

Robert Ashley and the Tourettic Voice  
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**Abstract:** This article explores notions of subjectivity and voice in American composer Robert Ashley's composition, "Automatic Writing." Ashley links his own (alleged) experience of Tourette Syndrome with his compositional process. The "Tourettic voice" that emerges in Ashley's music challenges normative conceptions of unified subjectivity and the ontology of presence.

**Key Words:** Tourette Syndrome, Robert Ashley, music and disability

The relationship between Tourette Syndrome (TS) and musical activity has intrigued both scholars and artists for decades. From Oliver Sacks' (1987; see also Sacks, 1992) essay on the drummer "Witty Ticky Ray," and the Tourettic boy pianist in the film *The Tic Code* (Draper & Winick, 1999), to Nirvana's song "Tourette's" (Cobain, 1993), responses to music and TS have been extremely varied and provocative. In this brief essay I examine one musical engagement with TS: American composer Robert Ashley's piece "Automatic Writing" (1996). Lasting exactly 46 minutes, "Automatic Writing" is a work for two voices (Robert Ashley and Mimi Johnson), electronics and Polymoog<sup>1</sup> (both performed by Ashley). The piece was produced, recorded, and edited at several locations (Oakland, Paris, and New York City); it is very sparse, and (at least in my hearing) hauntingly beautiful.

Before analyzing "Automatic Music" I would like to present some of the guiding thoughts and inspirations for this article. As a musician and Touretter, I have long meditated upon the dialectical relationship between my musical activity and my tics. In my own experience, playing guitar has helped me to "forget" the insistent and intrusive gestures of my Tourettic *Doppelgänger*. On the other hand, seemingly *ex nihilo* and unexpected impulses seem to have given my playing a particular creative flair. The last point brings me to a more theoretical point, namely an analysis of what I call the "Tourettic voice."<sup>2</sup> In neurological and popular discourses on TS, "involuntary" tics are described as being the "work" of something other than the ticquer. A Touretter is usually described as someone who struggles against his/her tics but simply cannot stop him/herself from ticcing. That is to say, a Touretter tics against his or her own will; a Touretter tics in spite of his/herself.

However, the tics of a Touretter are the movements of the Touretter, of course. Tics are unwanted movements or vocal utterances, gestures that fracture the sense of a self-sufficient and self-defining individual. Involuntary cursing is itself a curse – yet it is a curse that is embodied within the individual, embodied at the margins of that individual, and embodied as a disturbance to subjective unity. The Tourettic voice calls into question the subject's relationship with itself, the "presence" of the speaking subject, and by extension calls into doubt the very basis of Western metaphysics.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, the Tourettic voice intrudes into the space of normative subjectivity, and causes us to re-configure the "healthy" voice in relationship to the marginal (that is, the Tourettic voice).

Ashley's work is important because, instead of repressing *his* Tourettic voice, and instead of hearing his Tourettic voice from the position of his "healthy" voice, he affirms his own disjuncture and thereby acknowledges the irreducible fissure that characterizes all subjectivity. Instead of hearing and interpreting his Tourettic voice from without, Ashley performs his Tourettic voice as *his* (own) voice. No longer the symptom of a syndrome that intrudes rudely, Ashley *is* his Tourettic voice.

Let us now turn to an analysis of "Automatic Writing." In the liner notes of the CD (penned almost two decades after "Automatic Writing" was recorded), Ashley writes that "Automatic Writing was composed in the recorded form over a period of five years, during which time I was fascinated with 'involuntary speech.'" He continues to say that he was convinced that he has a mild form of TS, and he therefore wondered, "Because the syndrome has to do with sound-making and because the manifestation of the syndrome seemed so much like a primitive form of composing...whether the syndrome was connected in some way to my obvious tendencies as a composer."

Ashley's conceptualization of TS is overtly social, even political. He takes TS to mean any thought, utterance, or speech-act that is not easily interned by the conscious subject. In his liner notes he mentions that Morton Feldman (a contemporary of Ashley's and a fellow American avant-gardist with whom he is often associated) wanted to lock up any composer who "went around with a tune in his head." After saying that Feldman was only being metaphorical (and that Feldman did not actually want to lock anyone up), Ashley states rather emphatically, and somewhat ironically: "This speech was illegal." Such speech is illegal because it is unruly. It is unruly because it is uncontrolled and trivial; it lacks intentional design and is not the result of self-expressivity.

From there, Ashley cites two other avant-garde composers who seem to have described the kind of involuntary Tourettic speech that he is interested in: John Cage, who referred to a friend who hummed unconsciously, and Pierre Boulez, who apparently hated whistlers. (Ashley takes this to mean that Boulez hated people who "whistle while they work.") In contrast to Ashley, Feldman and Boulez condemn any person who produces sound that is not the conscious result of "their own" concentrating and concentrated autonomous self.

"Automatic Writing" is an attempt to produce and capture a truly involuntary speech. Reacting against statements made by composers such as Feldman and Boulez, Ashley valorizes the involuntary spontaneity of that speech which is unprepared and without obvious source. Discussing his early experiments with producing involuntary speech (intentionally producing involuntary speech is, of course, itself a paradox), Ashley says that his few moments of "loss of control" were triumphs. He triumphed because he desubjectified himself.

So, does Ashley have TS? I am not convinced that he does in the technical medical sense. What is interesting about "Automatic Writing," however, is that Ashley has *appropriated* TS as both a compositional strategy and a kind of political praxis. We should not forget, moreover, that historically all definitions of TS have been made in the context of social conventions. Even a cursory look at Howard Kushner's (1999) recent history of TS makes this much clear. I am not denying that there is a neurobiological basis for TS. However, as many neurologists, historians,

and psychologists have pointed out, TS must always be understood as *both* neurological *and* cultural. Ashley's "use" of TS is a kind of cultural work that questions the biopolitics of movement and speech: Why are Tourettic gestures (such as cursing) often cultural taboos? Within the brain and mind, what mechanism causes "involuntary" movements and utterances that are resolutely anti-social? Does the policing of bodily movement and vocal utterance in some way cause or agitate the Tourettic voice?

In trying -- although he cannot be trying -- to speak automatically, Ashley embodies an involuntary voice that is truly his own. Ashley's hyper-subjective involuntary speech-acts are captured beautifully in "Automatic Writing." In my own view, "Automatic Writing" brings to light the fragile boundaries separating presence and absence, self and other, normality and illness. Ashley's is a "disabled-Tourettic" voice that causes us to re-consider the categories of mental health and creative production; in the end, we don't know where his voice comes from.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> A Polymoog is an early analogue synthesizer.

<sup>2</sup> The following theorization has been greatly enriched by a series of articles in *New Literary History*, appearing under the title “Vocalization, Voice, and Intent.” See Brown & Kushner (2001), Miller (2001), and Schleifer (2001).

<sup>3</sup> In referring to the history of Western metaphysics in these terms I am drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida.