

## ANGELA CARR & KATE EICHORN / A Gloss on *The Writing Machine*

*La Machine à écrire* appeared in Montreal in 1964 (Les Éditions du Jour), the result of an experiment by young engineer and linguist Jean Baudot on a new computer at the Université de Montréal. It was one of the world's first works of electronic literature and perhaps the first book-length publication of electronic poems. Yet instead of serving as a milestone, Baudot's experiment—"the first book of free verse written by a computer"—is nearly forgotten. Perhaps *La Machine à écrire* was simply before its time—a text barely legible in an era when computers looked like church organs and occupied an entire room. Yet, like so much of Québec society in the 1960s, *La Machine à écrire* was also the product of earlier eras.

The copy of *La Machine à écrire* used for this translation was discovered in a used bookstore near the Université de Montréal, remarkably, with pages still uncut. The uncut pages appear to place the book in a period of book production before automated page trimming, though when Baudot's pioneering text was published, the uncut page was already passé. Although the book owes much to Québec's rapid modernization in the 1960s, as resources were poured into everything new and innovative, its 630-word lexicon was culled from *Mon livre de français*—a standard fourth-grade grammar issued by the *Frères du Sacré-Coeur*. As a result, this groundbreaking work of digital literature is strangely inflected by the Brothers' ecclesiastical discourse (notice, for example, the frequent references to guilt!).

Finally, and perhaps most strangely, like books from the Renaissance when it was fashionable to authorize texts with the endorsements of royalty, intellectuals, and other men of import, *La Machine à écrire* features ten expansive texts praising Baudot's creation. Endorsers include everyone from Oulipo founder Raymond Queneau to Québécois celebrities such as folksinger Félix Leclerc, cartoonist Normand Hudon, and philosopher and actor Doris Lussier. Somewhat surprisingly, Baudot's endorsers are listed on the front cover of *La Machine à écrire* in the same font reserved for the name of the author. But Baudot never claimed

to be the author. The biography of the purported author appears on the inner flap, as a cut-line under a photo of the computer: *The author, an electronic computer, the LGP-30, which composed the automatic sentences in this collection. This indefatigable machine could compose millions of different sentences with only a few kilowatt hours for inspiration.*

This translation, made after cutting the pages with kitchen scissors, puts Baudot's text back into circulation—this time not in the Québécois of the *Frères du Sacré-Coeur* but in contemporary Canadian English. Although the translator considered using software to translate the work, her research led her to conclude that the imprecise human gesture was most suitable. Baudot himself would, later in life, abandon an attempt to create a translation programme, concluding it was impossible. Translation, he felt, required the computer to think, even if composition did not.