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Marcel Schwob and "The Talking Machine": a Tale à la Poe--via Thomas A. Edison

Introduction and Translation by JOHN A. GREEN*

"Marcel Schwob, né à Chaville le 23 août 1867, décédé à Paris le 26 février 1905." Time and weather have all but obliterated these words from a tombstone in the Jewish section of Montparnasse cemetery, and the man's niche in present literary history is scarcely more noticeable. It is not that Schwob never achieved any fame. Alfred Vallette, director of the leading young review, the *Mercure de France*, was quick to defend him in 1892 as "one of the keenest minds of our time," and soon added that Schwob gave promise of defining tomorrow's taste in literary criticism. Teodor de Wyzewa, in 1893, thought it would be tomorrow's taste in literature itself.¹ Only a year later Schwob's *Livre de Monelle*—eventually to be described by René Lalou as "a breviary of all the influences which acted upon Symbolist sensibility"²—inspired Maurice Maeterlinck to assess its pages as "among the most perfect . . . in our [Symbolist?] literature."³ The following year young Paul Valéry dedicated his *Introduction à la Méthode de Léonard de Vinci* to Schwob, and in 1896, when Camille Mauclair rated him "one of the most brilliant of today's writers,"⁴ both Valéry's *Soirée avec M. Teste* and Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* were dedicated to him.

Probably no one suspected that Schwob's period of literary creativity was already at an end, and that his literary reputation, unlike that of Gide, Valéry, Jammes and Claudel, would therefore rest solely on his contributions to Symbolism. In the

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¹Both Vallette and Wyzewa wrote for the *Mercure de France*. See V (June 1892), 165; VII (March 1893), 236; VIII (July 1893), 198. (All translations mine.)

²*Histoire de la Littérature française contemporaine*, 20th ed. (Paris, 1923), p. 283.

³*Mercure de France*, XI (August 1894), 367-368.

⁴*Ibid.*, XX (December 1896), 457-458.

closing weeks of 1895 Schwob had undergone the first of a number of serious abdominal operations which caused him such excruciating pain as to effectively terminate his literary career. As his health permitted he turned to research on François Villon, France's greatest medieval poet, and translated Shakespeare's *Hamlet* for Sarah Bernhardt who used it to open her own theater in 1899. By 1905, when Schwob died, he had acquired some international status as an Elizabethan scholar, and was recognized as one of the world's foremost authorities on Villon, but his interests ran also to the eighteenth century and to his contemporaries across the Channel and in America. He had previously corresponded with Robert Louis Stevenson and George Meredith, and at the outset of his career had fallen, as French poets and *conteurs* had been doing for forty years, under the spell of Edgar Allan Poe.

In the early 1890's Schwob had formed a close, though brief, friendship with Oscar Wilde. Wilde's star was then in its zenith, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published in 1890-1891, caused no little stir in Paris. Perhaps it inspired an ending to a tale Schwob seems to have had in mind since 1889. The basis for that story probably was an interview accorded by Thomas A. Edison to the press during his visit to the Paris International Exposition. Edison at the time was pioneering in the development of the phonograph, and "Une Conversation avec Edison—'le Sorcier de Menlo Park,'" appeared on Sunday, 19 August 1889, in *Le Petit Phare*, a small paper published by Schwob's father in Nantes. The following is extracted from that article:

On the subject of the phonograph, our colleague [a reporter of the *New York Herald*] asked if it had been brought to its highest degree of perfection.

"Almost, I believe," said Mr. Edison, "in the latest instruments produced in my workshops. You understand that the phonograph ordinarily used in business does not come up to the special machines I use for my private experiments. With these latter, I can obtain a sound powerful enough to reproduce the sentences of a discourse that a large audience can listen to without any difficulty.

"My latest improvements have to do especially with the aspirate sounds—the weak point in our present gramophones. For seven months I have been working 18 and 20 hours a day on the single word 'specia' [sic]. I would say into the phonograph: 'specia, specia, specia,' and the instrument

would answer back: 'pecia, pecia, pecia,' and I couldn't get it to do anything else. It was enough to drive me mad. I kept at it, however, until I had succeeded and now you can read a thousand words from a newspaper into a phonograph, at the rate of 150 words per minute, and the machine will repeat them back to you without one omission.

