Typewriter Poetry Makes   Nothing Happen

Peter Simonsen

> Like a typewriter's final, right-hand bell,
>
> A rhyme can stop a line, or it can tell
>
> The sentence to go on and do its best
>
> Till, at the next line's end, it comes to rest.
>
> – John Hollander, *Rhyme's Reason* (14)

Types of Writing

The bell has tolled for the typewriter. Except for a poet luddite such as A. R. Ammons, who ran out of ribbon on February 25, 2001, the typewriter's bell no longer marks the end of a newly composed line of poetry with a little ring to lend a certain techno-rhythmical musicality to the work of composition. As the aged Ammons put it on his Underwood, standard upright, manual typewriter in 1997:

> I don't know what to do with this
>
> thing, these cramps, this breaking

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back: oh, yes, typing is not easy

these days, especially for those

already accustomed to computers:

they can't go back—what? and erase

things or do whole pages over or

type the whole poem over to station

it differently on the page (63)

So it is high time that we eulogize and begin to remind ourselves of the truly revolutionary impact

the typewriter had on twentieth-century thought and expression in its introduction of a writing

technology that fused "composition and publication, causing an entirely new attitude to the written

and printed word," as Marshall McLuhan pointed out in *Understanding Media* (283). What seems

most distinctive and revolutionary about twentieth-century poetry: its free verse and an

experimental layout that must be apprehended through the eye, are intimately linked to this new

writing technology. A Hugh Kenner has pointed out, "the printed page … became the poet's

medium when poets began to use typewriters" (1975 98; 1987 37-59). To use Ammons' term, the

typewriter better enabled the poet to 'station' the poem on the page.

Despite recent work by Kenner, Marjorie Perloff, Craig Dworkin, Darren Wershler-

Henry and others, we are still far from an adequate understanding of works of poetry where it

makes a sensible, that is, aesthetic difference that they were composed on and/or conceived 'for' the

typewriter. And in a wider sense, we are still far from grasping the intricate connections between

our sense of who we are, of our identity, and the technology we employ to write about our sense of who we are. This is the case today in the age of the computer and the internet, and it was the case in the age of typewriters and carbon paper. Preparatory to grasping more fully how our tools of writing shape our minds today (to paraphrase Nietzsche on the writing ball, see Kittler 200-214), we may consider how the typewriter shaped the forms of some twentieth century lyric self-expressions, which have shaped us in return.

In a Foreign Key – Inger Christensen & Claus Bremer

Consider page 47 of Inger Christensen's volume of poetry, *Det* (1969) (figure 1). Even readers without Danish will instantly recognize this as typewriter poetry by its sheer look. The medium of inscription is highly profiled, it overwhelms our sense of the poetry's form, and we should expect this medium to partake of the message. Three elements in particular stand out: the forward slash (/), the lack of traditional punctuation, and the use of extra spaces between words and phrases. These are all characteristics of typewriter poetry. Traditional punctuation – commas, periods, colons, semicolons, parentheses, dashes – is absent, and instead the forward slash is used in the penultimate and closing lines. According to the American Black Mountain poet, Charles Olson, who theorized the importance of the typewriter for poets in his 1950 essay, "Projective Verse," such a forward slash is a unique item in typewriter poetry. For Olson it marks a pause "so light it hardly separates the words" (23). Olson's influence was crucial for a number of European poets. In a Danish context, a poet such as Peter Laugesen has cultivated Olson's poetic and used the typewriter to achieve special aesthetic effects (as have e.g. Klaus Høeck and Dan Turèll). However, in "Projective Verse" Olson only saw poetry as an oral art and he insisted on theorizing the typewriter as a means to score

the text for vocal performance. Yet Christensen's poem seems to use the slash as a visual sign to indicate a semantic connection through inversion of life and death (which we need to know Danish to get). The forward slash is part of what Craig Dworkin calls the 'visual prosody' of typewriter poetry. For Dworkin, this is characterized by a number of non-lexical characters, e.g. "virgules, indices, arrows, diamonds, dashes of varying length, ellipses, lines, manipulated spacing, repeated parentheses and marks of punctuation – as well as by a range of mathematical symbols (equals, plus, greater and less than)," which must be *viewed*, "they cannot be spoken without some contrived act of translation" (62).

We are also asked to view Christensen's words, though. Readers who know Danish will recognize the lexical equivalent of the non-lexical punctuation mark for a full stop or period in line eight, "punktum." This word creates a weird effect if the poem is spoken. Traditional punctuation is of course not voiced unless we are dictating to someone, say, a typist. A punctuation mark is recognized by the eye, so when we hear the word, "punktum," in the context of a poem that surely makes a point of looking like something typewritten, we think of dictation and punctuation in addition to thinking of the use of "punktum" as the exclamation, 'period!' as in 'enough is enough, I've had it.' In this way, the scene of typewriting makes itself a felt presence in this typewriter poem – we are suddenly confused: are we reading or taking dictation? Christensen's postmodernism makes itself subtly present in such meta-poetic moments.

