

4-1-2017

Return to the Typewriter

Bruce Ballenger
Boise State University

Return to the Typewriter

BRUCE BALLENGER

My return to the typewriter began with a feverish compulsion to acquire not just one but a handful, beginning with the machines I used in college—a Hermes 3000 and a Royal desktop. But I didn't stop there. I became obsessed with earlier typewriters, especially those with glass keys, and purchased a 1940s-era Smith Corona Sterling portable and a Royal Arrow. The touch of a fingertip on that Sterling's black keys gave me a sensual thrill. A few weeks later, a West German Olympia SM3 portable arrived from an eBay seller, and I left it on my desk—to write on, I thought—but I spent far more time simply staring at it, running my hand over its graceful metal curves, tracing the chrome trim with my finger, and admiring the green wrinkle paint. My wife, observing all of this, suggested I mention this typewriter business to my therapist. She wasn't joking.

A few weeks later I did.

“This is probably silly, but Karen said I should mention that I recently developed this sort of typewriter obsession,” I told the therapist. “I've bought a bunch of them over the past few months, and she thinks it's a weird kind of nostalgic thing.”

In my case, nostalgia is an affliction, a warning sign that I'm looking backwards for something that I can find right in front me and I just refuse to see it. But I didn't think the typewriter obsession was this kind of pathological nostalgia, and I told the therapist that, and he smiled and nodded in agreement.

“How many typewriters do you have at the moment?” he said.

“I think I have seven,” I said. “Or maybe eight.”

“Don't you think that's enough?” he said.

“Oh yes,” I said. “I don’t think I’ll be buying any more.”

But two weeks later, I spent way too much money on a replacement for the first Hermes 3000—another Hermes, but in “mint” condition (and it was)—a move that seemed necessary because I had attempted to “fix” the carriage return and disassembled a part I could never put back together again. The situation reminded me of the time I tried to adjust the valves on my 1970 Fiat—the last car I felt I could actually fix—and had to call a tow truck to have the car taken to the repair shop. In 2016, there was no one to call in Boise to fix a broken typewriter.

But one day I did fix the Olympia, a success story that unfortunately later inspired me to tackle the Hermes, and it was a heady experience that made me love the typewriter even more. The Olympia SM3, a portable built in the fifties, exudes German engineering. If you turn it over and look at the gleaming guts of the machine, you see an orderly regiment of springs commanding a row of shiny type bars, all rigidly awaiting orders from the typist. There are stainless steel screws everywhere. Looking inside of the Olympia, I felt simultaneously intimidated and that anything was possible.

The carriage was jamming on the typewriter case—apparently a common malady for this model as it ages—and after a half hour of following the logic of connected rollers, springs, and screws, I found the one screw that would slightly elevate the carriage. It has worked well ever since. Fixing the Olympia gave me a giddy feeling, and it was not just a sense of accomplishment, but the feeling that in some small way I had recovered something I had lost: a machine that I could actually understand. My Fiat failures need not be prophetic, I thought, until I remembered the disassembled Hermes lying hopelessly in the garage. It is a very small garage, tenuously attached to our 100-year-old house, and it is where things wanted and unwanted collect, though I have always had a hard time distinguishing between the two.



There’s a community of typewriter lovers online—the “typosphere”—who diligently type their posts on their machines, scan them, and upload them to a blog—inky typewritten missives thrust defiantly into a digital world of otherwise flawless fonts. Typewriter people on these sites discuss things much like other online collectors—what they own, what’s for sale, and where to look for bargains. But there’s also much talk about the sensory experience of

the typewriter—things like the special “feel” of the keys in a Royal portable, the pleasing look of the seafoam green Hermes, or the peculiar clatter of the Olympia. Since I happily abandoned the manual typewriter for a computer in the early nineties, writing lost its sound, and I do find some pleasure in its return. Some typewriters are noisier than others. My Olympia SM3 makes a tremendous racket, each keystroke sounding like the report of a small handgun. Writing on the Olympia sounds like going to war against silence. The Royal Arrow clanks like a jalopy, and consequently it’s easier to accept when a wheel comes off and my writing runs off the road and into a ditch. The Hermes 3000 is somewhere in between. The Swiss who built it padded the inside of the typewriter with felt and sealed it in a metal case. Each keystroke makes a muffled clank, which I find polite and serious—perhaps even a little repressed—qualities that aren’t always good for writing first drafts.

