



*Malling-Hansen Writing Ball typewriter, 1878 model*

## Nietzsche's Typewriter

*We shape our tools and  
thereafter our tools shape us.*

John M. Culkin (1967)

### **N**IETZSCHE WAS GOING BLIND.

Plagued with poor health since childhood, by 1882 Friedrich Nietzsche's migraine headaches had become so debilitating that focusing his eyes on the written page had become painful and exhausting.

Fearing that he would have to give up writing (Nietzsche's greatest work was still ahead of him) he bought a typewriter—specifically, a Malling-Hansen Writing Ball, the first commercially available typewriter.

At least at first, Nietzsche found his new writing device indispensable. Once he had mastered touch-typing, he was even able to write with his eyes closed. (The machine was specifically intended to aid the blind.)

Incorporating 52 keys arranged in a brass hemisphere attached to a cylindrical platen, it resembled an oversized pincushion.

For a time, Nietzsche seemed to be enamored of the device, even going so far as to compose a short poem about it. Translated from the German, it reads: “The Writing Ball is a thing like me: of iron. Yet twisted easily, especially on journeys. Patience and tact must be had in abundance. As well as fine fingers to use us.”

(Not exactly *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*—which Nietzsche would write following year—but enough to suggest that to some degree the device became a part of his identity.)

Curiously, one of Nietzsche's close friends observed a noticeable change in the style of his writing after he began using the writing ball, commenting that while always terse, it seemed to now become even more succinct.

(Nietzsche observed this phenomenon himself, remarking “long sentences were not much of an option,” and “our writing instruments contribute to our thoughts.”)

One historian suggested that Nietzsche’s mode of expression even changed: “from arguments to aphorisms, from thoughts to puns, from rhetoric to telegram style.”

Just how much our style of writing—and by extension, our way of thinking—is molded by the tools we use to express it is today a matter of contentious debate.

Computer analysis of ‘before-and-after’ texts by Nietzsche and other writers is inconclusive, but the controversy has given rise to an area of research called ‘medium theory.’ The most well known example is Marshall McLuhan’s influential book, *Understanding Media* (1964), which took as the title of its first chapter the famous axiom, *The Medium is the Message*.

Most of the innovations which followed the leap from handwriting to machine-writing were less dramatic—that is, until the advent of the electronic word processor.

Just as the invention of the printing press and moveable type revolutionized publishing, the combined innovations of PC hardware and word processing software in the 1980s significantly altered the *content* as well as the *style* of writing, with one early convert going so far as to list the software he used in his novel’s acknowledgements.

Although most professional writers have by now made the switch to word processing—no doubt welcoming the ease it brings to editing and other formerly clumsy chores—a reluctant few still prefer the typewriter, (or even handwriting), at least for initial drafts. This in itself would seem to support the idea that medium influences, if not necessarily dictates, one’s writing style.

The PC, of course, also made possible the Internet, which virtually no one would claim hasn’t had a profound effect on society, and almost everyone is now to varying degrees wedded to their their smart phones, which in fact, now outnumber people.

With writing increasingly being replaced by videos, authors seek to accomodate themselves to rapidly shrinking attention spans by reducing their thoughts to brief texts or ‘tweets.’ (Certainly today’s youth have little time for the likes of Nietzsche!)

As far back as Socrates’s bemoaning the displacement of the oral tradition by the written word (fearing people would “cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful”) society has always been wary of innovation, but still, there may be reason to think that “this time it (really) is different.”

On the verge of the integration of man and machine on a scale unimaginable in Nietzsche’s era, it would be wise to slow down, self-reflect, and question just where we are going and how we want to get there. Otherwise, we may find ourselves dragged headlong into a future in which technology is the master and we are merely the medium.

Already in 1876, Nietzsche had mused: “Are there still human beings, or perhaps only thinking, talking, writing machines?” Despite his initial enthusiasm, he never totally mastered the use of his typewriter, and abandoned it after a few months in favor of dictating to a human secretary.

Nietzsche’s beloved typing machine gave him a lengthy reprieve, but in the end it could not save him. His health continued to decline, and he suffered a mental breakdown and died virtually insane in 1900 at age 55.

It remains to be seen whether our far more sophisticated devices will save us from our own mounting madness. ■