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Epilogue

‘That’s Not Writing, That’s Typewriting’: Machines and Masculinity from Cummings to Kerouac

Lisa Mullen

Hunter S. Thompson stands calf-deep in freshly fallen snow. Dark hills in the distance fade into deep blue twilight, but Thompson is picked out by the heat of the camera’s yellow flash, which glints off the silver gun he is holding out, double-handed, in front of him. The gun points at an IBM Selectric typewriter, cowering in the snow at his feet.

This famous photograph, taken by Paul Chesley in 1989 at Thompson’s ranch in Colorado, was the perfect publicity shot for a writer known for his risky, twitchy prose. Thompson’s point-blank assault on his writing machine is a pose, of course: the authorial equivalent of Pete Townshend smashing his guitar to pieces in an eruption of rock ‘n’ roll testosterone. Here are all of Thompson’s trademark gonzo attitudes in a single shot: the firearm obsession, the macho posturing, the capacity for unhinged overreaction. But another message lurks within the frame. Writers like Thompson, the photo implies, engage in mortal combat with the very words and sentences they string together. They must be prepared to thrash their delinquent typewriters into submission. Both writers and typewriters are dangerous beasts: ladies – let alone *typists* – are advised to stand well back.

Other chapters in this volume illuminate the unacknowledged female typing – literal or metaphorical – which has so often scaffolded the male literary career. This chapter turns the relationship back the other way. At

some point in the history of this technology, the gendered connotations of the typewriter shifted, so that direct hand-to-hand combat between man and machine came to symbolize a particular kind of male author and a particular kind of male writing. This kind of work, the legend insisted, had an elemental quality which could never be filtered through a female mediator. The fire of true inspiration would be sparked during the showdown between a single, heroic consciousness and a wily and recalcitrant machine.

Typewriters entered the literary scene in 1874 when Mark Twain submitted the first typewritten manuscript, *Life on the Mississippi*, to his publisher. Twain had been impressed by a demonstration of virtuoso typing he had witnessed in a store, but after purchase he had struggled to operate his ‘type machine’ with sufficient speed and accuracy, instead employing a specialist, an unnamed ‘type-girl’, to produce the text according to his dictation (Kittler 1999, 192–3). The uneasy cyborgian fusion of human and apparatus had begun to be understood as an aspect of the feminine, a resource to be exploited by men or leveraged by women with few other economic options. We see this equation playing out explicitly in the classic Hollywood melodrama *Grand Hotel* (1932), where Joan Crawford plays a freelance typist who visits businessmen in their hotel rooms at all hours to type their urgent documents for them; as the film makes clear, such work could be taken to imply that sexual services might also be on offer, for a price. Relying on double-entendre, Crawford’s character skilfully negotiates this subtext while her fingers rattle out her client’s dictated words. ‘You’re a little too fast’, she tells him, cutting him off just as he looks set to proposition her directly. ‘Can’t you understand me?’, he responds. ‘I understand you perfectly’, she replies pointedly; she will do the deal, but she will wait until she likes the terms.

Ten years earlier, the loose morals and bleak life choices of the type-girl had been set out by T. S. Eliot in his poem *The Waste Land* (1922):

The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
Out of the window perilously spread
Her drying combinations touched by the sun’s last rays,
On the divan are piled (at night her bed)
Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays.

(Eliot 1969, 68)

Having been crudely assaulted by her dinner guest – the ‘young man carbuncular’ who ‘makes a welcome of indifference’ because his ‘vanity requires no response’ – the typist remains numb and unmoved, merely glancing at herself in the mirror while ‘her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass: / “Well now that’s done: and I am glad it’s over”.’