The return of sound to writing—and the physical labor of pounding on the keys to make it—must change things for writers, at least in subtle ways. “The noise told us we achieved something,” says *New Yorker* writer Joan Acocella. “A page produced on a manual typewriter was like a record of the torture of thought.” I don’t know about torture, but I find the clatter of a manual strangely satisfying. Handwriting has a sound, too, and it’s as physical as typing but seems very different somehow. Handwriting is like the near silent flight of a bat at dusk, while typewriting is the jackhammer breaking asphalt above a broken water line. Henry James dictated many of his essays, stories, and novels to a typist who later reported that the great writer found the sound of his Remington manual a “creative spur.” When the machine went in for repairs, the replacement typewriter, an Oliver, caused James “evident discomfort” because it didn’t sound right. He missed the racket the Remington made in response to his dictation, and found it “disconcerting to speak to something that made no responsive sound at all.”

It’s interesting to me that the noise of typewriting isn’t inhibiting, especially when it stops. And it does stop. In this way, writing on a typewriter is like writing on a computer; on both I grind to a halt to think about what I’ve said and what I might say. But strangely, I find the silences that come when I stop typing on a typewriter more forgiving than when I write on a computer, whose blinking cursor is an insistent reminder that the computer is both alive and waiting. I also wonder if, as a nation of movie lovers, we don’t come to expect an interesting drama to unfold on a screen—even a computer

monitor—and become impatient when it doesn't. On the other hand, when a manual typewriter goes silent, the machine becomes inert. It just sits there. No hum or blinking—no electronic expectation—just a half-finished sentence or orphaned paragraph on a white piece of paper. It calls to the writer, but less urgently and insistently. It says, "I can wait."

I welcome the typewriter's patience, because now more than ever I'd rather not be rushed. Though it's taken me a long time to figure out, I've learned that to be rushed is no good for writing, and it is apparently no good for serious collecting either. Psychologists suggest that passionate collectors of things go through a kind of slow "courtship," where they fall in love with "the notion of owning the object." It is, at first, a cautious relationship, more like the wariness of the recently divorced on a first date than the headlong collision of amorous adolescents. Meanwhile, a grunting UPS driver drops another heavy cardboard box on my front porch, battered from its journey, and when it emerges from its bubble wrap, I'll have another typewriter to flirt with. At least until the next one arrives.



Unlike the computer, the typewriter remembers its mistakes, as we do, and until the invention of Wite-Out in 1966 the typist had two alternatives (short of retyping the page) for remedying error: white correction tape or the "x" key. The latter is a crude, blunt solution—bludgeoning a misspelled word or half-baked thought by hammering it over with "xxxxxxx"—and this is the method I prefer. This requires a willingness to live with ugliness, something I could not tolerate as a young writer, and perhaps this, above all, is why my return to the typewriter has been so fruitful. Writing for me has always been a struggle to manage what the novelist Gail Godwin once called the "Watcher at the Gates," an internal voice that is a "sharp-eyed critic," all too willing to bring writing to a halt before I have much to work with. Watchers, Godwin writes, are "notorious pencil sharpeners, ribbon changers, plant waterers, home repairers, and abhorers of messy rooms or messy pages," determined to waylay writers from doing the work of getting words down.

Years ago, when a typewriter was all I used to write with, my Watcher was a big fan of the machine. It would seem the perfect device for cranking up a writer's anxiety about making a mistake, slowing writing to a crawl. I am a clumsy typist. I easily confuse letters, and I exert uneven pressure on

the keys, so that one letter might arrive with inky boldness and the next one might be faint, tentative, and unsure. Years ago, when I typed papers, poems, and essays in college, the cosmetics of the page mattered to me more, and on a computer, where cosmetics are much easier to manage, it still does. But these days my typewritten pages always look like they've been beaten up in some verbal back alley, where the "x" key has slugged it out with errant words and thoughts. For the most part, my Watcher stays clear of this neighborhood.

