That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory:
A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
With words and meanings.
These lines from T. S. Eliot's *Four quartets* once testified to a time-honored tradition of creative struggle with one's words, to the agony of composition that forged well-wrought urns. Here we see the poetic mind at work, reflecting, ruminating, proving the fitness of a word, tuning the timbre of a cadence, pursuing novelty in the face of complacent poesy. But grappling with words and meanings meant more than constructing litotes or skilful enjambments. It was the fabric of the imagination, the condition of the poetic sensibility under pressure, haunted by the duplicities and excesses of the word and its troublesome resistance to the shaping spirit. Half a century after their composition, Eliot's words have a new freshness and relevance as testamur of a different type of anxiety in the age of the personal computer: the struggle with the writing machine.

**PUTTING WORDS INTO PLACE**

Words always cause trouble, especially for poets. Recalcitrant, impudent and just downright difficult, they require some force to go where we want them to and do what they are being directed to. When the small miracles of suggestion or metaphor happen, or inflection performs its subtle alchemy, we feel satisfied that words are still under our control. The wrestle with words has resolved itself. Things are satisfactory. For a writer of Eliot's generation, words, writing, composition, were facets of the organic, integrated sensibility; a complex, synaesthetic interplay of thought and feeling. Eliot would have been averse to thinking of the activity of writing as technological. The intervention of the personal computer has undoubtedly made writing technological and in the process it has altered the deeply personal relationship to words, thought and feeling that was paramount to writers such as Eliot. As we sit 'punching deck' have we lost the capacity to feel a thought 'as immediately as the odour of a rose'? Is the

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computer sympathetic to a sensuous engagement with words, meaning and experience? Eliot was concerned with a dissociation of sensibility. I'm worried about what's happening to words and their place.

Perhaps the recent anxiety over writing and computers is to some extent overstated. Writing has always been a technological activity, but it has only recently become a machinic one and this seems to be where the difference lies. The typewriter mechanised handwriting by regulating script into type and accelerating the delivery of words to the writing space. It simultaneously organised words into the hierarchies of typographic space, thereby streamlining the publication process by enabling writers to deliver typescripts rather than manuscripts to editors. But its collateral impact on the relationship between writer and words was negligible. That is, it left the integrity of the compositional process intact by keeping the technological function to a minimum and of a kind that could keep up with what was going on in the mind, rather than thwart its momentum. However, it did remove the tactile element from the activity of writing, the sensation of the hand rubbing the paper, the proximity of the body to the point of inscription, on which it left its tell-tale signs of materiality (calluses, ink stains, rheumatic joints).

The computer keyboard is even more sanitised and requires less physical input, though it is no less taxing on the body. But as an entire writing apparatus the computer is substantially different. With the computer there is an entire infrastructure of unseen machinations that intervene between our willed input of words and their placement in space. The electronic word breaks dramatically with the tradition of inscription and imprinting that were characteristics of manuscript and typographic culture. An assemblage of picture elements on a screen, the electronic word lacks materiality and fixity. It highlights some important concerns to do with the task of

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keeping words in their place once we have put them there. Specifically, the electronic word rekindles Eliot's darkest fear: are we losing our control over words?

Text On the Way to Disappearance

The fear of losing control over words is nothing new. The theory wars of the 1980s were as much a battle over who owns words as a political struggle for critical hegemony. The iconoclastic, adversarial posturings of many of the proponents of structuralism and deconstruction were reconstructed by those opposed to theory as the sentiments of a climate of fear, in which authorial notions of composition and intentionality were violently taken away from writers. No longer the centrifugal force of meaning, the author was relegated to the notary role of a user of words. The general tenor of such disempowerment was summed up in the assertion that the English language, rather than John Donne, was responsible for producing the Songs and Sonets. As speakers, and especially as writers, then, we merely borrow words from the public, anonymous archive of La Langue.

It was not long before scholars made the connection between what had quickly become known as electronic writing and the tenets of anti-authorial/anti-intentionalist critical theory. The general feeling was that a new writing technology such as hypertext was a literal embodiment of deconstruction's decentred, web-like network of traces. Here was the ideal form of writing theorised by people such as Roland Barthes and other members of the Tel Quel group; an elongated, continuously unfolding intransitive verb that had more in common with the architecture of labyrinths than syntax and transformational grammar. With all the fuss over écriture and structures of imminence, becoming and difference, little attention had been given to the unit of the word, and in particular what the critic Richard Lanham called 'the electronic word'. Norbert Wiener, the founder of cybernetics, anticipated in the 1940s a poststructuralist theory of the electronic
word in his focus on packet switching as an oscillation between presence and absence. Derrida, who was very familiar with Wiener's work, used Freud's 1925 essay on the *Wunderblock* or Mystic Writing Pad to visualise writing as a dynamic process of marking and erasure, in which words could only really be said to be there, to be present, at the moment of their fading. Mark Poster crystallised the link between deconstruction and the electronic word of the flickering screen in an influential essay of 1990:

Compared to the pen, the typewriter or the printing press, the computer dematerialises the written trace. As inputs are made to the computer through the keyboard, pixels of phosphor are illuminated on the screen, pixels that are formed into letters. Since these letters are no more than representations of ASCII codes contained in Random Access Memory, they are alterable practically at the speed of light. The writer encounters his or her words in a form that is evanescent, instantly transformable, in short, immaterial. By comparison, the inertial trace of ink scratched by hand or pounded by typewriter keys on to a page is difficult to change or erase. Once transformed from a mental image into a graphic representation, words become in a new way a defiant enemy of their author, resisting his or her efforts to reshape or redistribute them.