Readers who know Danish will also respond to the self-reflexivity of the first lines. They tell us how a painted surface cracks and flakes off, and an underlying dull white colour loosens and disappears. To have this happen at the very moment in line two where extra blank space is introduced is to call the reader's attention to what lies beneath and between the words we are trying to read: a blank surface, which in typewriter poetry is always an active contributor to the meaning of the poetic work. The development begun in the 7th century, of interword spacing in

written documents, which enabled visual silent reading (Saenger), was taken a giant step forward by the typewriter, insofar as it enabled the writer to clearly indicate the spacing he or she desired. Apollo 11 landed on the moon in 1969, the year of *Det*, and typewriter poetry is indeed a poetry of the space age. The extra spaces we find in typewriter poetry seem to indicate a desire to slow down the pace of reading, which has been increasing since we began to separate words – perhaps to silence it, even to tell us to stop reading and start looking. In the extra spaces between words the white page makes its presence felt – silence tells us this is writing not voice, spaced out text rather than overflowing effusion. The same effect can be achieved by the inverse technique of superscription. This can be observed in a poem by the German concrete poet, Claus Bremer (figure 2). The first line, which reads, "lesbares in unlesbares übersetzen," is increasingly superscripted in subsequent lines making the work finally unreadable and utterly impossible to articulate. The semantic meaning of the first line is graphically performed in subsequent lines where the 'readable' is 'translated' or turned into something 'unreadable.' Because it has been manually typewritten and mechanically reproduced we know there is a point to the congestion of letters in the superimposed words, that we are not just contemplating an accidental blotch. In a similar way, the typewriter actively and intentionally writes nothing when we hit the space bar – something that was unique to this writing technology and has a different 'feel' to it than when we merely lift the pen from the page. The blank and the 'blotch' carry meaning, but not in any traditional semantic sense – the meaning or message is conveyed even as it is covered by the medium.

This is a poetry we must look at rather than see through. It is pure typewriter poetry, a visual poetry of written silences, of artful negation and absence – of nothing. Both the nothing that is not there (Christensen's blanks) and the nothing that is (Bremer's superscription); that is, modern poetry. For Michel Foucault, in *The Order of Things*, the modern era was indeed the era when literature's "modality" became "a silent, cautious deposition of the word upon the whiteness of a

piece of paper, where it can possess neither sound nor interlocutor, where it has nothing to say but itself, nothing to do but shine in the brightness of its being" (300). The typewriter played a decisive role in this 'modernization' of literature. According to Jesper Olsson, who takes his inspiration from Friedrich Kittler, the appearance of the phonograph and film around 1900 meant that poetry lost its monopoly on representing voice and image and that "the space of the lyric was … confined to writing, in a strict sense," that is, typewriting (181).

New Types – Cummings, Pound and the Identity of the Modern Typewriter Poet

Behind typewriter poets such as Ammons, Christensen and Bremer are strong Continental and Anglo-American lines of influence. E. E. Cummings, for instance, was one of the first significant modern poets to use the typewriter from the very beginning of his career. From his earliest serious attempts at a new poetry after graduating from Harvard in 1916, Cummings experimented with the typewriter more radically than any other contemporary poet in the Anglo-American tradition. At this point he thought of himself as a cubist painter and a poet, calling himself a "POETandPAINTER" (Cohen). Cummings' interartistic orientation, combined with an acutely felt drive to 'make it new,' found an outlet on his keyboard as he typed and retyped his work in different shapes to achieve a variety of visual effects, usually *not* in the tradition of pattern poetry (see Cummings 1983).

Cummings drew his inspiration primarily from the first important Anglo-American typewriter poet, Ezra Pound. In 1912 Pound was experimenting with free verse in "The Return" (figure 3). Traditional prosody is taken to its extreme limit in this poem: each line has a unique metrical rhythm, and as Hugh Kenner points out, the poem opens with "an explicit statement that

