Interview with Will Eifert

Do you still work in computer technology?

Not really. I left my career as a computer games programmer back in 2004 to pursue a MFA in creative writing at UC Riverside which I completed in 2006. Right now I'm finishing up a Ph.D. in literature and creative writing at the University of Southern California. While I do some occasional website design (HTML, Javascript, CSS), for the most part, I no longer program for a living. On the other hand, technology continues to inform my work: both my current creative and critical projects revolve around the history of computers and the language of programming, and they both examine the themes of beauty and isolation in the context of our relationship with technology. My dissertation is more focused on the nineteenth-century and the emergence of the machine as a technological other. My poetry manuscript covers more ground, spanning the nineteenth-century into the present day.

What first gave you the idea of using your experience in the field of computers as creative inspiration?

While I can't trace it back to a specific moment, I do recall discovering that as I worked longer and longer hours as a programmer, I found it harder and harder to write creatively—not because the two acts were so dissimilar, but rather because they seemed to rely on the same part of my creativity.

Your poetry from Babbage's Dream focuses on mechanical items and yet flows very smoothly. Where do you find the "poetry" in computer technology?

As a programmer who writes, I've found that programming and poetry were more closely aligned than I'd ever imagined. Where is the poetry in computer technology and programming? I see them connected on a number of points. Both involve deep familiarity and fluency with language, grammar, and formal structures; both aspire to the creation of something that produces an effect, whether it is translation, transformation, or evocation; and both rely on the ability not merely to assemble things logically, but also to bend rules and think innovatively about solutions. In both programming and poetry, simplicity, elegance, and efficiency—especially when produced by flexible and original thinking—are deeply prized.

Once I started working on my MFA, I started to realize that there were also significant ways in which the experience of the exile and the hermit were connected with the ways society and programmers view the figure of the programmer. This type of solitude, obsession with craft, and dedication to a project (even if not always feasible) resonates with many other artists who work in more traditional mediums. While I think it's rare that the products we work on will ever constitute great art, I do think that programmers often feel deep emotional investment in their work and take pride when they find a particularly elegant or beautiful solution to a thorny problem.

In a similar fashion, I find that the mechanical objects of the nineteenth-century like Babbage's calculating engines and other gear and steam driven technologies of the period suggest a form of beauty that lies in craftsmanship. A made object or the machine that makes it can be beautiful and evocative. Machinery then,

and even digital machines and technologies now, simultaneously attract and disturb us. Where does this beauty lie? In some proximity to fear and anxiety. The key in seeing this beauty often requires us to look past the object's technical function, and consider instead these technologies as surfaces which reflect our own desires, fears, and anxieties as human beings. Donna Haraway suggests as much in her writing, noting that we should not fear the machine, for *we* are the machine and the machine is us—it mirrors back how we think, what we believe, what we fear, and what we desire. Technology, especially the computer, offers a glimpse into what remains of who we are in moments of existential transition in our society and how we wish to distinguish ourselves from the inanimate and the mechanical.

Do you think that inspiration for writing can come from any career?

Definitely. In fact, I often encourage writers to seek out employment and volunteer opportunities away from literature and writing. Spending time working with your hands or deeply invested in a field of study and research helps a writer acquire a broad and diverse vocabulary and a rich set of experiences from which to draw. What we learn in one area of endeavor becomes part of the way we see the world as a whole. I find writers who bring with them knowledge, passion, and experiences (good and bad) derived from time in a career or field of study have more interesting insights, see unusual and unexpected connections, and are more likely to surprise themselves and their readers with their work.

What would your advice be to writers working in full-time careers outside of writing who have trouble finding inspiration?

I think inspiration comes when we immerse ourselves in detail—when we push beyond the surface and consider in specificity textures, functions, histories, tangents, and relationships which spiral out from each object and idea that lies in our field of study. Charles Babbage notes in his great treatise, *On the Economy of Machines and Manufactures,* that when we survey any modern workspace or factory, we will find ourselves in a landscape populated by "a history of failures." Every object has a long history of failed designs and abandoned concepts. And in that history, there seems to me, a remarkable story of human endeavor and struggle. Narratives and relationships lurk everywhere. If every object arises from a history of failures, than every artifact must possess an aura of longing.

On a practical side, part of being successful as a writer employed in a career outside of writing, is to find a community of other writers. When I was a programmer, I spent as many evenings as I could attending open mic poetry readings and other literary events. I also became involved with a local writing group which met every two weeks. I pursued my study of literature through regular trips to used bookstores. As much as possible, I tried to gather information, take trips, and study not just poetry, but anything and everything that seemed interesting and unusual. I became a cataloguer of strange facts and odd quotes. Slowly but surely, I was amassing an archive of texts, images, and films that I felt helped me map out my own understanding of the world and whatever mythic landscapes resided within my personal experience.

Does your experience in combining an occupation with poetry influence what catches your eye as an editor?

I'm always fascinated by poems which find a way to turn the seemingly ordinary into the extraordinary. I love poetry that surprises me in its obsession with detail, navigating a path from one distinct and bounded field or realm, into something unusual and unexpected, something transcendent.

I've been a fan of Philip Levine's poetry for some time—the idea of word, hard labor, and the love of the thing being made and the maker are all things that I admire. I think I do favor poems which possess a similar respect for craft, both in the poem's making, and in whatever work is being engaged. On the other hand, I don't think that writing about work is always poetic—it takes imagination to discover connections and patterns that resonate beyond the immediate moment, that speak, even obliquely to the larger human experience.