Many great works of philosophy were originally written and copied using styluses, quills, or brushes, without the benefit of printing presses or other machines. Today, most philosophical texts are composed on computers. For about a century, though, many philosophers, like other writers, relied on typewriters for help. Although these machines can't think, they can surely assist us in thinking. A prime example is Friedrich Nietzsche, who hoped that his Malling-Hansen Writing Ball would help him with his poor eyesight and headaches. His device malfunctioned and he had to give it up in frustration, but not before writing a ditty in 1882 in which he identified with the machine (which typed in capitals only):

SCHREIBKUGEL IST EIN DING GLEICH MIR: VON EISEN UND DOCH LEICHT ZU VERDREHN ZUMAL AUF REISEN. GEDULD UND TAKT MUSS REICHLICH MAN BESITZEN UND FEINE FINGERCHEN, UNS ZU BENUTZEN.

Roughly translated:

THE WRITING BALL IS A THING OF IRON, LIKE ME -- BUT ON TRIPS WE GET TWISTED QUITE EASILY. ONE MUST HAVE PATIENCE AND TACT, SO MUCH, TO USE US -- AND FINGERS WITH A DELICATE TOUCH.

The authors — who both happen to pursue philosophy in Cincinnati, Ohio — recently made exciting discoveries about the typewriters of two major 20th century thinkers. Both philosophers developed complex ideas that call for "patience and tact," but they thought in very different ways — and they used their typewriters differently, too.
Willard Van Orman Quine is hailed as one of the greatest philosophers of the “analytic” tradition. Quine brought about revolutions in how many philosophers think about what sorts of things exist (1948) and how words can hold meaning and refer to things (1960). Upending a centuries-old tradition in philosophy, Quine undermined the prevailing philosophical belief that there are two distinct routes to knowledge, one that proceeds by looking at worldly states of affairs, and one that proceeds merely by thinking about what must necessarily be the case (1951).

Quine’s doctoral supervisor was the philosopher and logician Alfred North Whitehead, the author, with Bertrand Russell, of the *Principia Mathematica* — one of the most ambitious works of formal logic of all time. Quine’s doctoral dissertation was a generalization of Principia. According to his biography, it spanned 290 pages. He began writing it up 17 days before the deadline and delivered it with only three hours to spare on April 1, 1932. His first wife, Naomi Quine, assisted him, filling in certain symbols by hand.

In order to complete the manuscript, rife with logical operators as it was, Quine had subjected his writing to a very peculiar surgery. He owned a 1927 Remington Portable no. 2. The logic he treated in his dissertation required numerous Greek letters and logical operators not available on a standard typewriter. In an ingenious and expertly carried-out welding operation, he had the symbols he thought of as superfluous replaced by logical operators and letters of the Greek alphabet. The symbols Quine determined to be extraneous notably included the question mark. Questioned on the matter once, it is reported that Quine’s rejoinder was, “Well, you see, I deal in certainties” (Beacon Hill Paper, 1996).

Along with the question mark, Quine eliminated currency symbols, fractions, the ampersand and the “at” symbol. He added the Greek lowercase letters beta, eta, zeta, theta, and iota; an italic lowercase “a” that may have served as a substitute lowercase alpha; square brackets; and several logical operators. These include the conjunctive operator (∧ or “and”), implicature (⊃ or “if ... then”), the inverted epsilon (ε or “such that”), and the existential quantifier (∃ or “there is”) — Quine’s essay on which has become a staple of any advanced degree in analytic philosophy.

Within the span of a century, the symbolic logic this typewriter enabled would give rise to the computer, and the computer would come to replace the typewriter. Symbolic logic is something of a halfway point between natural language and mathematics. One might produce on Quine’s typewriter a statement such as:

$$\exists x(T(x) \land B(x) \land P(x))$$

Say that T means “typewriter,” B “black” and P “portable.” We would then read this as:

*There exists something such that typewriterness, blackness and portability are true of that thing.*

Or, in more natural English:

*There is a black, portable typewriter.*

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The adapted layout on Quine’s typewriter. Characters appearing in red have been added or moved from their original positions.
This genre of formal logic is known as predicate logic, because we've predicated certain qualities (in this case, typewriterness, blackness, and portability) of an object.