the gods, returning now, do so in unstable meters" (1971 190). About this particular poem Cummings said that he was less moved by the oblique classical references or the free verse than he was by "the inaudible poem – the visual poem, the poem not for ears but eye" (in Kennedy 106). Indeed, Pound's repetition of 'see' three times in the opening five lines underscores his visual prosodic agenda (the alliteration of the s-sound in 'see' and 'slow' and the repetition of 'ee' in 'see' and 'feet' foreground Pound's desire to make us see as much as hear the poetic feet). Pound wants us to see his first experiments with indentation and letting uncapitalized lines begin mid-page (whether "uncertain" belongs in line three or is meant to be free-floating in line 4 is an open or indeed uncertain question. In later editions it closes line three and it may be free-floating in 1912 simply due to the size of the page. The point is that after this poem, we can never be certain about this). As literary historical anecdotes will have it, but on the authority of New Direction's founding editor, James Laughlin, Pound's quirky lineation – which was what Cummings saw more than anything and which remains one of the most revolutionary features of twentieth-century poetry – reflects his "impatience with the machine, which stood in the way of his compositional fury: 'he would slap the [typewriter's] carriage and wherever it stopped that determined the indent'" (in Dworkin 71). That we are dealing with an aesthetic intention is evident by the fact that Pound insisted on having his revolutionary line breaks and indents translated into print. Whether he meant to pun on return carriage in his title and theme of the returning gods is, at best, uncertain (thanks are returned here to Charles Lock).

Cummings' treatment of the writing machine was more controlled, and he used it even more consciously for visual effects. Thus in a 1960 letter he spelled out the obvious: "not all of my poems are to be read aloud – some … are to be seen & not heard" (Dupee 267). We need to use both eyes and ears when we read Cummings' typewriter poetry to get the full impact of the medium's work. While the supreme example of a typewriter poem is surely Cummings's

grasshopper poem from the collection *No Thanks* (1935), I want to conclude by considering a little-read poem, "little tree," which was first published in January 1920 in one of the most important American magazines for new experimental art and literature, *The Dial* (figure 4).

In line seven Cummings uses what was to become his single most well-known characteristic, his trademark signature lower case 'i.' Cummings interrupts our reading eye with the spaced out blank and surely wants us to "see" (his and Pound's word) not only the page, but the lower case 'i.' This also releases the obvious pun on eye in 'i.' He makes sure we get the idea when the second large blank space in line 13 follows the word "look" (which of course hides the two wide open eyes in "look": oo). Cummings was quite aware of the verbal and visual pun on eye/i/oo. In a 1925 letter to this mother he contrasts himself with a famous man and says, "I am a small eye poet" (Dupee 109). Using the correctly capitalized 'I' in the letter, Cummings explains the lower case 'i' in terms both of a humble lack of fame and – given the pun on eye – in terms of his status as a poet-and-painter who writes a visual poetry. Only on the page before the silently reading eye does it make a difference if the 'i' is upper or lower case. The poem we are looking at is about a Christmas little tree. Cummings is not a poet of *calligrammes* and this poem does not resemble a Christmas tree, yet its meaning is still realized by means of typography: it is both about a little tree and about little people, children: "My little sister and i." Thus littleness or smallness is foregrounded thematically to match the lower case 'i.'

The use of the unpretentious lower case 'i' in the not unpretentious *The Dial* claims our special attention because this is where Cummings most dramatically announced his radically new poetic identity – this is where he created or performed 'himself' in print and in public for the first time. Cummings' best biographer tells us that he adopted the small 'i' as part of a rebellion against the stiff conventions of middle-class life, as part of his general subversion of all conventions regarding punctuation, capitalization, syntax, and because he was physically a small man: "by

acknowledging his littleness with the lower-case 'i,' he became different, became in fact unique, and therefore made himself outstanding" (Kennedy 110). It became his identity, at least as poet. The fame is lasting – Cummings *is* his lower case. What needs to be emphasized, however, is that Cummings' little 'i' is the product of his experimental use of the typewriter: that he did not press the shift key. New York poet and former laureate, Billy Collins, has noted the impossibility of imitating Cummings without appearing ridiculous: "One can only make bad reproductions…. With Cummings, it's as easy as ignoring the shift lock on your typewriter. But as the first person to write poetry in purely lower case, he inaugurated the dominance of the typewriter … and the death of the pen and inkwell" (in Locklin 41). Note how virtually the only capital letter used by Ammons is in fact the 'I.'

Making Nothing Happen

Cummings should be seen for what he is: not just our greatest typewriter poet, but one of our great modern media poets in the tradition of Blake, Mallarmé and Morris. Cummings' identification with the typewriter led to the creation of his most lasting image, the little 'i,' which is one of the most remarkable twentieth-century revolutions in poetics. This experiment with lyric subjectivity must be seen in relation to other Modernist revisions of the central self of Romantic poetics, such as T. S. Eliot's impersonality theory. Cummings' poetic identity is a minimalist one that knows itself to be a textual construct to the extent that it is created out of nothing, by default. Not pressing the shift key is similar to 'writing' in a different key by hitting the space bar an extra time or by writing words on top of one another to render them unreadable: these are strategies of writing nothing – of making 'nothing happen' in one of the senses of that famous line from Auden's 1939 elegy on Yeats – by

which the code of typewriter poetry is exposed in all its bizarre and unconventional beauty. The

typewriter is responsible for what was most significantly new in twentieth-century poetry and poetic

identity, yet it took a stroke of individual genius to not strike the key that set it all in motion.

