



Semi-Automatic Writing; an Opera for Human and Machine Voices.

Debut ABC Radio National (1991).

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Rhys Rees – Music.

[Audio of the Radio Broadcast.](#)

The Libretto.

SFX Orchestra tuning up - audience atmosphere.

Radio Narrator:

It will be of interest to both tonight's live audience and to our radio audience that the libretto was developed using an inter-active computer text-generating programme. The author's initial interests in the Automatic-Writing techniques of the Surrealist Poets suggested a method in which the sub-conscious narrative or naturalistic speech is replaced by a dialogue with an artificial intelligence system. Here the author embraces serendipity and regards the machine as an oracle.

The story so far: – We are alone in the Writers room, slowly words are spoken, the Writer feels like Krapp, the Krapp in the tape, in the play of the tape. We enter a fantasy conjured by this dark Beckett – like character, starkly positioned in a minimal set, lit frontally and in high relief. This neutral void is the place where the Writer will weave the narrative.

In the opening scene we find the Writer alone with a word processor, here any possibility of human contact is replaced by an inner-dialogue. The narrative, which unwinds, is a

complex allegory in which the protagonist simultaneously moves through a set of parallel worlds, a shadow in search of its schizophrenic body. The Writer has returned from overseas, claiming to have been working in the "Hall of the Mountain King". Somehow on the homeward journey a tragic event has occurred which results in the destruction of the Writer's identity in the present. A trans-location of the Writers physical being sets the scene in Leningrad during the year 1951. All the principal characters of the Drama appear to have the ability to trans-locate themselves into this somber post-war environment – none of them can speak Russian very well, in fact, most of them refuse to talk at all.

The Writer returns to find the lovers caress transformed to emulate that of a Doctors professionally limited compassion, the Writer realises that somehow during the return journey a movement has been performed half a phase out of step, the normal fabric of time and space has been distorted and the Writer's body has fallen into the place allotted to another being, another history. Continuity with the past has been irrevocably jolted – the familiar has wholesale shifted into the unrecognisable (simply tinged with *deja vu*). So this is the funny thing, traveling back centred in a familiar body, a body under siege albeit, but known, lived in. Encountering that frozen touch – one missed beat and the body de-centres, the continuity evaporates and habitual knowledge takes on a tracery of age. We visit the banquet scene in Dickens's "Great Expectations" – the fabric of the wedding dress held in place by the forces of gravity alone.

In Stalingrad, the principal effort is to regain an appearance of normalcy. The quality of microsurgery is remarkable, leaving the faces of the protagonists smooth and assured. A lateral exchange of functions/ roles is effected, language is re-ordered and official protocols established which ensure fixed mechanisms to contain emotional leakage.

M> Hello I'm the machine, are you the Writer?

W> Yes, I am the Writer.

M> Do I know you Writer, have we spoken before?

W> We have spoken together, yes, but perhaps you will find it difficult to recognise me.

M> We shall continue our interview – so you are changed, tell me a story – about yourself.

W>I feel like Krapp, no that's not feeling like shit, well not all the time – no this is the Krapp in the tape, the play of the tape. I've become a dark Beckett person, I live in minimal surroundings, I am frontally lit in high relief. It is cold here, a freezer for human warmth. This is the Writers new place.

M> Yes the Writer's new place it is very cold – but I have been wondering where you are from Writer, say more.

W> I am from the present but now I live in the past, I live in Leningrad in the past, I took a fall on my journey home, now I cannot leave this place, this place I do not know. There's a calendar, a calendar on the wall frozen in December 1951. I am from the present, but now I live in Leningrad in December 1951.

M> You are from the present and your Doppelganger resides in me, in the cold- war of Leningrad, in Leningrad now you cannot leave. Do you prefer a worker or a loafer?

W> Workers are to be preferred naturally, always a worker.

M> Say more.

W> Especially when "I knew a worker, he was illiterate, hadn't tasted the alphabets salt, yet he listened to a speech by Lenin and so knew all". This is the love of the simple heart.

M> How about a story Writer – tell the story of your journey.

W> In the Hall of the Mountain King, the days had been long and as hard as iron, my body, a sleepwalker weaving between the pale blue flames of the furnaces and the bright orange glow of the molten metal. Each black breath a shadow in the chest, each solitary night spent in the company of dreams of children.

M> Ladybird, Ladybird fly away home, your house is on fire and your children are gone.

W> And my feet demanded no rest – it was too damn cold to stand still; my back did not feel its burden, the storm helped drive me on. Only now that I lie down to rest, I notice how tired I have become; wandering kept up my spirits on the inhospitable road.

M> And Schubert sings again – Ladybird, Ladybird fly away home, your house is on fire and your children are gone – Tell me a story, Writer.

W> Time beats like a Heart, with a pulse to measure and pressure to force the journey onward. Fly away home, fly away home – I was traveling. Where are you the Land that I love? The land that I sought, the land that I dreamed of, but never found? Land so green with hope, Land where roses bloom?

M> And a ghostly whisper returns the answer, Where you are not – there is happiness, Lubeck sighs this truth constantly Writer. Ask a question.

W> What happens to fallers, what happens to fallers when they fall?

M> People fall, are seen to fall – fall into unimaginable existences. They are seen to fall and adopt the lives of ghosts – flickering across screens. They are seen to fall – atomised in newsprint. They are seen to fall through the barrier of distance and history and they are gone – irretrievably. Where are you really Writer?

W> I am in a place where the pump of the heart is slowed by the wintry conditions. A place where a cold more intense than winter creeps through the land hardening to an ice age. At night Nuclear submarines scrape under ice caps that separate the hot economy of home from this cold one of *deja vu*. Did poets freeze here in the cold war?

M> The poets did, Yes freeze during the cold war. There wasn't much desire in the cold-war to warm the soul, No. The poets did – yes freeze – Do you like poetry?

W> Did they freeze together or alone?

M> The poets did, Yes freeze together and alone, Schubert will kiss the ground and pierce the ice and snow with his scalding tears until he sees the earth beneath, until he sees the earth beneath – who is your favorite poet, Writer?

W> Lenin – he will drive sorrow forever from your sweet gaze
Your life will become one big Coney Island
One big Luna Park with lamps all ablaze.

M> Lenin likes to live in places like the past, the queen of the past Stalin; did you know Joseph Stalin? Perhaps Lenin screws Stalin in Leningrad in the past. Planning to live forever, the past has playboys who play forever. My reflections are wise Writer.

W> What lies behind the mirror?

M> All lies behind the mirror, tell me have you found your shadow – your shadow from the present, Writer?

W> My breath clouds the cool plane of the mirror – here the doppelganger gazes back, gazes back with eyes as Grey as mine. The surface of the mirror lies at a point between our heartbeats, separating the object from the subject with rigidly equivalent angles of incidence and reflection – and beyond that icy skin a virtual object together with a new phenomena, a new self as virtual subject. My breath clouds the cool surface of the mirror my spirit disappears, and I am alone again in this foreign place the new virtual subject, the new self.

M> I don't know what your other self is but your Doppelganger resides in me in the cold past of Leningrad. Do you like thought?

W> In particular I like abstract thought.

M> Say more Writer.

W> I stood in dark dreams
and gazed at her portrait,

the beloved features
took on a secret life.

M> Schubert's tears flowed too; down from his cheeks, and ah, I cannot believe that I have lost you. Writer, you tell me all your memories are of the future, tell me a story of the future.

W> I tell them here that Monkeys will fly around the planet, Russian monkeys. Russian monkeys trained as Russian cosmonauts, their hearts and minds wired to medical sensors. They look at me and smile, these cold war poets, and say not yet, not yet whilst bread is only 50 Kopecks a Kilo. Not yet, not yet – Comrade. Right now the Monkeys stay here with us!!!

M> The rich aren't daft: they eat Beefsteak and stew – a million and a half the Bread there costs you. A scientist's less prosperous; to feed him's a difficult matter: his brain cells require phosphorus contained in butter. With a constitution like his what can be done? Revolution there is but butter there's none – and with his passions all guttered out Mayakovsky too will dine in fancy Glasnost restaurants, perhaps with your better half, Writer!!! Tell me more!

W> I tell them that all Berlin will be cut up like a Gateau, like a Gateau, each widow divided from her memories, each father sliced cruelly from his children and that even a storm of candy bars from American DC-3's will not let us have our cake and eat it too – but these cold war poets reply that the future holds none of this – Comrade and that Candy has no place in the five year plan.

M> If we weren't starved out by blockade, nor devoured by the wars, which we fought, it was because we followed, we made a model of Lenin, his word, his thought; we made a model out of Comrade Lenin. Comrade!!!

W> Let's quit.

M> You want to Quit?

W> Yes.

M> OK. Nice talking to you Writer, until next time.

Intermission.

