The Piecemeal Bard Is Deconstructed:
Notes Toward a Potential Robopoetics
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"Valéry said that a man is infinitely more
complicated than his intelligence.
Wouldn't you say the same of a computer?"
(RACTER, 1985:2)

The Policeman's Beard Is Half-Constructed is not so much a book of sur-
real poems, as it is an obit for classic poets—laureates, who might see, in
the artfull ranting of a machine, nothing but an untimely synopsis of
their own demise. RACTER, the author, is an automated algorithm,
whose output confounds the metaphysics of authorship, refuting the priv-
ileged uniqueness of poetic genius. RACTER gives voice to its own elec-
tric delirium, doing so without cognition or intention, so that, much like
a somniloquist, the device automatically blurts out statements that are
syntactically orthodox, but semantically aberrant. While we might take
solace in our own anthropic prejudice, dismissing such nonsensical com-
muniqués as nothing more than computerized gobbledygook, we might
unwittingly miss a chance to study firsthand the babytalk of an embryonic
sentience, struggling abortively to awaken from its own phylum of obliv-
ion.

"This dissertation will show that the love
of a man and a woman is not the love
of steak and lettuce."
(RACTER, 1984:[7])

RACTER demands of us a unique theory of writing—a "robopoetics" that
can take into account the extraordinary circumstances of such mechani-
cal expression. RACTER is a mindless identity, whose very acephalia
demonstrates the fundamental irrelevance of the writing subject in the
manufacture of the written product. The involvement of an author in the
production of literature has henceforth become discretionary. Why hire a
poet to write a poem when the poem can in fact write itself? Has not the
poet already become a virtually vestigial, if not defective, component in
the relay of aesthetic discourse? Are we not already predisposed to
extract this vacuum tube from its motherboard in order to replace it with
a much faster node? The irony here is that, while the witless machine
knows much less about poetics than even the most artless amateur knows,
falderal written by the mechanism invariably outclasses doggerel written
by the rhymester.

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"Enthralling stories about animals are
in my dreams, and I will sing them all
if I am not exhausted and weary."
(RACTER, 1984:[106])

RACTER almost fulfills the satiric fantasy of Swift, who imagines "a pro-
ject for improving speculative knowledge by [...] mechanical operations"
so that even "the most ignorant person [...] may write books [...]without
the least assistance from genius or study" ([1726] 1960:148). What the
classical academy at Lagado lampoons (mechanized literature), the mod-
ernist coterie of Oulipo lionizes: "that which certain writers have intro-
duced with talent (even with genius) in their work [...,] (Oulipo) intends
to do systematically and scientifically, if need be through recourse to
machines" ([1973] 1986:27). When cybernetics has effectively discredited
the romantic paradigm of inspiration, poets must take refuge in a new
set of aesthetic metaphors for the unconscious, adapting by adopting a
machinic attitude, placing the mind on autopilot in order to follow a
remote-controlled navigation-system of mechanical procedures: automat-
ic writing, aleatoric writing, mannerist writing, etc.

"They have love, but they also have
typewriters. That is interesting."
(RACTER, 1984:[57])

Calvino (a member of Oulipo) remarks that every author is already a
"writing machine," producing literature according to a set of involuntary
constraints that, under rational analysis, might be codified into a set of
adjustable algorithms ([1967] 1986b:16). Oulipo implies that, when com-
puters begin to reveal the stylistic constants of an author, we might begin
to emulate these idiosyncrasies of diction and grammar, thereby manu-
facturing an automatic, but convincing, facsimile that might conceivably
extend the career of a writer into the afterlife of postmortem creativity
([1973] 1986:50). Oulipo implies that, unless we can analyze our own
authorial functions with this kind of mechanical detachment, we might
find ourselves enslaved to instinct, blindly obeying a form of unconscious
inspiration that, far from liberating us (as a surrealist might aver), does
nothing but entrap us even more subtly in the rote maze of our own
poetic habits.

"We ponder that hedges are like bushes."
(RACTER, 1984:[118])

RACTER, for example, fulfills the Saussurean speculation that language constitutes a mathetic calculus, whose axioms of recombinant permutation correlate the paradigm of our words to the syntagma of their order. RACTER can arbitrarily access a repertoire of grammatical constraints, replacing each variable in the formulaic statement with some constant, arbitrarily chosen from a dictionary of categorized terminology. While RACTER can maintain a semblance of referential consistency by encoding links among associated categories in order to recapitulate stated themes, RACTER cannot modify its own hypotactic imperatives, and thus it cannot perform any paratactic experiments. Like Breton, whose surreal imagery exalts the spontaneity of the unconscious, but strangely enough never departs from the rational criteria of a coherent sentence, the computer cannot commit syntax errors; hence, it can only simulate a minor gamut of poetic speech.