Illustrations

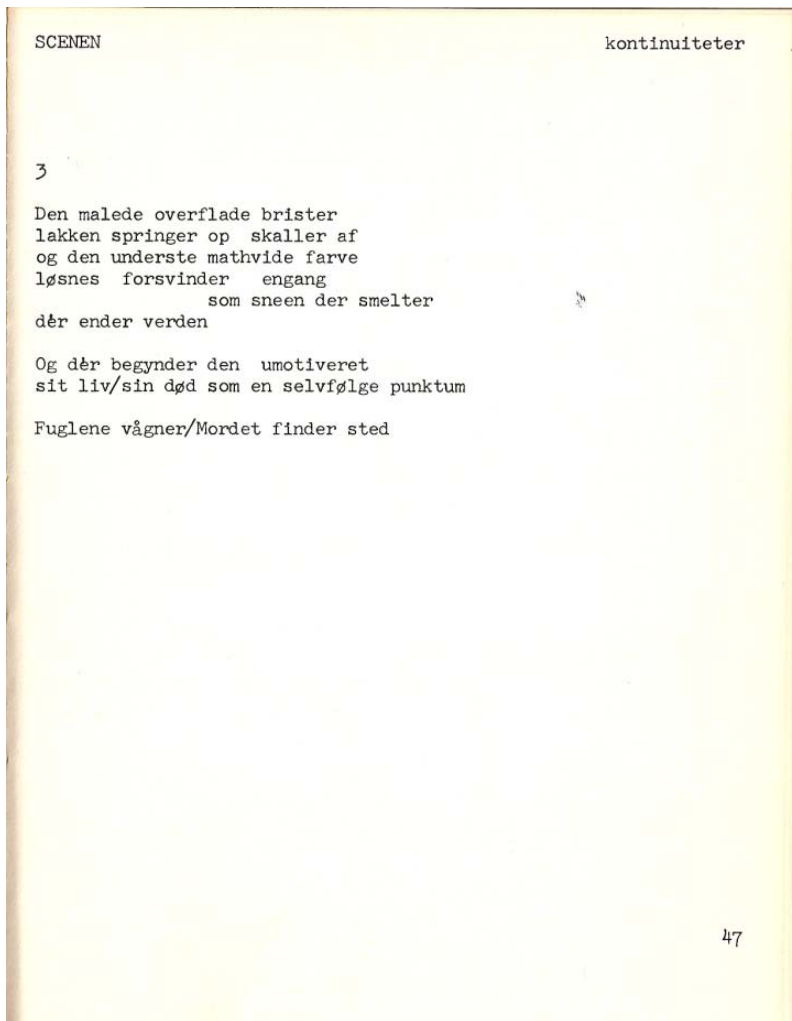

Figure 1 Inger Christensen, *Det* (1969) (47)

lesbares in unlesbares übersetzen
            lesbares in übersetzen
                        lübersetzen
                        übersetzen

Figure 2 Claus Bremer (1967) (in Riddel 13)

THE RETURN

SEE, they return; ah, see the tentative
 Movements, and the slow feet,
 The trouble in the pace and the
   uncertain
 Wavering !

See, they return, one, and by one,
With fear, as half-awakened ;
As if the snow should hesitate
And murmur in the wind,
     and half turn back ;
These were the " Wing'd-with-Awe,"
    Inviolable.

Gods of the wingèd shoe !
With them the silver hounds,
    sniffing the trace of air !

Haie ! Haie !
 These were the swift to harry ;

Figure 3 Ezra Pound, "The Return," *Ripostes* (1912) (53)

SEVEN POEMS

BY E. E. CUMMINGS

I

little tree
little silent Christmas tree
you are so little
you are more like a flower

who found you in the green forest
and were you very sorry to come away?
see   i will comfort you
because you smell so sweetly

i will kiss your cool bark
and hug you safe and tight
just as your mother would,
only don't be afraid

look   the spangles
that sleep all the year in a dark box
dreaming of being taken out and allowed to shine,
the balls the chains red and gold the fluffy threads,

put up your little arms
and i'll give them all to you to hold.
every finger shall have its ring
and there won't be a single place dark or unhappy

then when you're quite dressed
you'll stand in the window for everyone to see
and how they'll stare!
oh but you'll be very proud

and my little sister and i will take hands
and looking up at our beautiful tree
we'll dance and sing
"Noel Noel"

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Figure 4 E. E. Cummings, "little tree," *The Dial* (1920) (22)

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