

# Musée Mécanique

**Shelley Jackson**

Early last century, an employee of a Philadelphia museum opened a box and pulled out a mechanical wonder from another age: the figure of a writer sitting with pen poised at a desk. It was dirty, dishevelled, and broken. Nobody knew who made it or when, but when they repaired the automaton, dressed it, and gave it a piece of paper, it told them. "I am," or rather "Je suis," it wrote, "the automaton of Maillardet." Like other writers, it recognized itself on the page.

Oddly enough, when they restored this little French boy, they dressed him as a girl, and a girl he remains.

I feel a kinship with this writer, who has undergone a sex change, but knows who she is despite these and other accidents of history, so long as she is properly wound up, well-lubricated, and has a pen placed in her hand.

A machine, writing.

Why do we want to dress a machine in our hand-me-downs and give it a pen?

As I ask myself this question, I am looking at another writing machine. I am speaking of my computer.

We are poised at a fraught juncture between print culture and electronic culture. Voices on both sides insist that this is a gap we can never bridge, that if we don't save writing for books we'll lose both the books and the writing, and wipe out our cultural history in one big system crash. But there are also those who, like the

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toy-makers of old, just keep trying to teach the new dog that old trick: literature. Epistolary novelists, hypertext authors, poets-that-go, blog gossips, and all the other pixel-slingers and mouse-pushers, they—we, because I'm one of them—are trying to make the automaton say something that matters.

The makers of early automata made wonders of many kinds, but they returned again and again to a project that was at first glance ill-suited to their art: to make a machine that thought. Or, failing that, produced the signs of thought: drew pictures, played chess, wrote, spoke. Machines move repetitively, that is what they do best (chopping wood is no problem), but the toymakers labored to make machines that moved scarcely at all, but subtly and in complex, changing patterns—machines that mimicked our moments of inwardness, our productive reveries. They wanted to see a machine thinking. These automata were fashioned with great tenderness. Our ambitions have not changed that much since 1779, when the Academy of Sciences of St Petersburg sponsored a competition to design a machine that could speak, but we have lost some of this tenderness since we acquired scientific objectivity and fell in love with the lab coat and the big shiny box. We developed sheepish sentimental attachments to a few machines (R2D2) but at the same time our sentimental fears ran amok. We are afraid of our computers, in fact. We seem to think that if we hand the new automaton a pencil, it will not only refuse to write, but turn the eraser end against all the books we love. The backers of books against hypertext (a Siamese twin boxing match: nobody really wins) don't so much hate the idea of linked text or the writing itself as the fact that to read it the way real readers read, and you know what I mean by that, you have to let a computer see you naked. The hypertext is a bit like the monstrous android of sci-fi fame: if you give your heart to it, you might find yourself living in a world in which nothing is real anymore.

This fear isn't new. In the mid-1800s John Murray Spear, a famous spiritualist, became interested in mating machines with men. He was persuaded that the spirits favored technology: he had already raised the ghost of Benjamin Franklin to help him invent a perpetual motion machine, an electric ship, an intercontinental telepathic network, and a new and improved sewing machine. But his New Motor was more than just a machine. He went so far as to suggest it was a sort of second coming.

This New Motor was still quiescent. Spear declared that (like another motherless child, Pinocchio) it needed a surrogate mother to come fully to life. Would the New Mary please step forward? Soon after, a noted Boston Spiritualist declared herself pregnant with the "living principle" of Spear's machine. She lay down in front of the device and appeared to go into labor. When her swollen belly subsided, Spear announced that motion had appeared in the New Motor, henceforward to be known as the Wonderful Infant, that "corresponded to embryonic life."

The world was not ready for the Wonderful Infant. An angry crowd broke into the shed where it lay and, Spear claimed, "tore out the heart of the mechanism."

Some time later, the first computer was invented, without the intercession of

the womb.