"You will appreciate the difficulty of the task that I accomplished when I tell you that the impressions made on the cylinder when the aspiration of 'specia' is produced are no greater than a millionth of an inch in depth and are invisible even under the microscope.

"That is just to give you an idea of my work. I am not a theoretician, and I don't pretend to be a savant. Everyone applauds the theoreticians and the savants, when they explain, in a very formal language, what someone else has done. But all of their formulated knowledge put together has never given the world more than two or three inventions of any value. It's easy to invent astonishing things, but the difficulty comes in perfecting them enough to give them some commercial value. It's the latter kind of inventions that interest me."

"And what new discoveries will be made in the field of electricity?"

"Well, that's difficult to say. We may, one of these days, run up against one of the great secrets of nature."

In December of that same year the poet Robert Browning, whom Schwob greatly admired, died. The connection between this event and the Edison interview appears tenuous except that, in 1890, one year after Browning's death, a group of the poet's friends gathered to pay him homage and to hear, as it were from the grave, the voice of Browning speaking to them from an Edison recording. It was a singularly impressive event in that day.

Almost a year later the Paris newspapers published Schwob's latest tale:

The Talking Machine

The man who came in, holding a newspaper in his hand, had an expressive face and an intent gaze; I remember that he was pale and wrinkled, that I didn't see him smile even once, and that his way of placing his finger against his lips was charged with mystery. But what first caught one's attention was the stifled, broken sound of his voice. When his speech was slow and deep, the solemn tones of that voice could be heard, with unexpected, resonant silences, as if there were far

distant overtones quivering in unison; but for the most part the words tumbled from his lips, and spouted forth muffled, broken, discordant, like the noises of cracking china. There seemed to be in him an endless host of breaking cords. And from this voice all intonation had disappeared; no nuances could be detected and it seemed remarkably old and exhausted.

Nevertheless this visitor that I had never seen before came forward and said: "You wrote these lines, did you not?"

And he read: "The voice which is the aerial sign of the thought, and through that of the soul, which teaches, preaches, exhorts, prays, praises, and loves; through which in turn the being shows itself to exist; something almost tangible to the blind; impossible to describe because it is too fluctuating and varied, simply too alive and embodied in too many sonorous forms; the voice which Théophile Gautier renounced telling about in words because it is neither sweet, nor dry, nor warm, nor cold, nor colorless, nor colored, but something of all that in another dimension; this voice that one can neither feel nor see; the most immaterial of wordly things, the one which most resembles a spirit—science, with a stilet, pierces it in its flight and buries it in little holes on a revolving cylinder."

When he had finished—and his tumultuous speech reached my ear only as a muffled sound—this man danced on one leg, then on the other and without opening his lips uttered a dry, rasping laugh that seemed about to split asunder.

"Science," he said, "the voice . . . Further on you wrote: 'A great poet taught that speech could not be lost, since it is movement; that it was powerful and creative, and that perhaps, at the ends of the world, its vibrations were bringing into existence other universes, aqueous or volcanic stars, blazing new suns.' And we both know, don't we, that Plato had predicted, long before Poe, the power of the spoken word:

'The voice is not merely a striking on the air: for the tapping finger can strike the air and never make a voice.' And we also know that on a certain day in the month of December, 1890, one year to the day after the death of Robert Browning, there was heard at Edison-House, coming from the casket of a phonograph, the living voice of the poet, and that the sound waves in the air can forever be restored to life.

"You are savants and poets; you know how to conceive preserve, even restore life: the creation of it is unknown to you."

I looked at the man pityingly. A deep line cut across his forehead from the hairline to the bridge of the nose. Madness seemed to bristle his hair and illuminate the balls of his eyes. The look on his face was one of triumph, like those who believe themselves emperor, pope, or God, and who, from the height of their greatness, despise the ignorant.