In her Chapter 14 in this volume, Arwa F. Al-Mubaddel has traced the influence of both Vivienne Haigh-Wood Eliot and Ezra Pound on this section of *The Waste Land*, and how the evocation of misogynistic disgust for the typist developed over various iterations of the text. Eliot, then still working in the foreign transactions department of Lloyd's Bank in the City of London, clearly understood the sexual politics of office work between the wars. A sense that the typewriter might provide access to, and stand in metonymically for, new social and economic opportunities for women seemed to trigger in some writers a species of gender panic, and a determination to shore up the bulwarks of masculine exceptionalism. The skill of the typist had to be construed as somehow both insignificant (compared to men's creative ideation) and powerful (as a threat to the ethereal virtue of women). Thus, in Arthur Conan Doyle's story 'The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist' (1903), the 'spatulate finger-ends' of a young client at first suggest to Sherlock Holmes that she may be a typist, but her exquisite appearance – she is a 'beautiful woman, tall, graceful, and queenly' – immediately allows him to amend his first impression and decide that she is a pianist: 'There is a spirituality about the face', he confirms as she absorbs his gaze, 'which the typewriter does not generate' (Doyle 2011, 99).

This characterization of typewriting as incompatible with the more spiritual aspects of art would come to inflect the definition of modern creativity, rewriting the mechanisms of male authorship, too, so that it was no longer imagined as a heady encounter with a girlish muse, but a grim confrontation with a macho antagonist. For both men and women, gender gets in the way of a frictionless fusion between the artist and the apparatus. As a technological interface, the typewriter belongs to modernity and rationality, qualities which threaten the supposed fragility of feminine inspiration. Simultaneously, the machine's intervention breaches the impermeable armour of the autotelic writing subject; it is therefore associated in some psychoanalytical analyses with the polluted feminine rather than the pristine masculine. This paradox is examined by the cultural theorist, Friedrich Kittler, in his analysis of twentieth-century media technologies *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1999). Kittler points out that the recalibration of gender and writing began as soon as women were recruited, by men like Mark Twain, to be the backroom operatives cranking out miraculously legible typescripts bearing someone else's signature. According to Kittler (1999, 183–263), the female typist was a novel assemblage: a hybrid entity which changed both the way women thought about themselves and the way they were categorized by men. Not only did flesh and metal become fused when a woman put her fingers on the keys, but so too did human mind and machinic motivation; as Kittler points out, even the word 'typewriter' was originally used interchangeably to refer both to the machine and to the person who operated it. Women who learned to touch-type at speed, sometimes from shorthand notes, and

sometimes directly from spoken dictation, were required to train themselves out of habitual modes of autonomous thought in order to channel words unthinkingly through brains and bodies which have been reduced to the status of components in a robotic apparatus.

Some writers saw immediately the gothic potential of this subjugation of the human will. In Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1887), the character of Mina Harker inhabits just such a half-human status: already psychically connected to Dracula after drinking his blood, she is also half machine, the indefatigable conduit for the diaries, journals and notes produced by Van Helsing and the other vampire-hunters, which she collates and types 'in manifold' to create a repository of depersonalized information (Stoker 2003, 239). Kittler's book describes how information technologies gradually sever the connection between human subjectivity and the human body, and how meaning is transformed at every stage of this cultural transmission. Handwritten words, which begin in the individual sensory organs of mouth and ear, pass directly through the body to be turned into symbolic marks on the page by the idiosyncratic movements of the fingers of a scribe. At this stage, he suggests, meaning still bears the trace of human individuality: the identity of the writer can be detected from their handwriting. When the typewriter is invented, however, the machine intervenes decisively, excising somatic authenticity in favour of transactional, *Grand Hotel*-style irony. For the sake of universal legibility ('Can't you understand me?'), the subject is forced to submit to a standardized mechanical regime dictated by the technology ('I understand you perfectly'). Like Mina Harker, the typist acts as a relay between the animate and inanimate worlds. Kittler sees this as an irreversible change in human ontology, which in the modern, technological world is severed from the organic origins of knowledge and culture. The typewriter makes obsolete culture's power to record and communicate an individual human subjectivity. As Nietzsche, another early adopter of the typewriter, put it: 'Our writing tools are also working on our thoughts' (Kittler 1999, 200).