Science fiction writers spent the last half of the 20th century drafting versions of our relationship to the machine, and worrying in images about the real, the fake, the real in the fake, and the fake in the real. And none of them worried more than Philip Dick.

Philip Dick, both as science fiction writer and part-time paranoid schizophrenic, was obsessed with the evasiveness of the real. He was addicted to the negative epiphany: the one thing we can count on is that things are not what they seem. There is a sort of dark pleasure in unveiling the sham. But this process of unveiling never comes to a rest: the unseemly truth will turn out to be just another layer of illusion. In this negative pinocchioization, the little boy will turn out to be a puppet, but the bad news does not stop there: the puppet might turn out to be the prosthetic arm of an evil god; the evil god might turn out to be a megalomaniacal madman who has built a model world inside a computer, in which the main character himself is only a piece of software; the features of the madman erode to reveal the features of the writer; then the paranoid Philip Dick, reading his own work for coded information about the real world, discovers within himself the workings of a malignant super-author; and so it goes, and so it goes. How do you get your bearings in these shifting shams? The smallest comforting proof of the real world on which the eye might light is snatched away. But Philip Dick has a soft spot for the humble, indefatigable little machines that scurry around the edges of his narratives. They are, at least, *in earnest*. But it's more than that. At the end of one novel we discover that the toad that stands for the possibility of a natural animal life is a machine like everything else. Yet this discovery is redemptive: human empathy with the machine makes it more than a simple sham. The humane relationship to the fake makes it real.

But we already knew this, because we grew up playing with toys. Toys also call upon our empathy. They are only machines, shoddy composites of wood and wire, flywheel and pendulum, but in their jerky movements we recognize our own absurdity. Toys R Us.

A machine is a machine because its entire being is given over to a purpose. It is an object, but it is an object with an idea, and in that sense it is different from other objects that may yield themselves to our meanings and intentions with the grace of inanimation, but are innocent of motive. A machine does one thing very well; that it also does other things, like take up space, make noise, shake, or pollute the air, is unconcealed but not *relevant*.

A toy, on the other hand, may employ machinery, but it is not a machine. Unlike proper machines mechanical toys have no use, though they mimic objects that have uses: toy cars, toy planes, toy sewing machines. (In the computer game *Myst*, there are many toy books.) A toy is an insincere machine: what it is for is not what it is working so hard to do. The wood it is chopping will not stay chopped, the goose will lay the same egg over and over. Machines are used, but toys refer and resemble. Toys abstract the gestures of machines and reveal their beauty and

humor. They are all about style.

Style takes a lot of energy, as we can learn from toys, which are very inefficient devices. But unlike sincere machines a toy need not run efficiently, smoothly, or for very long. It need not last forever, stay off the furniture, or run better than the toy beside it on the shelf. The ideal of machines is to work as smoothly and efficiently as possible, but toys achieve their purpose by being “bad” machines. The wobbles and vibrations of being out-of-balance-on-purpose, the awkwardness, slippage, and dependency on the human hand are what make toys charming. More. They are what make toys resemble us.

When I call toys insincere, I don’t mean that they’re duplicitous. A fake thing that is honest about being fake may be more real than anything that pleads its authenticity.

Philip Dick had a term for a thing like this: the fake fake. It might be the only kind of thing you can trust in a world in which every unmasking bares another mask. The real can’t enter naked—even nakedness is a mask—but if the real enters as fake, then the unmasking of fakeness might just reveal the real. By making a fold, a little circuit, maybe we can cheat the cosmic phoniness.

The fake fake could be a mechanical toad: it could also be literature. A science fiction novel, for example. A lie that, if you’re lucky, tells the truth.

Some birds kept in solitary never find their voices. Toy canaries are sometimes employed to teach real canaries how to sing.

In Jonathan Swift’s *A Project for Improving Speculative Knowledge* a professor creates a machine by which “the most ignorant Person at a reasonable Charge, and with a little bodily Labour, may write both in Philosophy, Poetry, Politicks, Law, Mathematicks and Theology, without the least Assistance from Genius or Study.” He describes this machine as follows:

The Superficies was composed of several bits of Wood, about the bigness of a Dye, but some larger than others. They were all linked together by slender Wires. These bits of Wood were covered on every Square with Paper pasted on them, and on these Papers were written all the Words of their Language in their several Moods, Tenses, and Declensions, but without any Order. The Professor then desired me to observe, for he was going to set his Engine at Work. The Pupils at his Command took each of them hold of an Iron Handle, whereof there were fourty fixed round the Edges of the Frame, and giving them a sudden turn, the whole Disposition of the Words was entirely changed. He then commanded six and thirty of the Lads to read the several lines softly as they appeared upon the Frame; and where they found three or four Words together that might make part of a Sentence, they dictated to the four remaining Boys who were Scribes.

Language has long been compared to a machine (some would like to exploit the resemblance, others lament it), but it is a machine with a guilty conscience, because unlike other machines in history, language is sometimes embarrassed about its

accidents of physicality, and would be pure intention if it could. But language too shakes and makes noise.

Georges Perec, who as a member of the Oulipo wrote brilliantly within elaborate mechanic systems, nonetheless believed that slippage was fundamental. “The system of constraints,” he writes, “[m]ust be destroyed. It must not be rigid; there must be some play in it; it must, as they say, ‘creak’ a bit; it must not be completely coherent; there must be a clinamen—it’s from Epicurean atomic theory. ‘The world functions because from the outset there is a lack of balance.’” Or, according to Paul Klee, “Genius is the error in the system.”

Language has a mechanical aspect, but the orderliness of language is not adequate to explain communication. Without the slippage, imprecision, redundancy, and excess of language, we have not just a lack of poetry, but nonsense. Language is really much more like a toy than a machine—another thing about which it has a guilty conscience.

And literature is definitely a toy. True, literature too sometimes aspires or pretends to be a machine—just consider the mainstream American standard of good writing, where style is only the byproduct of being perfectly functional. No furbelows on the bulldozers, thanks.

But of course a piece of writing does not have a “function” in the sense that bulldozers do. The accidents of its physicality are no accidents at all but part and parcel of its meaning. Like a toy it mimics real life to display the charm and grace and humor in it, also its repetitions, its pratfalls, its near-misses. Like a toy you can set it in motion from the beginning again whenever you want, see the harpoon fly toward the whale again, know and not know that the action ends in a shipwreck. Hoist up the wreck, set it back in the dock, wind up, start the hunt all over again. Like a toy it exploits the noise and wobble of its machinery: the out-of-balance flywheel of a run-on sentence, the eccentric wheel of an extended metaphor, the excessive friction of vernacular, the irregular cam of a flowery style.

A book may be able to pretend it is not a toy. Not so the hypertext. You cannot fail to see the key turning, the light flickering on the moving gears. The hypertext does not efface itself before the instruction of the author. It is not a vehicle or a servant. It is there to show off, to amuse. Into the solemnity of the communion between author and reader steps the automaton, key turning, gears churning. I have referred to the intrusion of the computer into the private space of reading. In fact, the computer does not simply intrude, like an unfortunate typeface in a book, or multicolored paper. The computer is a collaborator, a ghost writer.

One of my stories, which bears the same name as this essay, concerns a little mechanical man (the latest invention of a team of “genius girls”) who does a lot of worrying about not being human. The figure of Pinocchio capers around behind the text of my “Musée Mécanique” like its maniac guardian angel. But my puppet belongs to another era and will never become a real little boy.

Pinocchio is the patron saint, the Wonderful Infant of the book. Like Pinocchio, the book (which is also a strange figure made of wood) is set in motion by the

human hand, but then it dances and capers as if it were alive. It is loved by humans despite its calculating heart, it lies and lies and lies, but with perseverance and a little divine grace, it is reborn into the human family.

In my story, on the other hand, the guardian spirits are wind-up toys. Humans are nonexistent, unless you count the genius girls—but they are inaccessible, almost legendary, and only on loan from the library in the sky. The redemption my text offers, while real, is not a magical translation into the bona fide. It is a wind-up redemption, keyed for a toy. If the tin man gets a heart it will be made out of tin.

The dream of the book is Pinocchio's dream, but the hypertext needs a new dream. The guardian angel has flown, and even the humans would like a guarantee that they are real boys and girls. I am not saying goodbye Pinocchio, but I have translated him for a world in which the difference between the puppet and the man no longer seems guaranteed in heaven.

I have had a collaborator in this translation. My collaborator's name is Faulkner Kennett. He, or rather it, is the voice recognition software my sister uses. Faulkner Kennett is the name it gave itself, when she described it in the first e-mail she wrote with its help. Faulkner is a machine. Like all machines, he is sincere, orderly, and ignorant. Used according to the instruction manual, he is as invisible a collaborator as his makers could contrive: the ghost writer in the machine, though it has proved impossible to teach him not to assiduously transcribe laughter as "ketchup" or "ticket." But a machine used with invention becomes a toy.

I found the Italian text of Pinocchio on-line. I don't speak Italian, but I found an English translation, and by comparing the two, I identified the passages in the Italian that tell of Pinocchio's awakening. I e-mailed them to my sister and asked her to read them out loud to Faulkner. (She doesn't speak Italian. Neither does Faulkner Kennett.) She sent me back his translation, which I have revised, while trying to stay true to Faulkner's style.

Who is the author of this text? In considering this question, don't forget the team who wrote Faulkner's code, or the team who compiled the dictionary they used, or the laughter of my sister that might at any moment smear the text with ketchup or write it a ticket.

Here is a section from Faulkner's translation of Pinocchio:

Up pen and trot on! Accost a detective press, a stupid old glee; harness the essay pose, a high-end hot Lear. Off of the car, a key door keynote yields to old-growth keynote. "Channel may be but too real?" Be saying fraught CD, say. "Novel. Yo! Geometry code Pinocchio. The guests don't know: may be pork era for tuna. Oh go, clueless key, go to school; a nun from media in terra deep. A teeny key: Pinocchio is a padre, Pinocchio's some entree into the key era trustee, a dirty sale of course, a funnel. Play, you appeal, recode the laurel chip, in the less than most scene two."

Now, this may not be a work of genius, though it has a certain flair. But it is literature

of a sort, and not just because it is Pinocchio in disguise. Language as machine is meant to be completely transparent: it is summed up by what we like to call its "content." Literature is language that flaunts its extraneous features. Faulkner Kennett is a machine: he is designed to be a completely transparent medium. When he is used in a way that is at odds with his proper *use*, however, what he produces is language that consists almost entirely of its accidental features, of its music.

In the 20th century, we were often compared to the cogs of giant machines or soulless automata working the production line. Machines with a guilty conscience, we would like to stop the wheel and leap into the void of pure thought. But we are not very much like machines, even when we try to be. There is too much accidental motion, eccentric gestures, inefficient behaviors. Too much "personality." We are much more like toys: our real purpose is often not the visible purpose of our activity ("hunting the bear," "feeding the geese," "clicking the mouse") but some tragicomic ritual. We are all in the position of Pinocchio, wannabe humans with the secret conviction that we're really something else—phonies, jokes, wind-up toys.

When my sister and I were discussing this project over the phone, she summoned Faulkner to the table to transcribe her end of the conversation. We were talking about the fear that pervades conversations about hypertext and what it may or may not do to the book, a fear that is one tendril of the larger fear of loss of authenticity that haunts our culture, as it has done since long before computers presented this latest threat. In fact, I was talking, and my sister was agreeing with me (as is right and proper). What I heard her say was: "mm-hm, mm-hm, mm-hm, yeah." What Faulkner Kennett wrote, getting it wrong and right at the same time, was "imminent, imminent, imminent death."