As 20th century Jewish émigrés in America, my family tried to suppress their Jewishness, or had it suppressed for them. It was not until I came across a news article on the fate of the Auschwitz concentration camp at the age of twelve that I became aware of both my Jewishness and the reality of World War II. I was drawn to the artwork, poetry, and acts of political resistance taken on by children my age who had perished in the Holocaust. Among them was the diary of a boy, Petr Ginz, who worked in a typewriter repair shop in Prague before he was deported to Terezin, and eventually to Auschwitz (2007). His vivid descriptions of the smell of gasoline, of the fireballs it could produce, of which typewriters were easily disassembled for repair and maintenance and which were complex and difficult, kindled in me a fascination with the machines. I started to collect, clean, and repair typewriters — sometimes for money.

Apart from ranking among the most important thinkers in my field, W. V. O. Quine — "Van," as he was known to friends and family — was also the beloved undergraduate mentor of my own beloved undergraduate mentor — Daniel Dennett. Dennett wrote an homage to Quine upon his passing, writing that, as an undergraduate, he thought of it as his mission to prove Quine wrong (Dennett 2011). Upon arriving in graduate school, he was recognized by all as a dyed-in-the-wool Quinean. I was touched to read this, and to recognize my own experience with Dennett in Dennett's remarks on Quine.

When I heard rumors that Quine wrote on a typewriter that had been modified to possess logical operators, I took it as my mission to uncover the fate of this machine. Where could Quine's typewriter be? A voice in the back of my head chimed in: "Richard Polt would know." The problem was, I couldn't remember who Richard Polt was. I Googled him: a philosopher based in Cincinnati, Ohio. I, too, am a philosopher based in Cincinnati, Ohio. But why would he know what had befallen Quine's typewriter? I remembered then the Classic Typewriter Page, which Polt ran, and the ETCetera journal, for which Polt had served as editor, both of which had served as my guides to the marvelous world of typewriters throughout my teenage years. I emailed Polt, asking after Quine's typewriter, and, incidentally, if he'd like to get a beer.

Richard Polt didn't know the whereabouts of Quine's typewriter, but after some digging, I discovered that Quine's son, Douglas Boynton Quine, ran a meticulously orchestrated website documenting the family history. I contacted him through the site. He sent many pictures, and wrote that Quine used the machine religiously unto his death in 2000 — although its original case had disintegrated by the end of the century. There were more interesting coincidences. Quine grew up in Ohio, where Richard and I had now landed. Doug's academic background was in an area that closely paralleled my own interests. I wrote to Doug that I used to have spare cases for that model; maybe one day I will furnish it with a proper case, if they can be found in some basement somewhere, and if they are not too riddled with mildew by now.

I never liked the Remington portables. Perhaps due to the condition I would acquire them in, I concluded that they were prone to rust and difficult to repair. Their compactness — handy for travel — made them hard to maneuver when something went wrong. Perhaps the only bright side I saw to the Remington Portable no. 2 was that it came in Mountain Ash Scarlet, my favorite typewriter paint. The experience with Quine's Model 2 has given me a new appreciation for the Remington portable. I have come to think of it as a workhorse.
Heidegger's Urania-Piccola
— R.P

While Quine is a major figure in the "analytic" philosophical tradition, which emphasizes precision and logical argumentation, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) is a big name in the "continental" tradition, which tends more toward the literary and historical. His philosophy emphasizes that human existence is temporal, and that truth is an uncertain mix of dark and light. According to Heidegger, philosophical language at its best is closer to poetry than mathematics. In a notorious 1929 lecture, he asked not only "Why is there anything at all instead of nothing?" but even — much to the consternation of logicians — "What about the nothing?" (Heidegger 1998). He once wrote that "questioning is the piety of thinking" (1977). So he could hardly do without a question mark.

But could he do without a typewriter altogether? In his 1942 lectures on the early Greek philosopher Parmenides, Heidegger goes on an unexpected tangent, fulminating against the Schreibmaschine as a force that is destroying the essence of writing, which is properly "hand-writing" (Heidegger 1992). He wrote all of his voluminous texts with pen and ink.

But Heidegger's writing was not easy to read: it was a tiny version of the now obsolete Sütterlin script, in which several different letters look an awful lot like n. So he did rely on typewriters and skilled typists when he needed texts that would be readable by his publishers or the public. In fact, he wanted typewritten versions even of private manuscripts that he had no intention of publishing during his lifetime. Who could be trusted to type them up? Mostly, his brother Fritz. The editors of the collected edition of Heidegger's writings (which is nearing its projected length of 100 volumes) have the benefit of thousands of pages typed by Fritz on the basis of Martin's manuscripts.