Yet Kittler's analysis does not account for the different ways men and women experienced these transformative tools, and how that reflected the gendered professional profiles of those who typed for money. For a woman like Sylvia Plath, technologies of writing threatened to drag authorial identity down into the deadly realm of the clerical. The heroine of *The Bell Jar*, Esther, has a mother who runs a secretarial school and encourages her daughter to learn shorthand and typing so that she has something to fall back on when her vague dreams of being a writer inevitably come undone. 'The trouble was', Esther says, 'I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters' (Plath 1997, 76). Esther's internship at a fashionable New York magazine, while ostensibly glamorous, seems dangerously close to secretarial dullness: a dullness which reflects the pre-programmed attitudes and behaviours of the other girls she meets there, who are happily constrained by the obedient versions of femininity which

they are expected to embody. Esther is at first impressed by their ability to follow this rubric so exactly, but then she notices that her boss, Jay Cee ‘wanted to teach me something’, just like all the other ‘old ladies’, including her mother, who have acted as the gatekeepers of proper conduct. ‘I suddenly didn’t think they had anything to teach me’, Esther says, ‘I fitted the lid on my typewriter and clicked it shut’ (Plath 1997, 5). For the moment, she is rejecting both office work and literary production; by inhabiting the same apparatus, these two occupations will remain confusingly aligned until she has worked out how to function as a woman with a mind of her own.

For men, on the other hand, the model of the typewriting employee was not the office worker but the news reporter: the buccaneering adventurer whose typed pages have the power to shape public events and enhance his personal potency. In *His Girl Friday* (1940), Rosalind Russell’s ace reporter is the bizarre exception in an otherwise testosterone-fuelled newsroom: she types fast, but it is her sparkling copy which marks her out as dangerous – so dangerous that her editor has to resort to marrying her, twice, in an attempt to make sense of the situation. Elsewhere in the Hollywood canon, it is male journalists who roll pieces of paper importantly into their heavy machines. In a crucial scene in *Citizen Kane* (1941), the all-powerful Kane fires his drunken reporter (and former friend) and types out, with glacial calm, his own deadly review of his wife’s operatic performance the night before: an irrevocable step in his creeping dehumanization. In *All the President’s Men* (1976), Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman take down a corrupt president using typewriters as weapons. Indeed, the technology explicitly fuses these two personalities into a single lethal entity: they joust with each other via the typewriter as they argue about how best to write the story, and use the keys to communicate without speech when they think their office might be bugged. For such journalists, unlike the academics and novelists whose wives stood by to type up painstaking revisions and corrections, speed is everything. The truth must be channelled as directly as possible from the brain to the typewriter, so that it can be hurried on to the even bigger and faster mechanism of the printing press, all before the onrush of modernity makes the original thought redundant. The machine-gun clatter marks the newsroom as a warzone. Your ability to concentrate in the din is a life or death matter, and depends on your capacity to focus with, and through, your machinic alter ego.

The potential of these machines to instigate an unsettling transformation of the male mind became a theme in twentieth-century culture. As traditional gender boundaries dissolved, in the workplace and in the private sphere, cooperative artistic muses were increasingly hard to recruit, and their place was filled by a much more demanding presence. Nine years before Thompson’s blameless IBM stared down the barrel of oblivion, another writer had had a run-in with another unsympathetic typewriter. In Stanley Kubrick’s 1980 adaptation of Stephen King’s *The Shining* (1977), we find would-be novelist Jack Torrance (played by Jack Nicholson) holed up in

snowy Colorado with his wife, his son, a few hundred unquiet ghosts, and a manual Adler Universal. Setting up his desk in an echoing salon at the heart of the Overlook, Jack knows exactly what he must do if he wants to achieve his dream of becoming an author: he must hit the keys of his typewriter day and night, filling the empty white space with the snick-snick-snick of mechanically mediated prose. In the early days of the family's winter stay at the deserted hotel, this automatic aspect of writing offers some comfort to Jack, who can't quite seem to hit on a good idea for a story. 'Something'll come', his wife Wendy assures him, 'It's just a matter of settling back into the habit of writing every day.' 'Yeah . . .', Jack answers dubiously, 'That's all it is.'