I've always found that the emotional work of writing lies, as Godwin observed, in the fear of failure. This begins with being afraid that when you sit down to write, nothing will come, and then when it does it won't be good enough. It came as a revelation to me years ago that the tools I use to write with can affect this fear of failure by calibrating my need to perform. The journal was the first place I learned to write badly without shame, while on the computer—where my Watcher dwells—there is always some performance anxiety. The typewriter is somewhere in between the orderly march of words on a computer screen and the helter-skelter of a journal, so the return to the typewriter means there is now a third track to follow, one that is part performance and part play, one where the Watcher is present but sees from a distance.

Another pleasure has returned with the typewriter, too, and that's the accumulation of pages. While I do print out manuscripts from my computer from time to time, mostly the work exists in some unseen file. While it can easily be summoned, magically assembled from the digital ether to appear on my screen, there's something infinitely more satisfying about the unruly stack of typewritten pages. Depending on the weather, they may still hold the curl of the typewriter's rubber platen, and the feel of the words embossed on the page reminds me of writing's labor. Printer pages seem ephemeral, like a late spring snow, but as typewritten pages collect, they somehow seem more permanent, and they are harder to throw away. Each typewriter I use leaves its signature on those pages. The Hermes has an unusually large font that seems immodest somehow. The Royal Arrow—one of my older machines—cannot seem to keep its characters in line, which I find endearing. No matter how often I clean its typebars, the Olympia portable on my desk at home has a half clotted "e" that winks at me defiantly. As my typewriter collection grows, so does this idiosyncratic chorus, who are welcome backup singers when I can't seem to find the right words.



One of the earliest typewriter keyboards was designed after a piano. This made little sense, of course, because a typist makes words not chords, choosing one key at a time, but I like the analogy anyway. I am a habitual key jammer. Like commuters rushing a subway door, two or three keys often get stuck, poised before the paper until I flick them free with a finger. Key jamming is the equivalent of a dissonant chord, another kind of music the typewriter makes. It's likely I'm more attuned to the typewriter's crude rhythms because as a child I often went to sleep to the sound of my father pounding away on his Royal Standard in a room down the hall. The sound was a lullaby because it meant my father wasn't too drunk to type, and as I lay there in the dark I could believe him again when he said he was a writer. Sober, he was a good one, too, doing feature stories for the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Post*, and even writing an unpublished article about his brief time in rehab for his alcoholism at Hazelton in Minnesota, a story that in real life didn't end well for him. Dad had a preference for typing drafts on yellow manuscript paper—cheap stuff that felt like newsprint—and when I look at these pages now, they are riddled with clear holes where an “o” or an “a” punched through. He apparently attacked the keys with a fury, perhaps desperate to get the words down. He was dead at 57, a day after my brother found him suffering from a cerebral hemorrhage, lying on the floor right next to his Royal typewriter.

I kept that machine for many years, using it to type papers in college. Dad also had an Olivetti Lettera 22, and I used this, too, though I never liked it much. I really wanted to. It was a small Italian portable with a sleek profile, and had a zipper case trimmed in brown leather. But it was hard to type on, demanding more pressure on the keys than I could muster. Instead, I turned to the Royal, the typewriter whose muffled clatter put me to sleep years before. Dad's Royal was an office machine rather than a portable; it was built like a tank and looked like one, too—gray metal with yellowish, ivory-colored keys. Typewriter fans talk about which machines are particularly good “typers,” models that may not be beautiful to look at but are responsive to the touch, typewriters that owners intend to use not display. I began my collection with a similar motive, and auditioned each typewriter hoping to find one that suited me as much as Dad's old Royal did. Two machines—the Hermes and Olympia portables—became my favorites; they are both models often singled out by writers as among the best-working typewriters.