"Yes," he went on—and his voice choked up the more he tried to make it strong—"you have set down all that the others know and the greater part of what they dream about; but I am greater. I can, to borrow from Poe, create worlds in movement, and blazing, roaring spheres with the sound from matter without a soul; and I have surpassed Lucifer in that I can force inorganic things to blaspheme. Night and day, according to my will, skins which were alive, and metals which perhaps are not yet so, utter lifeless words; and if it is true that the voice creates universes in space, those that I have caused it to create are worlds that have died before they came to life. In my house lies a Behemoth that bellows at a wave of my hand; *I have invented a talking machine.*"

I followed the man as he started for the door. Along noisy, well-frequented streets we passed and arrived finally at the outskirts of the city as the gas lamps, behind us, were lighting up one by one. Before a low postern set in a black wall the man stopped, and slid a bolt. We made our way through a somber, silent courtyard, and then my heart filled with anguish at the groanings, grating cries and syllabized words which seemed to come roaring from some cavernous gullet. And these words were totally without shading just as the voice of my guide, so that, in this unbounded exaggeration of vocal sounds, I could recognize nothing human.

The man showed me into a room that I could not describe because my attention was taken immediately by an awesome monstrosity towering in the center. There, as high as the ceiling, gaped a gigantic throat, blotched and swollen, with folds of black leather hanging or bulging from the tempestuous current of air that rumbled up from its depths to pass through two enormous, trembling lips. And amid the grinding of wheels and the screaming of metal wires I could watch the piles of leather shuddering, and the gigantic lips yawning falteringly; deep inside the gaping red pit an immense, fleshy lobe was flapping, rising, dangling, stretching up, down, right and left. A sudden burst of air shook the machine to its

foundations, and a few articulated words spouted forth, uttered by an extra-human voice. The explosions of the consonants were terrifying, for the P and the B, like the V, escaped directly from between the black and swollen labial folds, as though being born under our very eyes. The D and the T burst forth under the snarling superior mass of leather, and the R, which took time to form, rolled ominously. The vowels, crudely modified, seemed to spurt out of the yawning gullet like notes from a trumpet, and the lisping of the S and the SH surpassed the horror of even monstrous mutilations.

"Here," said the man as he placed his hand on the shoulder of a thin little woman, deformed and nervous, "here is the soul that works the keyboard of my machine. She executes on my piano pieces of human speech. I have trained her to admire my will: her notes are stammerings; her scales and exercises the BA, BE, BI, BO, BU of the classroom; her studies, the fables I compose for her; her fugues, my lyric pieces and poetry; her symphonies, my blasphemous philosophy. You see the keys which represent, in their syllabic alphabet, and in only three rows, all the miserable signs of human thought. I produce, simultaneously—and without being struck down as damned—the thesis and antithesis of man's truths and those of his God."

He seated the little woman at the keyboard, behind the machine. "Listen," he said in his muffled voice.

And the bellows began to move under the touch of the pedals; the hanging folds of the throat filled out; the monstrous lips quivered and gaped open; the tongue began working, and the clamor of the articulated speech burst forth:

IN THE BE-GIN-NING WAS THE WORD

roared the machine.

"This is a lie," said the man. "It's the lie of the books we call sacred. I have studied for many, many years; I have opened throats in the dissecting room; I have listened to voices screaming and weeping, to sobs and sermons; I have measured them mathematically; I have drawn them forth from myself and others; I have broken my own voice in my efforts; and I have lived so long with my machine that I speak, as it does, *without nuances*. Nuances, you understand, are part of the soul, and I have eliminated them. Here then is the truth and the new

word." And he screamed at the top of his voice—but the phrase resounded no more than a raucous whisper: "The Machine is going to say:

I HAVE CREATED THE WORD."

And the bellows began to move under the touch of the pedals; the hanging folds of the throat filled out; the monstrous lips quivered and gaped open; the tongue began working and the speech burst forth in one prodigious stutter:

WOR-D WOR-D WOR-D

There was an extraordinary tearing of wires and crunching of gearwork; the throat sagged, there was an over-all withering of the leather, and a blast of air that swept away the syllabic keys into a twisted heap of debris. I couldn't tell whether the machine had refused to blaspheme or whether she who played the words had introduced some principle of destruction into the mechanism: for the little, deformed woman had disappeared, and the man, whose taut face was suddenly furrowed with wrinkles, was cringing his fingers furiously in front of his muted mouth, his voice having disappeared forever.