Later, when Wendy interrupts his typing with small talk and sandwiches, Jack sees it as an intrusion on what has become a fraught and intensely intimate relationship with his typewriter – her very presence is an assault, as he sees it, on his hard-won heroic persona as a writer. Plucking the sheet out of his machine and ostentatiously tearing it to pieces, he explains: 'Whenever you come in here and interrupt me, you're breaking my concentration. You're distracting me, and it will then take me time to get back to where I was, understand? [. . .] We're going to make a new rule. Whenever I am in here and you hear me typing' – he taps the keys to demonstrate – 'or whether you *don't* hear me typing, *whatever the fuck you hear me doing in here*, when I am in here that means that I am working – that means don't come in. Now, do you think you can handle that?'

For Jack, the typewriter's demand for work, its implied capacity for inhuman feats of productivity, functions as a rebuke to the inefficiency of the human operator: the question is not whether the machine can serve and enable Jack's literary output, but whether he is strong enough to satisfy its infinite appetite for words. Thus, when the malevolent spirits of the hotel push him over the edge, Jack's feverish workrate continues unabated – but all vestiges of authorial agency or coherence disappear. He fills page after page of his typescript, but when Wendy looks she finds only the single, endlessly repeated sentence: 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.' In effect, the typewriter has tricked Jack into self-feminization, turning manly writing into *typewriting*, mere repetitive labour which could be done by anyone, even a boy – or a woman. Sitting down to wrest words out of his typewriter, he feels himself to be engaged in important work, but he is in thrall to a pitiless rhythm which he takes to be inherently masculine, but which is really part of the inhuman agenda of the evil hotel and the spirits which possess its material objects. The 'dullness' to which he succumbs has been instilled by the typewriter's iron regime, but the vestigial gendered connotations of the technology make him believe that he is implicated in the moribund domesticity represented by Wendy, and this is what makes him so susceptible to booze, ghosts and wife-killing carnage.

The prototype macho writer, who seems to have inspired Stephen King, Stanley Kubrick and Hunter S. Thompson, was of course Jack Kerouac, author

of a novel which is probably now better known for its mode of production than it is for its aesthetic qualities or narrative élan. Yet *On the Road* (1957) is a book which frequently concerns itself with the threshold between the autonomous and the automatic. Kerouac's semi-autobiographical narrator, Sal Paradise, supposedly embarks on his erratic journey around America because he wants to be 'free', but the reader soon understands him to be in thrall to an entirely second-hand agenda, represented by the figure of Dean Moriarty (based on Kerouac's friend, Neal Cassady). Dean enters the narrative only fleetingly, always blowing through on his way to somewhere better, and Sal can never fully inhabit his own story because he is fighting to keep up with Dean's itinerant programme and his inhuman, sleepless, drug-fuelled rhythm. In one key scene, he witnesses Dean and another friend, Carlo Marx, engage in a long-planned conversation in which they intend to tell each other the perfect truth. They sit cross-legged facing each other, but as Paradise listens through a long night, their exchanges seem nonsensically robotic in nature, pointlessly cataloguing words and actions from their shared past, but never pausing to consider what anything means. Kerouac supplies a sample of their endlessly scrolling data: 'You harken back now if you will, my dear fellow, to the night Marylou was crying in the room, and when, turning to you and indicating by my extra added sincerity of tone which we both knew was contrived but had its intention, that is, by my play-acting I showed that – But wait, that isn't it.' (Kerouac 2000, 44). As dawn breaks, they find themselves baffled as to how to bring the dialogue to a close.

'You can't stop the machine!', yelled Carlo at the top of his voice. The first birds sang.

'Now, when I raise my hand', said Dean, 'we'll stop talking, we'll both understand purely and without any hassle that we are simply stopping talking and we'll just sleep.'

'You can't stop the machine like that.'

'Stop the machine', I said. They looked at me.