The right feel of a typer is a quite personal judgment, of course, but once you've found a great one you keep it close by. (You worry about it a little, too, hoping that strange grinding sound or anemic sounding ding isn't life threatening.) Stories about great (almost always male) writers and their favorite typewriters are common lore in the typosphere. Legend has it that Hemingway used only a couple of typewriters for much of his career, including a Royal Arrow portable, a machine in my collection. Woody Allen apparently has owned only one typewriter—an Olympia SM3 that he bought when he was 16. Cormac McCarthy still uses an Olivetti 32. This durable commitment to the typewriter among some writers isn't too surprising, despite the ease of writing on a computer. It might be habit or stubbornness or the siren song of body memory—the need to pound at the keys rather than tap at them, and to hear the clanking music of the typebars hitting paper and platen. Some longtime users develop personal relationships with their machines, which can become embodied. The novelist Paul Auster writes that “slowly but surely” his long association with an Olympia made it difficult “thinking about my typewriter as an *it*.” He says, “the *it* has turned to *him*.”

While I do assign personalities to my typewriters, I have not thought to give them personhood, the kind of thing we sometimes feel for other things like cars and boats. We do this, I suppose, because we sense their presence, and the shift from “it” to “him” or “her” helps us to do this. Malfunctions become lovable quirks. This makes it possible for us to live with the things that fail us, and this is especially necessary for the things we imagine we need most. The people that fail us—well, that's something else.



The return to the typewriter has also meant returning in memory to the summer of 1966, when everyone I knew was enrolled in a typing course to prepare for high school. The class was held in a sweltering room filled with Royal Empress typewriters—large gray office machines with glossy curves that designers in the sixties seemed to fancy. Our textbook that summer, *Gregg's Typing*, was oddly shaped—longer than wide and bound at the top—and featured a series of lessons to improve our speed and accuracy. We practiced “alphabet reaches” and two-to-five-minute timed exercises in which we copied nonsense sentences like this one: “Friends civics fans, when they both but did if it is.” Most days ended with a speed test, and when we were all frantically typing at once, the

room thundered with the sound of words copied from *Gregg's*: “Hot rodders were once a menace to safety on public highways, but now most of them have become respectable and well-respected for their help to other motorists.”

Seven blocks away, while we raced with each other that summer to write more than 50 words per minute, the dead alewives piled up on Lake Michigan's beaches. These die-offs occurred every summer in those years, but in 1966 and 1967 they were particularly staggering. A Chicago newspaper back then described a “great shimmering band of [dead] alewives stretching for forty miles” along Lake Michigan's southern shoreline, millions of fish that would collect on the beaches to decompose in the hot sun. Meanwhile, at typing class, the dead words piled up for us as we produced page after page of meaningless prose copied from *Gregg's Typing*. But we got faster, and by the end of the course we could type without looking at the keys, a marvel we hadn't been able to imagine when the class began.

I was learning “touch typing,” of course, a method that is so commonplace now that it's hard to imagine it as a novelty. But the user manuals for the first commercial typewriters instructed typists to use only their forefingers to type—in other words, to “hunt and peck.” The idea of using all the fingers hadn't been considered. If the typewriter was to be a commercial success, however, it would have to outrun handwriting, which was the standard method of dictation in the office. In the 1880s, F. E. McGurrin, a young court reporter in Salt Lake City and a typewriter fancier, taught himself to type blindfolded. Using all of his fingers save the thumb on his left hand, McGurrin began to hit impressive speeds on his Remington. His fame spread. In the January 1888 issue of *The Typewriter Operator*, McGurrin challenged any typist to try to beat him in a typewriter race for a purse of \$500. Louis Traub, who ran the Longley Shorthand Institute in Cincinnati, accepted, and the two squared off in front of a large crowd of mostly stenographers on July 25, 1888, in a room at Traub's stenography school.