Poster knew that the electronic word was going to be nothing but trouble. Flickering in the pixellated limbo between presence and absence, the deconstructive word had found its true home in a fugitive situation of writing, the utopia of cyberspace. Words were going to be even harder to pin to the canvas.

But things were even worse than they actually appeared. The flickering evanescence of the electronic word signalled an even greater level of defiance. Quite unlike the orthographic solidity of the hand-

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written word, or the density of high DPI (dots per inch) resolution, the pixellated word is a representation of something else, of binary logic; a standard protocol for exchanging information electronically. We have known for a long time that words are abstractions, symbolic notations of facets of the world and the meanings we accord to them. The digital word (we must give it its proper name) takes abstraction much further into a realm of hyper-abstraction. As well as a phonetic and semantic value, words have a digital value as well. Furthermore, this digital value in turn triggers an electrical charge. This is getting alarming.

FROM TRUE TYPE FONT to WYSINWYG

Anything this abstract is receding from the human context and our ability to identify with it. It's easier to identify with words in the recognisable forms that we take for granted and feel are so much a part of ourselves. I couldn't imagine Tom Eliot getting too excited about a digital version of 'Prufrock.' There would be precious little modifying of sensibility going on there. In an effort to give a sense of stability and homely comfort, designers came up with true type font. This was the nearest thing to a promise of congruence between the digital word and the printed word, the reassurance that what you see on screen is what will be delivered in the durable permanence of print.

True type font is actually less a form of reassurance than a reminder of what is actually going on when we write using a computer: we are processing words. The term 'wordprocessor', very much an eighties phenomenon, has fallen out of use as quickly as it was coined. It no longer generates the unrest of the early 1980s, when the writing machine was starting to infiltrate the practices of authors and academics. As a postgraduate student in the English Department at La Trobe University during this time I was well positioned to witness the impact of wordprocessing (as a term and a process). It was, ironically, in the
context of an Honours class in intensive poetic analysis that one of
my tutors made a memorable tirade against the whole idea of a
machine that processes words. Amid discussions of F. R. Leavis's con­
cept of 'moral hygiene' it was not inappropriate to hear my incredu­
lous tutor attack wordprocessing as a form of bad taste, for the very
idea that words could be subjected to something so mechanistic was
an affront to his sensibilities. The wordprocessor made him feel, with
immediacy, a different kind of odour. The wordprocessor came straight
out of Dickens' circumlocution office and Orwell's Newspeak, with
their connotations of sterility, controlled atmospheres and a bureau­
cratic sense of words being put through the mill of officiousness. But
there was even more at stake in this assault on the sanctity of the word.
My tutor had transmogrified into the poet-warrior celebrated by Jethro
Tull in Thick as a brick: he was railing against the dying of the light.

The few academics who actually used the wordprocessor, installed
in the department's auratic general access space, had a different
view. One in particular marvelled at its prowess, its ability to make
the physical task of writing more flexible. That same academic, how­
ever, became the protagonist of a cautionary tale that soon became
the talk of professorial offices, common rooms and the urinal when,
in tones normally reserved for the tragedies of Aeschylus, the depart­
ment grapevine transmitted the news that the wordprocessor had
deleted a chapter from his new book—here was the first victim of the
processed word. As if to counterpoint the horror of this calamity, a
colleague of the hapless academic had recently lost the entire manu­
script of his PhD to bushfires in the Adelaide hills. The news of this
disaster was greeted with equanimity, since natural forces were less
malevolent and more forgivable than the machine that ate words.

These examples are indicative of the repertory of horror stories of
all computer users. Once upon a time the typist's eye-skip concussed
words out of their place. Such dislocations are still a threat with the
computer, but the finer sensitivity of the electronic keyboard has
increased the likelihood of mistakes occurring, elevating the 'keyboard error' to a taxonomy all of its own. Misplaced letters or diacritical marks are nothing compared to the loss of veritable chunks of text that can disappear with an inadvertent mouse movement or finger glide over the touch pad (perhaps there's a new branch of critical theory to be developed around ergonomics and hermeneutics). Think, too, of the horrors of not saving text as a file; material that has the wholeness of inspired composition, or just plain old graft, can vanish quicker than the skip of an eye. At least in the days of carbon paper a copy could be retained if an original typed document was lost. The problem with text that is virtual is that unless it has been saved as memory in the computer it has to be done all over again. Remember those moments of agony attempting to retrieve lost epiphanies, to recombine the synchronicities of the right words and the right sense? One of the hard lessons of electronic writing is that the digital word is not sympathetic to le mot juste and even less so to the neologism. 