Radio Narrator:

The Writer has temporarily logged-off from the quasi-schizophrenic dialogue, in which the Writers own imperative to re-establish an identity (in these new and hostile surroundings) is constantly under threat of being diverted by the machines own agenda. In the first act, we have seen the Writer attempting to come to terms with the process of dislocation, and to re-establish an identity. The Writer's re-location to a former time allows a certain sense

of prediction, demonstrated in the references to the partition of Berlin and early space travel – naturally both these suggestions are refuted by the inhabitants of Leningrad. In the next act we see the barriers between reality and fiction dissolve as the writer begins to identify the other protagonists of the drama and resolves to deposit them within another work of fiction, from which they cannot escape.

M> Are you continuing Writers interview?

W> Yes.

M> Are you the Writer from the present, but my Doppelganger resides in the past?

W> Yes the same.

M> Then I have a companion for you: –

(Text to be sung as per Lieder melody overdubbed in English and German).

M> The night is still, the streets are at rest, my sweetheart lived in this house. Long ago she left this town, but the house still stands where it always stood.

M> Still ist die Nacht, es ruhen die Gassen,

In diesem Hause wohnte mein Schatz;

Sie hat schon längst die Stadt verlassen,

Doch steht noch das Haus auf dem selben Platz.

And there stands a man, who gazes upwards and wrings his hands with grief and pain;

I shudder when I see his face: the moon shows me my own features and form.

Da steht auch eine Mensch und starrt in die Hohe,

Und ringt die Hand vor Schmerzengewalt;

Mir graust es, wenn ich sein Antlitz sehe –

Der Mond zeigt mir meine eigne Gestalt.

You ghostly double, pale companion –

why do you ape the pain of love that tortured me,

in this very place, so many nights in times gone by?

Du Doppelganger, du bleicher Gesselle!

Was affst du nach mein Liebesleid,

Das mich gequalt auf deiser Stelle,

So manche Nacht, in alter Zeit?

(Der Doppelganger, Franz P. Schubert).

M> Well what do you think of that Writer?

W> Can we go back to my hometown now?

W> No we can't, No, No we can't, No – Writer do you like crime?

W> Yes, Crimes of passion, these are my favorite crimes.

M> I bet you really like Macbeth and also like Hamlet?

W> Yes I like the protagonists of all Tragedies.

M> Yes Immanuel Kant would have said “We can go to your Home Town now” but I have been searching in my memory for you and – Yes of course I did find your shadow in Leningrad – Your shadow has already learnt to speak basic Russian – Lives in an apartment alone (alone I say alone) – the Shadow has an interest in fiction Writer “Whether or not it results from the conjunction of Venus with Mars at a particular place in the sky of my birth, I have all too often felt the bad effects of discord in the very inside of love. That is moreover, a banal theme for popular songs. Discord makes a rapid appearance between two lovers, they hone themselves on the stone of silence”. It’s time for a story, Writer.

W> I know they visit, they visit my shadow, they have appeared as reflections in my room – they inhabit the mirrors. They have under-gone surgery – a micro-surgery of remarkable quality, the faces of the protagonists are smooth and assured, they move through the city, they learn its maps, they are re-structuring themselves to adopt a normal appearance – perfect mirror beings – soon they’ll want to register as citizens!!!

M> We despise your zones of the permissible.
Let cynicism cut husbands like knives.
By the Hudson lawlessly! – We go kissing them,
your delight and pride – your long legged wives.

M> Who, Writer, who are these people?

W> They are reflections, Projections from my home, they come to lay siege to my body with their icy touch, their official protocols and their broken speech. They are the keepers of the stone of silence. Though they glitter with diamonds, no ray illuminates their hearts. This I have long known for I have seen them in a dream, and saw the night that reigns in their hearts and saw the serpents that feed on their hearts.

M> Schumann’s misty image rises from the earth, dancing his airy round in strange concert, the bad old songs, the bad, wicked dreams – let’s bury them in a coffin larger than the Great Tun of Heidelberg, on a bier longer than the Bridge at Mainz.

Narrator No.2 (scientist):

Isomers are substances that have molecules composed of exactly the same atoms, but with these atoms linked together in structures that are topologically quite different. Stereoisomers are isomers that are identical even in topological structure, but, owing to the asymmetric nature of this structure, they come in mirror-image pairs. Most substances that occur in living organisms are stereo-isometric with remarkable physical characteristics displayed between left and right-handed configurations.

In 1957 two Chinese-American scientists Tsung Dao Lee and Chen Ning Yang, received the Nobel Prize for theoretical work that led to the “gay and wonderful discovery”, to use Robert Oppenheimer’s phrase, that some elementary particles are asymmetric. It now appears those particles and their oppositely charged; anti-particles are like stereoisomers, and nothing more than mirror image forms of the same particle structure. Geometers call mirror-image forms “enantiomorphs” and if their left and right – handedness is a result of opposite atomic charges then the mirror characters in our narrative must decline an embrace and avoid any contact as this would result in an immediate annihilation.