It's hard to imagine now that a typing race would generate much drama, but the Cincinnati papers breathlessly covered the event, and in the years that followed, typewriting races became a national sport. McGurrin was its first champion. The typewriter was still a novelty in the 1880s, of course, and they were impressively intricate machines, high-backed with exposed typebars and linkages, a nest of machined metal contained in a glossy black frame.

McGurrin's Remington 2—made by the gun maker—even featured elegantly stenciled flowers. Typewriter historian Darren Wershler-Henry notes that at about this time, users of the machine became “type-writers” rather than “operators,” a linguistic turn in which person and machine seemed to merge, a phenomenon that coincidentally also seems to apply to collectors where, as one psychologist put it, “the line between ‘me’ and ‘mine’ is blurred.”

It was the fascination with speed that drew the crowds to typewriter racing; after all, this was the point of these contests. And in Cincinnati on that July day in 1888, McGurrin hit 95 words per minute when listening to dictation and 98 when copying from a court document. Straub, the challenger, lagged behind. It was a victory for touch typing (and a PR success for Remington, the maker of McGurrin's winning machine). But McGurrin's streak as the world's fastest typist didn't last long. In a Toronto competition, a month after the Cincinnati contest, a New York stenographer named Marie Orr proved even faster. One paper reported that “her skill in manipulating the machine was marvelous.” Orr also won a special medal for her speed in typing the phrase “This is a song to fill thee with delight” over and over again for five minutes with the fewest mistakes.

REMINGTON COPY WRITTEN BY MISS ORR.

This is a song .to fill th ew with deloght . This is a song to fill thee with delight.This is a son to fill thee with delight.This is a song to fill thee with delight.This is a song to fill thee with delight.This is a song to fill thee with delight.This is a song to fill thee with delight.This is a song to fill thee with delight.This is a song to fill thee with delight.This is a song to fill thee with delight.This is a song to fill thee with delight.This is a song to fill thee with delight.

As you can see from this excerpt from Orr's prize-winning entry, she comes out of the gate with a stumble, but soon finds her rhythm. This is a shame, really, because when she trips over “song” and writes “son”—“This is a son to fill thee with delight”—the error briefly breaks the deadening repetition of the words, and for a moment I imagine my own mother saying it. This is, of course, entirely beside the point of a typing contest, as it was in typing class, those many years ago, where we navigated our lumbering Royal Empress typewriters towards that mythical shore where the natives, ankle deep in dead alewives, could type 60 words a minute without a single mistake.



We recently visited the Antique World Mall in search of a tablecloth. My parents owned an antique shop when I was young, in an old house with three floors of items on a busy road in Glenview, Illinois. This was nothing like that. The Antique World Mall is a warehouse with long rows of antiques, each divided into booths where separate vendors display their specialties—children’s dolls, linens, cowboy hats and boots, furniture, glassware, old tools, and so on. There are typewriters here and there, too, and the other day there was an old Corona with glass keys (\$45), a Royal desktop with glass sides (\$85), and a magnificent upright Remington in mint condition (\$120). Karen had her eye on me.

“You want to buy one,” she said.

“No, I think I’m finished. I don’t need any more typewriters,” I said.

I meant it, too. Yet as I sit here, I can’t get that Remington out of my mind. It glistened under a bright desk lamp, with its glass keys, gold antique lettering, and glossy black enamel. Even now, after all of this, I wonder at the strangeness of such a longing.

Yet people collect things, and they always have. Sigmund Freud was passionate about Egyptian, Greek, and Roman antiquities, and was said to sometimes stroke his favorite statue—a figurine of the Greek goddess Athena—while engaged in psychoanalysis with patients. Freud famously opined that the compulsion to collect is a matter of control and recovery, two things we lost when we first watched our turds disappear in those early, traumatic flushes. Twenty years ago, when we were clearing out the house in New Hampshire to move to Idaho, where we now live, Karen proposed that I should dispose of my few remaining manual typewriters, none of which I used anymore. These included my father’s Olivetti portable and Royal Standard, as well as the Hermes 3000 I bought new in college. She meant “dispose” literally—I should throw them away. Naturally I resisted. But in those waning days of the move, we became less and less particular about what to keep, and soon we were wildly tossing things into the huge garbage bin we had rented to receive things that no longer mattered. These aren’t always easy calculations under the best of circumstances, as the cluttered garage attached to my Idaho home still suggests, and I took the three typewriters and threw them in the garbage bin.