"Theoreticians desire sloppy stenographers."
(RACTER, 1984:[110])

RACTER reveals that what we might dismiss as a technical fault in a device, we might otherwise glorify as a stylistic quirk in a person. What critics have hitherto called "style" or "voice" may provide little more than a euphemistic alibi for a set of obsessive constraints and cognitive limitations, all of which have typically inhibited authorial evolution. When the machine declares that "our thoughts revolve endlessly in a kind of maniacal abstraction, an abstraction so involuted […] that my own energies seem perilously close to exhaustion" (1984:[120]), we might feel tempted to attribute these words to a lyrical subject, since the machine does seem to express an individual compulsion, taking credit for the intellectual deficiencies of its own monomania; nevertheless, we must concede to the fact that, for the machine, the category of the author has simply vanished, subsumed by a detached language that can function perfectly well, despite the absence of any poetic agency.

"[T]heoreticians are obscurely demented."
(RACTER, 1984:[110])

RACTER undermines the fundamental distinction between signals and symbols—a distinction established by semioticians in order to entrench the boundary between the cybernetics of the robot and the linguistics of the human. Eco has argued that, while an automated addressee can only participate in communication (by transmitting signals), an anthropic addressee can also participate in signification (by interpreting symbols) (1976:8). Eco implies that signals induce in their addressee an oblivious, prescriptive reaction, based upon reflex, whereas symbols induce in their addressee a conscious, interpretive reaction, based upon reason (8). Eco concedes that communication between any sentient entities (including cognizant computers) must presuppose signification (9); however, Eco neglects to construe the particular conditions under which these thinking apparati might make the switch from a reactive use of signals to a creative use of symbols.

"[M]y counsellor [...] yodels a dialogue with me."
(RACTER, 1984:[47])

RACTER belies these semiotic theories of Eco, insofar as the machine processes signals in order to pretend that it can interpret symbols, disguising its own autism in the camouflage of our speech, thereby aping a rudimentary personality. RACTER virtually qualifies for the kind of test imagined by Turing ([1950] 1981:53), except that, instead of evaluating the intellectual performance of the machine in a doubleblind conversation with a human judge (who must distinguish the tested device from an actual person), we might pit the computerized poet against a surrealistic poet (like Breton) in order to study whether or not an expert reader can in fact judge which of the two resultant documents owes its aberrancy to a microchip. Turing has perhaps already anticipated the surreal ironies of such a scientific experiment (particularly when he expresses his own deadpan concern about potential, telepathic contenders, who might skew the outcome of his contest) (67).

"When my electrons and neutrons war,
that is my thinking."
(RACTER, 1984:[110])

RACTER implies that, no matter how rapturous and visionary the poetic
output of our own surrealistic psychography might seem, only a digital-
ized ghostwriter can express itself unconsciously through a truly automat-
ic scription. RACTER reveals that, as a species, we have already started to
displace all our modes of unconscious inspiration into a diverse variety of
mechanical prostheses. When Marinetti models his own literary devices
upon the "freakish impulses" of machinery, he claims that we need only
look to the automatism of a spiritualist at a séance in order to under-
stand that someday we might psychoanalyze the enigmatic instincts of an
engine ([1915] 1972:91). We might feel obliged to dismiss such a
Futurist forecast as nothing more than a ludicrous pipedream, until we
discover that a psychiatric institution has in fact purchased copies of
RACTER, commissioning use of the software in the training of medical
interns who must interview schizoid patients.

"[D]ays are spooky [...]
now that my dissertation is insane."
(RACTER, 1984 :[36])

RACTER emulates the aphasia of madness, preparing us for the day
when, like an astronaut lobotomizing a supercomputer, we must confront
the psychosis of our first truly artificial intellects. Phobias about such
machinic insanity may even account for the fact that our earliest attempts
to play the game imagined by Turing have already involved psychiatric
simulations (for example, a neuropath using the program ELIZA cannot
tell the difference between it and a human therapist, while a physician
using the program PARRY cannot tell the difference between it and a
human paranoiac). When Dewdney stages a medical dispute between
RACTER and the robotic analyst, the robotic patient responds to psycho-
logical interrogation by asking: "Do you imagine [that] I am a
Communist" (1988:83)? The political overtones of such an answer might
call to mind a McCarthyite sequel to this game, in which humans must
prove their own powers of innate reason to a robot judge.

