites. His archive is vast; it extends from the poetic imaginary to bureaucratic networks and military installations; it enters the typing pool, the classroom, the newsroom, and the courtroom; and it probes high art, technical science, literary gossip, popular culture, urban myth—even barnyard yarns.

The artwork that closes the book, Rodney Graham’s *Rheinmetall/Victoria 8* installation, involves the cinematic projection of an image of a typewriter slowly being covered with a layer of snow or ash (p. 287). This installation is, in effect, the artistic expression of what Wershler-Henry achieves through his archival de-frag: the typewriter is rendered visible as a writing object by virtue of the discursive sediment that has settled on and around it.

The history is fragmented into six ‘A’-initialed sections. *Archaeology* sets out the procedural framework described above, after which *Assembly* cobbles the typewriter together from a genealogy of constituent pieces—moveable type, automata, and writing aids for the deaf and blind. Emphasized is the discourse of truth embodied within these early writing devices, as writing becomes writing with machines, and the objective becomes the translation of the inner voice to the writing surface. In *Amanuensis*, Wershler-Henry turns to dictation, addressing the instability and interchangeability of the inscriptive trinity of dictatorial voice, machine, and machine operator: “something dictates, someone types, and a page of standardized mechanical text appears” (p. 77). Typewriters (machines) come to merge with typewriters (“Type-Writer Girls”) and, eventually, to overwrite and consume
the dictators (authors) themselves, as these last submit to typewriterly control. Authorship is called into question as the writing is performed by a social and technological assemblage and inspiration becomes machine-fed, whether from typist-muse, from muse-as-machine, or simply dictated—Ouija board style (p. 102)—from a mystical beyond.

Authority further elaborates the idea that typewriting exerts disciplinary control over typists and writers, this time through patterns of spatial, bodily, and mental organization dictated by the typewriter’s special logic—the page and the invisible grid. Typewriting becomes a management task, an efficiency experiment embodied by a QWERTY-keyboard configuration that is at once completely arbitrary and indisputably internalized. Even poetry, when practiced and generated by the typewriter, is guided by its disciplinary mechanisms; while artists may claim to strive for immediacy of expression in typewritten work, Wershler-Henry assumes a familiar poststructuralist stance in stressing the inescapable mediation in these works: “there is always noise in the channel” (p. 170). Despite this interference, it is argued, the typewriter continued to be culturally depicted, and thus constructed, as both producer and arbiter of truth, mythologized to such an extent that even monkeys operating typewriters would be capable of generating “every book in France’s National Library” (p. 186), or any such combination of truthful (known, canonical) texts. Wershler-Henry’s assessment of creative intent, authorial voice, and typewriting’s disciplinary regime, as they apply to typewriting monkeys, dogs, farm animals, and cockroaches—from both real-life and fictional accounts—shifts the terrain of inquiry in surprising new directions, meanwhile underscoring the depth to which typewriting has inscribed itself into popular imagination.

The key theme of Acceleration is time and the logic of typewriting; it needed to be fast, as rapid as speech. As typing speed became a practical and profitable obsession, new practices emerged to train bodies for speed: typing contests and touch-typing. Significantly, speed is enhanced when typists refrain from reading for meaning while reproducing copy. In this mode, typewriting opposes that which is generative (creative) and rewards blind conformity to pace, line, and letter. Finally, though, it is electrification and IBM innovations, such as the “golf ball” typehead (p. 255), that hasten typewriting’s final chapter by shattering the strict disciplinary grid. In Aftermath, Wershler-Henry asks whether the logic of the typewriter translates into computer word processing, concluding that “the patterns of knowledge that describe computing and the patterns that describe typewriting are entirely different” (p. 264). Though this is still automated writing, the archaeology of computing reveals a different base logic: notions of truth, authority, and speed are preempted by software, networking, and digital competence.

Culled from Wershler-Henry’s 2005 doctoral thesis of the same name, Iron Whim—the book—is more theoretically streamlined, likely in an attempt to attract a general readership. In both cases, Wershler-Henry employs the flexibility of what he describes as the communication scholar’s often variable and haphazard “theoretical toolbox,” drawing on a range of relevant concepts and arguments to provide supportive scaffolding for his history, but not to significantly challenge those standpoints or forge new theoretical territory. Overall, it is the combination of Wershler-Henry’s skillful storytelling, ingenious narrative structure, and unorthodox historical and literary revelations that are key in building this history, and, as follows from his own discussion, The Iron Whim is hereby added to the discursive archive of typewriting. The Iron Whim finds firm footing in that body of research that focuses on the materialities of communication and makes a welcome contribution to the material history of inscriptive technologies and writing practices.

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