Heidegger also had academic assistants — and in October 1932, according to a police file that was recently found by scholar Adam Knowles at the archives of the University of Freiburg, his assistant Werner Brock's torpedo portable (which Brock had purchased in 1927) disappeared from a seminar room. It shouldn't have been left there in the first place, noted the police. But the point is that "it was there, and that should be enough," retorted Heidegger indignantly.

The case was closed in January of 1933, in the absence of both typewriter and culprit. Later that month, such trivia were eclipsed when Hitler became chancellor of Germany. By May, Heidegger had joined the Nazi party and become the new rector of the University of Freiburg. Brock, who was of Jewish background, emigrated to England with Heidegger's help, found a position at Cambridge (where the great analytic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein was teaching), and published An Introduction to Contemporary German Philosophy in 1935 with Cambridge University Press. Heidegger stepped down as rector in 1934; whether he sufficiently distanced himself from Nazism after that is still a matter of hot debate today.

Nearly 88 years after Brock's typewriter went missing, I was alerted by a fellow collector that a machine purporting to be Heidegger's was being offered on eBay. It was an Urania-Piccola portable that bore the Sütterlin-style signature "M. Heidegger," scratched into the paint on the back of the paper table, in a place normally hidden by the folded paper supports. In theory anyone could imitate Heidegger's signature, but given Heidegger's known antipathy to typewriters, who would think of forging such an object?
I was persuaded that the machine was genuine by the fact that the serial number (#180482) dated it at 1932. It seemed likely that Heidegger bought this typewriter for Brock's use, as a replacement for the stolen Torpedo, and signed it in an inconspicuous place with the idea of making it easier to identify in case of another theft. Having published three books on Heidegger as well as working on his philosophy as a translator and editor, I was mightily tempted by the "Buy It Now" button.

The seller of the typewriter, as I discovered after yielding to that temptation, was Alvaro Albornoz, a Chilean historian living in Romania. Albornoz, a typewriter collector, had bought this machine from a Roma antique dealer who had picked it up in Freiburg. The typewriter was quite dirty, and Albornoz discovered the mysterious inscription only after extensive cleaning. It took him some time to decipher it and to decide that it might genuinely be Heidegger's signature. He was so inspired by the discovery that he delved into Heidegger's thought and used this machine to compose his own philosophical work, titled The Seven Seals of Being.

Uranias were made by Clemens Müller AG in Dresden. The company began in 1855 as a sewing machine factory; it introduced the Urania standard in 1909; the Perkeo, based on the Standard Folding, appeared in 1912; and the Urania-Piccola, an original portable design, in 1925. It was produced until 1935. It is not a rare machine, but it does have some quirks: its carriage return lever is on the right—a very unusual arrangement on a portable—and the ribbon color selection lever is on the left side. In addition to the regular Model R, the company offered a simplified Model S and a Model T with tabulator (Dingwerth 2008). The same design continued as the Klein-Urania (1935-43, 1947-49) in a more streamlined body.

Heidegger's Urania-Piccola Model R is now a highlight of my collection. There are no exotic symbols on this machine, but its 44-key German keyboard does have the ability to type in French (with the characters ç é ` ') and includes some other slightly unusual symbols (§ ÷ + =); this is a common layout on this model. It is in good condition, although the paint on the panel in front of the typebasket and on the front frame has been touched up (suggesting extensive use) and the shift lock is missing. A decal on the back tells us that the typewriter was sold by Strangfeld, an office machine dealer in Berlin.

Epilogue
Quine used his beloved Remington to the end of his life and bequeathed it to his son, while Heidegger may never have typed a word on his machine—maybe it was only used by others to copy some of his "essential" hand-writing—and it could easily have ended up on a junk heap.

Do Quine's and Heidegger's very different relationships to their typewriters reflect differing views on the nature of language and truth? Or on the value of modernity, science, and technology? Is a typewriter a more logical way to write, while pen and ink are more poetic? How do writing machines function as machines for thinking? Can a typewriter be, as Nietzsche put it, "a thing like me"? One thing is certain: we'd better hold on to our question marks.

Acknowledgement
Thanks to Adam Knowles for the information on the theft of Werner Brock's typewriter.

Sources
Royal's first portable typewriter
William Belcher • The Olivers • The philosophers' touch
Dear Doug,

The article featuring your photographs which you so kindly provided is enclosed, in print, at long last! I hope that you are well. We have finally been vaccinated which is a great relief; it feels as though the world may indeed return to normal some day.

Kind regards,

[Signature]

MEL ANDREWS