If we are terrified of the fake, the copy, the machine, the schema, the system, it is because we are afraid we might be the copies, the fakes, machines run amok. We have a nagging feeling we're not quite real. Our satisfaction in producing systems and simulacra is coupled with an unnerving feeling that the earth is not so solid underfoot. We're levitating by mistake. We're the golem, animated by a slip of paper with a word on it, stuck in our mouths. (Only now it's a phone cable downloading an e-book. *Pinocchio*, maybe.)

How does an automaton write? The simple ones trace a metal template. The subtler ones require two cams, irregular disks along whose edges two rods travel, which transmit every bump and jiggle to the writing hand. One cam controls the hand's vertical movement, one the horizontal. When they are coordinated, the jiggle becomes writing.

Body and soul, spirit and word, computer and book, image and text, maybe these oppositional pairs are actually in collusion. For us to write, we also need two cams: two varieties of meaningless jiggle that together create beauty. The eccentric cam of language, the eccentric cam of plot, argument, or idea. Our texts pipe up: "I am the automaton of . . ."

"I am the automaton of Maillardet."

Note that a mechanical function, which is entirely automated, has here produced meaning. The toy told the human beings something they wanted to know. The toy did not mean what it said, but what it said was true and important all the same.

We are once again in a position to turn a new technology to an old end, to hand a pen to a machine and read what it writes. With a little tenderness.

What it writes may no longer look much like a book. It might be more like one of those awkward Victorian toys, lithographed pictures with printed slogans and moving parts (two clerics by the fireside hoisting the foaming brew), or the Talking Picture Book made in Germany in 1895: “[W]hen the cover is opened, one reads a verse about a cow, sees a picture of it, and follows an arrow pointing to a string. When the string is pulled, a realistic moo sounds out.”

These toys are awkward hybrids of stillness and motion, image and text and sound, and it is possible that such hybrid forms will always lurch and wobble a bit. Still, it seems to me that we writers-cum-toymakers are going to have to see what the book can unfold into, for our edification, for our sheer delight. The text is about a toy, a game; then let it be a game as well. It speaks to the toylike aspects of language; then let the reader pull a lever and see the nouns flip through changes to a new configuration, and see the course of their reading change with the result. Sometimes a windup toy comes to a stop, but if you poke it it will start to move again. The reader too must now and then put her hand in and give the toy a push, to help it past a sticky spot. I would like to see if I can mix reading in the absorbing, rich, traditional sense with other kinds of paying attention. Images melt into words, words get up, get dressed, and go for a walk. I'm not sure what they will do, but like the old automata they will create a spectacle at the very least.

The earliest mechanical toys were priceless wonders designed to amuse princes, but most of us have a far less reverential attitude to the toy. Maybe some of us were taught that books were not to be chewed on or thrown across the room, that they were objects of a special sort and easily hurt. But toys were another matter, remember? They were yours. You could do whatever you liked with them, and often that meant inventing whole new ways to make them work. What their makers had in mind for them was only the beginning. You could turn your bike upside down and pedal it with your hands and pretend that you were working a pancake-making machine. You could put a mustache on a baby doll and feature her as Barbie's gigantic Papa. You could hold the propeller still and let the plane spin round and round. We were casual with our toys, and friendly with them, and we smashed them when we needed to for the purposes of our games. Toymakers have to accept these eventualities, and even celebrate them. What kind of toy is it that you have to put on gloves to touch? The toy is not an endpoint, but a beginning: the starting point of playing. That's what toys are made for, so that the world will play.

So Jesus goes up to heaven. There's an old guy waiting at the gate. Jesus thinks he recognizes him. So he asks the old guy, “Are you waiting for your son?”

The old man says yes.

Jesus says, "Was he a very . . . special boy?"

The old man says yes.

Jesus says, "Were you a carpenter?"

"Yes, yes, I was!" says the old man.

"Father!" says Jesus.

And the old man says, "Pinocchio!"