Paradise is, nevertheless, impressed. As in 'The Shining', this mechanical word-making is aligned with insanity, but here it presents as a hip rejection of the old, 'natural' order. He tells them they are 'very amazing maniacs' and that he has listened to them all night 'like a man watching the mechanism of a watch that reached clear to the top of Berthoud Pass and yet was made with the smallest works of the most delicate watch in the world' (Kerouac 2000, 45). Sitting down to compose the book which would become *On the Road*, Kerouac apparently wanted to access the same kind of technological momentum. This he achieved by loading up his typewriter with a long scroll of taped-together paper which would never need to be changed – an attempt to disrupt the page's inbuilt temporal and spatial discipline, in order to succumb more completely to the frenetic

productivity which the typewriter itself had to offer. This makeshift scroll of paper, unspooling endlessly like the road that beckons and beguiles Sal Paradise, has become the talismanic symbol of Kerouac's virile creativity: undomesticated, untrammelled and unstoppable. Other aspects of the novel's legend bolster the sacred status of this typescript: the visitors to Kerouac's apartment who were intimidated by the unceasing thunder of the machine; the seemingly inhuman feat of writing a full-length book in less than three days; the fact that the single, barely punctuated paragraph which resulted was more aptly measured by length (120 feet) than by anything as fussy – as *clerical* – as a word-count. Kerouac's prodigious ingestion of benzadrine during the writing of the book confirms that this was an attempt to transcend the limitations of the human body as well as the limitations of the page; the sweat-sodden T-shirts which festooned his workspace, each hung up to dry for a spell, to be replaced by the next in line, suggest a body pushed to the limits of endurance by the demands of the machine. When Kerouac met Truman Capote on a television chat show, his sniffy objection became part of the mythology: 'That's not writing', he told Kerouac, 'That's typewriting.'

Capote was attacking the whole matrix of speed, technology and masculinity which Kerouac was constructing around literary production, implying that by subordinating himself and his intellectual autonomy to the machine, he was effectively volunteering for the role of Eliot's numbed type-girl, with her underwear hung up around her flat and her savourless tinned food and tinned emotions. For Capote, real style was slow cooked and daintily prepared. 'I am a completely horizontal author', he told an interviewer in 1957. 'I can't think unless I'm lying down.' The pencil was the appropriate medium for such horizontal cogitation:

I don't use a typewriter. Not in the beginning. I write my first version in longhand (pencil). Then I do a complete revision, also in longhand. Essentially I think of myself as a stylist, and stylists can become notoriously obsessed with the placing of a comma, the weight of a semicolon. Obsessions of this sort, and the time I take over them, irritate me beyond endurance. (Capote 1957)

Capote wanted to suggest an alternative to the Kerouacian ideal of a typewriter, a girl, and an unwashed T-shirt in every city in America. Instead, he presents an image of excessively finicky writing which is just as performative in its own way as Kerouac's brutal key-bashing, and partakes of a similar mock-humility, with the author once again helplessly besotted with his muse and imprisoned by his craft. Capote implies that the imperative which enslaves him is aesthetic rather than technological; he invokes a deliberately outdated, romantic image of the tortured artist physically debilitated by service to a poetic deity.

For mid-century American poets, though, the typewriter seemed to offer exciting access to a new kind of muse. In 1950, Charles Olson wrote a manifesto for the group which became known as the Black Mountain Poets, in which he emphasized the importance of the typewriter in enabling a kind of quasi-musical notation for a literature which originated in the mouth and breath:

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. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had. For the first time he can, without the conventions of rhyme and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work. (Olson 1997, 245)