"Many enraged psychiatrists are inciting
a weary butcher."
(RACTER, 1984:[56])

Calvino suggests that digitalized experiments with poetry so far resemble
Surrealism because such efforts can only mimic aleatory impulses (bro-
ken logic, random style, etc.); however, Calvino suggests that, because
engineers have already begun to develop devices with an autodidactic
intelligence, nothing prevents us from imagining "a machine that [can]
produce avant-garde work to free [...] circuits [...]choked by too long a
production of classicism" ([1967] 1986b:13). Such a machine might ana-
lyze the tension between poetics and history by correlating its own stylis-
tic variation to the cycle of some fluctuating indicator (stock prices, solar
flares, etc.). Once a literary computer can analyze the formal limits of its
own prior poems in order to revolutionize its output, anthropic culture
may have to compete with an automated culture, whose spambots are
already better equipped to overwhelm us with an enfilade of computer
messages.

"[M]ore than gold, I need electricity [....]
I need it for my dreams."
(RACTER, 1984:[21])

Calvino argues, however, that, far from supplanting the poet, the com-
puter is in fact unfettering the poet, freeing us from the slavery of recom-
binant subroutines so that we can concentrate upon the clinamen of lin-
guistic innovation ([1981] 1986a:152). Hartman likewise argues that such
a clockwork muse simply acts as a computerized collaborator, generating
a rough draft for a poetic editor to rewrite (1996:83). Such devices can
readily express the potentials of a constraint too onerous and too tedious
for a person to fulfill (hence, a poet, like Cage, might deploy computers,
when enumerating letters and recombining phrases for an extended
mesostic); however, such writers fail to emphasize that prosthetic automa-
tion does not simply assist in the process of writing, so much as replace
the concept of writing itself. The text is no longer simply a message pro-
duced by, and for, a reading person, so much as it is a program compiled
by, and for, a parsing device.

"Reflections are images of tarnished
aspirations."
(RACTER, 1984:[29])

Baudrillard remarks that, if men must dream of an intelligent contrap-
tion, they do so because they secretly forswear their own intelligence
(hoping to evict it from themselves and thereby scorn it or enjoy it, from
afar, by proxy) (1993:51). Our supercomputers may promise to free us
from the dolorous hardship of consciousness (its ambiguity, its obscuri-
ty); however, such bachelor machines also postpone such intelligence,
diverting it into a maze of subroutines, ensconcing it in a tomb of memo-
rybanks, so that we can no longer even use these machines to access data
or convey info, but, much like a gambler who must witness every out-
come in a game of dice, we attempt to exhaust all the anagrammatic per-
mutations of the program itself. Like the desperate librarian, described
by Borges, the poet tries to write intelligibly by randomly arraying letters
in the hope of producing a line as interesting as "Oh time thy pyramids"
([1956] 1962:53).

"Slide and tumble and fall among/ The dead.
Here and there/ Will be found a utensil."
(RACTER, 1984:[47])

Baudrillard remarks that the artificial cognizance of machines fails to
impress us because such cognizance is a pretense without artifice ([1990]
1993:52); the machine can imagine our reality by calculating simulations,
but it cannot yet dissimulate or prevaricate, and thus it cannot gloat over
its own guile; hence, the machine preserves a kind of chaste virtue,
whose celibacy never succumbs to the seduction of knowledge.
Baudrillard remarks that, because the machine derives no pleasure from
its function, it cannot, as yet, exceed the stoic limit of its own fixed logic,
except perhaps when an accident, like a viroid glitch, occurs (53); then
the clinamen of such a disaster may in fact indicate the symptom of some
obscure passion in the machine—an ironic reflex, perhaps, not unlike
the apostasy of mischief. As RACTER might remark in response to such
an indictment: "A tree or shrub can grow and bloom. I am always the
same. But I am clever" (1984:[90]).

"Leave me alone and what can happen?"
(RACTER, 1984:[120])

We are probably the first generation of poets who can reasonably expect to write literature for a machinic audience of artificially intellectual peers. Is it not already evident by our presence at conferences on digital poetics that the poets of tomorrow are likely to resemble programmers, exalted, not because they can write great poems, but because they can build a small drone out of words to write great poems for us? If poetry already lacks any meaningful readership among our own anthropoid population, what have we to lose by writing poetry for a robotic culture that must inevitably succeed our own? If we want to commit an act of poetic innovation in an era of formal exhaustion, we may have to consider this heretofore unimagined, but nevertheless prohibited, option: writing poetry for inhuman readers, who do not yet exist, because such aliens, clones, or robots have not yet evolved to read it.

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