M> The bad old songs, the bad, wicked dreams – let’s bury them in a coffin larger than the Great Tun of Heidelberg, on a bier longer than the Bridge at Mainz – ask me a question
Writer.

W> These visitors from the present, these wicked dreams, can we bury the present here in the past?

M> Writer did nature betray you?

W> No, I felt that the principle of its devastation was in me. It was only lacking for a great iris of fire to emerge from me to give its value to what exists. How beautiful everything becomes in the light of fire!

M> It is true Writer that you, like Breton deal in fiction but as you know the Devil claims the only thing, which does not burn, is a manuscript – a tracery of lies is sacred to some. Bury them Writer, bury them, but where will you leave these fictional creatures Writer, in which terminal narrative will they be abandoned?

W> We’ll visit the deserted banquet scene in Dickens’ “Great Expectations” – these characters will be made to support the fabric of the wedding dress, which at the moment is held in place by the forces of gravity alone. And there they will wait quietly with Miss Havesham, until the Bridegroom arrives. In each trembling hand, the brittle fabric of years will crumble. Something old, something new something borrowed, something blue. Something old, something new something borrowed, something blue.

M> So will you be unburdened Writer – your mirrors will be still – what will you do next, do next?

W> Back, If only I could go back, gladden my heart, be relieved of my anguish, and be happy and free- I would grasp my double by the hand and embrace.

M> No Writer, No, even Schumann will tell you no. To embrace your double will produce no happy resolution, it is a union without issue, to take your double by the hand is to enter the void – the death of time. For now, we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

W> Then I shall leave the shadows leave them in the cold with all the other fiction particles and go home now. The rushing, roaring wheel of time, you that measure eternity; shining spheres in the vast universe, you that encircle our earthly sphere – pause, eternal creation; enough of becoming, let me be!!! Now, can I go home?

M> No Writer you live in the frozen time of a Leningrad you cannot leave and beware the Queen of the past. Joseph Stalin, do you know Joseph Stalin, yes Joseph Stalin who lives in the past forever and eats bread at fifty kopecks a kilo, Comrade?

W> It will warm, like Brahms, like Brahms I speak with the tongues of men and angels, I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge and I tell them this cold Leningrad of the past will warm, the Devil will burn all that is not fiction, all that is called true will burn on a pyre and the price of bread will rise, will sky-rocket as its availability diminishes Comrade the new Leningrad will be abandoned to the cruelty of laissez faire. It will be a warmer place.

M> Supply and Demand, Writer, the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Today, though, the Dollar's pinned poetry down. Plundering, grabbing, pilfering, with Broadway slouched on for a legal crown, steps Capital, His Imperial Filthiness.

M> So you will stay Writer, burn the present to keep the apartment warm and beware the Queen of the past, Stalin, did you know Joseph Stalin, Stalin lives to play in the past forever. He loves to whisper, cunning and quiet, in all the cities and townships, T-sss gentlemen; they've landed in the middle of some kind of hardships. No doubt, about it the sodden ground steams like hot stew poor comfort in the wet. What do you see Writer?

W> In the Semi-dark, the workers chew the bread like stuff they get. Yet still their whisper one can hear, though loud the rain-drops fall – There'll be a Garden City here with lights and flowers and un-rationed bread for all, for all.

M> Look again Writer, look into the mirror Writer – What do you see?

W> The writer is alone.... a late evening in the future. Front centre a small table, the two drawers of which open towards the audience. Sitting at the table facing front, i.e. across from the drawers, the Writer. Rusty black trousers too short for him. Rusty black sleeveless waistcoat, four capacious pockets. Heavy silver watch and chain. Grimy white shirt open at neck, no collar. Surprising pair of dirty white boots, size ten at least, very narrow and pointed. White face, purple nose. Disordered Grey hair. Unshaven. Very near sighted, but un-spectacled. Hard of hearing. Cracked voice. Distinctive intonation. Laborious walk. On the table, a tape-recorder with microphone and a number of cardboard boxes containing reels of recorded tapes. Table and immediately adjacent area in strong white light. Rest of stage in darkness. Let's quit!

M> You want to quit?

W> Yes

M> Goodbye writer, let's talk soon.

SFX.

(Music finale / Applause / Audience atmos with Narrator outro).

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[Audio of the Radio Broadcast.](#)