Olson's key idea was that poetry should be 'projective', erupting from the body of the poet in the most direct way possible. For Olson, the typewriter offered not slavery, but freedom from linear convention; the poet's body conjoined with all the material possibilities of the blank sheet to create new, expressive configurations. Another 'typewriter' poet, E. E. Cummings, found the fixed grid of the typed page offered an alternative mode of visual and verbal signification, though for him it was the potential for precision and discipline – what Capote would call 'the placing of a comma, the weight of a semicolon' – that mattered. From his earliest unpublished drafts, composed in 1916, he was using the space bar and the carriage return to turn words into patterns of syllables, punctuation marks and white space, taking the reader's eye on vertical or diagonal journeys which disrupt the kind of automatic horizontal line-scanning which normally makes the materiality of the text disappear to the absorbed reader. Where Kerouac used his endlessly erupting typewriter to free himself from the page and from the putative reader's clingy and restrictive demands for coherence, Cummings used the machinic repertoire of parentheses and ampersands to imply connection and intermingling. The *mis-en-page* of poems like 'may i feel said he' or 'she being Brand' invites the reader into fumbling, often decidedly un-erotic, but explicitly mutual physical encounters. Whereas Eliot's typist found herself reduced (at least as far as the poet and his carbuncular young man were concerned) to the status of an unfeeling object by her daily imbrication with the apparatus of typographical anonymity, Cummings's 'she' could be woven into the airy fabric of the poem, as a present and palpable body, and sometimes as a voice. Even the absence of a 'she' could be graphically represented. In one of Cummings's late poems, 'l(a' (published in 1958), he inserts the

phrase ‘(a leaf falls)’ into the word ‘loneliness’ and then sends the resulting fragments fluttering down the page:

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(Cummings 1991, 673)

The sentiment expressed could not be more formulaic, but the automatic metaphor which renders melancholy into falling leaves is both satirized and refreshed by the typographical presentation. Read in the context of the earlier love poems, especially, the atomization of this impoverished image suggests that poetry itself will wither to nothing without a warm human connection to sustain it. Here is the converse of Kittler’s idea that technology irreversibly severs the human subject from natural experience and expression; it seems to be the typewriter, as much as the poet’s artistic agency, which desires and demands the intercession of the female-embodied experience. This appropriation of the female body would itself be reversed in the work of the avant-garde novelist Kathy Acker a few decades later. One of her early experiments (Acker 1972) probed the boundaries of legibility and authorship by retyping, rearranging and over-writing a once-stately and well-ordered quotation from *The Arabian Nights*. Acker uses her typewriter as the focal point of female recalcitrance, just as Scheherazade used her endless tales to shield herself from male power; that the title of the resulting poem, ‘Entrance into Dwelling in Paradise’, evokes the protagonist of *On the Road* is surely not an accident.

In a world shaped by the hegemonic framework of the Word document, Kerouac’s insatiable paper scroll is now the default setting for any on-screen textual input. Meanwhile, the old-fashioned typewriter, with its apparent appetite for human warmth, has become a receptacle for analogue nostalgia: an affective reminder, perhaps, of the emotional labour performed by the typing wives, assistants and administrators who have been foregrounded in this volume of chapters. Just as the typewriter intervened emphatically in

the material processes of writing, copying and editing, so it came to assume a political freight, invested with society's gendered expectations about technology, modernity and creativity. At first, the association between women and typewriters kept both firmly dehumanized; Friedrich Kittler quotes a 1929 letter to the *Frankfurter Zeitung* from a group of female office workers defending themselves from the accusation that modern women had little interest in literature. 'The rattling of the typewriters, which we have to listen to for eight hours, keeps ringing in our ears throughout the evening. [...] This is why we cannot spend evenings other than at the movies or going for walks' (Kittler 1999, 175). Women's promotion from clerical type-girl to intimate helpmeet mirrored the machine's own anthropomorphic progress, as it ceased to be merely the harbinger of industrial efficiency, and took on the status of muse and interlocutor – a formidable and exacting presence within the scene of troubled and congested male creativity. From there, it was not too difficult for women to turn their mastery of the machine to the service of their own authorship, leaving some male writers grappling with a once-sympathetic technology which seemed, inexplicably, to have turned on them.

Hunter S. Thompson's theatrical showdown with his Selectric reveals a nuanced and dynamic relationship: a mutual interchange of desires and limitations, with the typewriter's unshakable presence inflected by expectations of emotional support. When he took his own life in 2005, Thompson placed a typewriter on the table in front of him, loaded with a sheet of paper bearing the single, carefully centred word 'counselor'. What this enigmatic suicide note might signify is anyone's guess, but Thompson chose his typewriter as his messenger, and that conveys something of the strange, toxic intimacy between the man and his machine.

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