With electronic writing, then, it's not so much a question of losing control over words, but of losing words altogether. This is the deeper, primordial fear of the literate sensibility, for it is this very loss that writing was invented to overcome. Writing was invented as a means of holding words, information and meaning in place. Writers don't mind wrestling, but they expect their opponent to still be around at the end of the contest. The reality of losing text highlights the precarious nature of the WYSIWYG interface.

**Styles of Digital Will: or the dialectic of the refinement**

The intermediate function of the interface is making our wrestle with words more and more intolerable. Market-driven obsolescence is undoubtedly a factor in this. Improvements to interface design


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proliferate in a spiralling vertigo of upgrades, in which qualitative differences between genuine improvement and design are blurred. Refinement has declined into finessing; workable and functionally satisfactory interfaces become architectures of excess, idiolects of iconography. Interfaces offer familiar, metaphoric ways of doing things that we are comfortable with; for instance, the desktop arrangement of the Macintosh. Through chronic refinement interfaces have become smarter and, through feedback, are more responsive to our interactions. In other words, they have become more user-friendly. Well, that’s the idea behind the corporate hype and software mumbo jumbo. In reality, feedback and intelligent software have actually created a more complicated working environment where much time is spent undoing automatic insertions, corrections and suggestions and managing that most diverting of all distractions, the fit of pique.

These interventionist devices, such as the macro that draws attention to a sentence that is possibly too long or may be ungrammatical, or highlights dubious spelling or incorrect usage, are designed to make life easier for us in our wrestle with words. Then there’s the myriad actions that make decisions for you, such as. Capitalising the first letter after a full stop or

The first letter of an indented, interpolated quotation

Even more dramatically, modes of address can be automatically altered, such as changing the passive to the active voice. These devices actually create more work as you spend a lot of time uncorrecting smartarse decisions made on your behalf that you may not even want to make. Such decisions

• generate frustration
• get in the way
• think that they are just so clever
• The overall result is a kind of automatic copy-editing of the

6. I am grateful to Jenny Lee for pointing this out.
text you are working on. This in turn makes you watchful, distracted and irritated.

In making the screen space more busy and dynamic, this process reinforces the very thing that you are trying to forget: that words are being technologically processed. Smart software—which second-guesses what the writer is doing, intervenes to ask questions, monitors and interrogates and generally makes a nuisance of itself—is the late twentieth-century counterpart to the intrusive narrator of the picaresque tradition in the novel. When letters, numbers or typographic features of spacing make unauthorised entry onto the screen, they do so with the brazenness of autonomy, of indifference to our presence as authors. It is, after all, my text that I’m typing! Just as the intrusive narrator in fiction holds up the continuity of a story, the intrusive copy-editor in wordprocessing packages frustrates the flow of composition.

Writers have long been preoccupied with the idea of words appearing out of nowhere, inspired by a Muse, or a mysterious second hand, such as Shakespeare’s ‘affable familiar ghost’, the unseen presence that gulls his rival poet with intelligence. Words, too, can materialise out of the work of writing itself and the sheer force of their semantic charge can give rise to even more. Out of this process individual words seem to be organizing themselves into higher systems of order (has Manuel De Landa dabbled in literary criticism?). The unsolicited appearance or modification of words on the screen endows writing with a strange phenomenology, a weird sense of self-making; the term ‘word-processing agency’ acquires a quite different connotation under these conditions. Self-reflexivity is, after all, a condition of any living system, as Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela have argued. Think, then, of the digital realm as a kind of

self-organising, autopoietic system, with its complex, codified instructions on how words are to appear on the screen. Digital animation software has, after all, appropriated the term 'behaviours' to account for the functions of objects or avatars. The problem with such metaphors of the autonomous word is that they remove the writer from the situation of writing, just as poststructuralism had done earlier. Indeed, the idea that words can come into being without the creative force of the writer exerts a strong theoretical force within the critical apparatus developing around electronic writing. As Richard Grusin has pertinently suggested, the 'discursive logic that structures the current articulation of electronic authorship' is heavily influenced by the critical theory of writers such as Michel Foucault, who in 'What is an author?' imagined a cultural formation in which 'discourse would circulate without any need for an author'.

Samuel Beckett once described the way James Joyce's words 'elbow their way on to the page.' While the context is quite different (he was referring to the strong mimetic force of Joyce's language in *Finnegans Wake*) the image of brusqueness is an apt one, as it suggests that words have personality, vibrance and the suggestiveness of autonomy. However, I weary of the brusqueness and presumption of Mr M. Word, Gentleman. I want my words back and I want them left alone. I can't even write a letter without an animated avatar of His Nibs appearing out of nowhere and wheedling me in that precocious tone: 'Prithee, Gentle Sir, methinks I hear the sound of scribbling.'

Bugger off!
