

# Plato and the Word Processor

1 SOME PEOPLE WORRY about the effect they have on the nerves that Others are concerned about the vapors computer chips are quietly forged. But technology might have on the way we think—on our thought processes? Why measure, and analyze cell-phone heads, eye-strain from computer liabilities from lugging around a laptop, computers might be changing the way we assume that since computers can't the way we do.

But then there is word processing. computers, word processing has taken over for the typewriter (and typesetting machines) as the primary shaper of written communication. Snail-mail, e-mail, faxes, contracts, term papers, homework, notes cut and pasted from Web pages, health information downloaded—an entire universe of information word-processed and made available online and in hard copy. If word processing (WP) adds, or detracts, in any way to or from the process of human communication, it certainly deserves a closer look.

In his book, *Electric Language: A Philosophical Study of Word Processing*, Michael Helm offers a history of the various technologies we have used to form and communicate our ideas and information along with a survey of Western Philosophy's take on language and ideas. Helm marks the beginning of WP with IBM's near branding of the term in 1964. But like Kleenex, the term later became generic for all computer-assisted writing. The author says there is a need now to calculate word processing's effect on our most important technology, writing. If we wait, we may soon arrive at a time when we take WP so much for granted we will be unable to see the changes it is making in us.

## Transformational Technologies

As a technology, language is much more than a tool that we pick up and put down as needed. In Helm's

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words, language's "symbols (words) touch upon an ontological dimension." A modern school of philosophy puts it this way: You can't think what you can't say. Words are so closely tied to the world of abstract ideas that we don't merely use words to give ideas names—words take us through to ideas. Any technology that tampers with our habits in this area could actually affect the way we understand ideas. In fact, the

two major shifts in the past, from an oral-aural society to one based on writing and later the printing press, both caused "a fundamental shift in the history of civilization" according to the author. Could it be that word processing is the next leap, from the typographic to an electronic media? And if so, what will the seismic shifts be?

### Different Roots, Different Leaves?

Michael Heim notes that the

## Tech Forum

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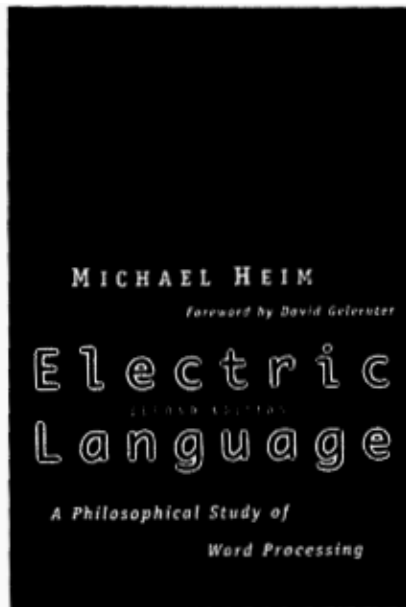
mouse clicks and keystrokes and snake through our wrist bones. that float in the clean rooms where does anyone worry about the effect

is it reasonable to investigate, radiation that goes through our staring, and the chiropractic and yet pay no attention to how we deal with ideas. Maybe we just think, there is no way they can affect

Still the number one task for

genesis of WP began with text editors developed by programmers to help them write programs for data handling. The ASCII computer code of Os and is was used to encode language on the machine, and "data-handling techniques for number crunching or for the high-speed manipulation of quantified routine information were applied to natural language communication."

Did these text editors impart the smell of machine oil that would



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taint this new electronic language with programmer's algorithmic logic, or did they just lubricate the wheels to accelerate what Heraclitus insisted was at the center of man's reason, that "thought flows"?

The author tells us, "Writing converted to ASCII is fundamentally—as a phenomenon—different from handwritten manuscript. . . . When a phenomenon has been digitized. . . it has been transmogrified into a new form, a form that can be controlled by human beings with a precision far beyond that of other forms of reproduction."

Helm then reminds us that current analysis of human logic has shifted from what used to be the proper arrangement of grammatical elements (Aristotle) to sophisticated mathematical models (Leibniz). We analyze logic today as though it was an advanced calculus, and WP can clearly serve this new reasoning model. Is that good or bad? An even more intriguing question is, "If we program that calculus into a machine, would that make it rational?"

### **New, Blue Words**

Word processing also introduced hyperlinks, those colored words that, when clicked on, take you elsewhere. The hyperlink is a new part of speech, and unlike nouns and verbs, which allow you to freely associate within yourself, these words are tunnels out to other pages and networks of pages, which you don't control—double click and you don't know where you'll end up.

Certainly, nouns, verbs, and adjectives are eminently important to the way we think and communicate. How important is a new part of speech going to be in our scheme of knowing and saying? Come to think of it, when was the last time a new part of speech showed up in the language? Who invented nouns; when were adverbs introduced? This hyperlink may really be important, especially since it is electrified with its own associative powers that are not our own.

It's impossible to sum up in this small space all the streams the author follows in his central chapters specifically dealing with WP. He explains the different psychic frameworks that let us see

what we think, and then he gets to the hallmark differences between electronic and conventional text. Within W~ a new language of metaphor has arisen, one that has a fluidity and abbreviated symbolization that is unlike our other forms of communication. Reading and writing are different with word-processed text (you can't scroll when you read a book, and you don't have hyperlinks when you write with a pen or typewriter), and we are learning to think in electronic language. Will our consciousness be restructured by this technology? Probably. Exactly how is something we need to begin to look at now, before we are so immersed in its effects it becomes like air—vitality influencing every human action, but doing it almost invisibly.

The good philosophical texts ask the right questions, and *Electric Language*, by Michael Heim, although not an easy read, does just that. Is word processing and its influence on the way we think something we need to start worrying about? Well, how much time do you spend in front of a computer each day?