The philosopher William James wrote that losing a collection leads to “a sense of shrinkage of our personality, a partial conversion of ourselves to

nothingness,” which seems a little strong. But experts often say that while the things we choose to collect may initially be accidental, they soon become implicated in our sense of identity. To lose a collection, James suggests, is to lose a part of ourselves. Until recently, I wasn’t haunted by the loss of those three typewriters, though I always regretted jumping up and down on the refuse trying to pack things down to make more room in the disposal bin. Somewhere under those layers of household rubbish I was stomping on an Olivetti, Royal, and Hermes. Now, of course, I want them back in the worst way. I imagine my old typewriters crushed and rusting away under six feet of sand in a New Hampshire landfill, and I can’t understand the version of myself back then who decided to throw them away. He was, I guess, ready to move on.

I could never have known, of course, that two decades later I would find myself with a garage full of typewriters, a collection that now stands at 16. However, the audition is over. I leave an Olympia SM3 on the desk at home, and a later Olympia model built in the late sixties—the SM4—on my desk at the university. The machines wait at my left elbow, a piece of paper in each, ready to make a racket. From time to time, I’ll go into the garage and crack the case of one of the machines I rejected, put it on the workbench, and give it a try just to confirm I made the right choice, that those Olympias should stay where they are. In a world of want, I am a little embarrassed by the acquisitive impulse that led me to collect manual typewriters, and lately I think about giving away all but the ones I use. But the other day my friend Richard wrote that his wife Cheryl has a Remington from the “twenties or thirties,” and asked whether I’d be interested in it. I said I would.

In interviews, collectors often describe their collections as “sacred,” and even “magical,” possessing a meaning that seems to defy reason. It’s a habit that invites good-natured ridicule. Last week, my wife Karen took a picture of me gesticulating at an antique typewriter display in the front window of a stationary store in Baker City, Oregon, and posted it on Facebook. “Bruce found a typewriter porn shop, and it was hard to pull him away,” she wrote. And yet, on some level we are all collectors, holding on to a box of favorite cassette tapes or a glass jar of old rocks collected on family trips. They are objects that evoke another time and place—relics of a personal history. To collect things that once belonged to someone else seems a little different somehow, because they carry a past we cannot know, though with my typewriters I eagerly look for the evidence. Several still have stickers from the office supply where they

were bought, mostly in the Midwest. A few have the faint scent of cigarettes; some are speckled with Wite-Out or flecks of pink typewriter eraser, traces of attempts to correct past mistakes. My collection connects me to writers at other times, all waiting for the words to come, and the chatter of each typewriter making them. It is the sound of the machinery of meaning-making—*rat a tat, tat, rat a tat, tat, tat, ding*—then the sweep of the left hand and the grind of the carriage as it returns home to begin a fresh line. It is the hopeful sound of typing down the hall.

Though I tell myself that my motives were utilitarian—I just wanted to find a typewriter I wanted to use—I know that there are unconscious reasons for collecting these machines. But what could they be? To feel connected in some small way to my dad, a man I lost in my early twenties? Or is it nostalgia about the young man I was back then, so serious and so sad? G. Thomas Tanselle writes that the emotional need behind collecting is “a drive to create order,” to pluck a desired object from a chaotic world and place it somewhere it belongs. Doing this, the collector finds the world less threatening and more understandable. It is hard for me to imagine that those old typewriters, lined up on a bowed shelf in the garage, might possess such power. Is there a better explanation for my return to the typewriter? Perhaps one day I should take them all out of their dusty cases, set them side by side, and type on each, as Marie Orr once did, “This is a song to fill thee with delight.” That clanking chorus may be the best answer I can find.