Sunday February 26, 2012

The instrument shapes the output

By Jim Taylor

I got a new computer this last week. After six months of trying to work off two different computers – a desktop computer in my home, and a laptop that I use whenever I'm away – I found that no matter how religiously I backed up files from one to the other, the files I needed were always on the other computer.

So I decided to consolidate everything on one computer that can go wherever I go.

I'm pleased with my new, more powerful, laptop. At least, I think I will be, once I get used to its idiosyncrasies and programs.

Those programs will change how I work. They'll probably change the way I write, too. I just don't know how, yet. Because the technology we use inevitably affects the product we create.

Think of Beethoven, for example. Beethoven composed on the piano. He could not have created those glorious symphonies if he had chosen to compose on, say, the bagpipes. Or a guitar, for that matter.

Every instrument has its own capabilities, and its own limitations. Wind instruments can play only one note at a time; the violin family, two notes at a time – but only so far apart on the scale. A pianist or organist can harmonize up to ten notes at a time, many octaves apart.

So Beethoven could explore combinations and sequences of notes that were simply not possible with a flute or harmonica.

The writer's tools

The same principle applies to writers, although we have fewer instruments available – just the pen, typewriter, and now computer.

Matthew Kirschenbaum, a professor of English at the University of Maryland, has been tracking the changes those instruments have made. He'll describe his current research at the University of Toronto on March 1.

You might be surprised to know that the first book ever written on a typewriter was Mark Twain's memoir, *Life on the Mississippi*. Until then, all manuscripts were handwritten.

That, incidentally, is the reason for the oft-quoted claim that a writer should only send a manuscript to one publisher at a time. Before photocopiers, before carbon paper, there was only one manuscript, laboriously written out by hand.

Shakespeare wrote all 37 of his plays by hand. With a quill pen. Which he had to dip in an inkwell every few words. That process inevitably affected his thinking; it mandated a pause, every few seconds, for him to reconsider his next words.

Later, the pace picked up. Fountain pens eliminated the need to pause. Typewriters enabled the torrent of words to spill out even faster. And, regrettably, often without serious consideration.

Which meant that editing oneself became more of a problem than simply getting words down on paper.

Differences in perception

In one sense, modern word processors merely increased the speed at which a writer could create text. But they also affected another factor -- the way one edits and corrects a manuscript.

Before computers, the only way to improve a sentence, a paragraph, was to type it again. In my typewriter days, I often retyped the same paragraph three or four times until I felt satisfied. But each previous version was still there, to compare my revisions against.

My final rewrite, when I had to retype the entire text without errors, gave me a further chance to get it right. One textbook for authors, in fat, insisted that a writer should fully retype any manuscript, if only to force one's mind and fingers to think through the words one more time.

Word processing programs on computers make changes infinitely easier. But previous versions vanish into the void, beyond re-examination.

The computer screen also affects my ability to critique my own work. A screen emits light; it doesn't reflect it, like paper. My friend and colleague Eric McLuhan – son of the famed Marshall McLuhan – did his doctoral studies on the difference in perception caused by the two different kinds of light.

Transmitted light, McLuhan concluded, routes itself differently through our brains. We tend to be less critical, more accepting.

Have you ever stood in awe, watching light stream through a stained glass window? Back home, the prints from your film look much less impressive. Because now you're looking at reflected light, not transmitted light.

Or consider this. Every kindergarten child learns the three primary colours -- red, blue, and yellow. Mix blue and yellow, for example, to create green. But your TV or computer screen uses red, blue, and green -- not yellow -- as primary colours. Because the screen emits light, rather then reflecting it.

So although computers made it much easier to amend or correct one's text, they simultaneously made it more difficult to discern what needed correcting.

That's why books and newspapers seem to have more typographical errors these days -- "that" instead of "than," "or" instead of "of." By writing on screen, writers sacrificed precision for speed.

I'm not as prescient as the McLuhans. I cannot foresee how new technologies, which hurtle upon us ever-faster, will change the way we use our language. I can only say, with some certainty, that they will.

But perhaps, a few years from now, I'll look back and see how my new computer has affected my style.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column about obsessions – mine, and my pets' – encouraged a few of you to share your obsessions too. Mary-Margaret Boone wrote, "Mine is collecting -- as my kids have told me every new thing in my life becomes the start of a new collection. I collect first-day Canadian postage covers, vases, angels, rocks, shells, Trixie Belden books, Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys books as well, Bibles, plates for my plate rail, (which I can now fill twice but the plates have to be bread and butter sized plates), miniature animals, miniature anything actually. My son laughed when I spoke about what I would try to save if the house was on fire -- I probably would not get out of the house!! A sad thought of being tied to one's possessions!"

Ruth Shaver wrote from Schellsburg, Pennsylvani,:" I, too, am obsessed with words, specifically the improper use of them and of poor grammar which impedes the understanding of them. And I also shout at the television and radio voices which misuse and abuse the English language. I attribute this obsession to the influence of my grandmother, who was an English teacher, and to my father, who imbued his childhood experiences of learning to speak and to write from his 'excruciatingly precise' mother. My obsession has, however, served me well most of the time!

Heather Richard: My description of Phoebe's obsession with food made Heather Richard "think of my dog, a 4 year old English Springer Spaniel named Cody. Cody is obsessed with food too, and in a house with three teenage children, he often his weight to get to the point where the vet said "severe diet or he won't be able to walk in 2 years". So now poor Cody is cut down to 2 cups of low calorie dog food a day, no treats, NO human food. He's even more obsessed with food now - his counter surfing skills have reached new heights! This shows how obsessions, magnificent or minor, can have powerful effects on our lives. As human beings, we have to make the decision whether an obsession is worth pursuing to extremes.

"Oh, and did I mention that one time Cody was left alone, he ate the full butter dish, two boxes of cereal, and a bottle of shower gel!"

David Gilchrist admitted to being a little behind in his reading, but he still wanted to send along a comment about the Jonah column, two weeks ago. "I was delighted to see your 'take' on Jonah, which is similar to my understanding of the story (one of my favourite sermon illustrations, as there are so many hidden lessons in those 4 short chapters). The story says that Ninevah had 120,000 'who didn't know their right hand from their left, and also

much cattle.' For lo, these many years, (again, whether from my own interpretation, or from something I read) I understood that to mean that there were 120,000 innocent little children still too young to know left from right…

"The Wycliffe Bible Dictionary says 'Calah was a city less than half the size of Nineveh, and it had 69,574 people in 879 B.C.'; which would make Ninevah more than 140,000 people …"

Given the life expectancies of the time, and the habit of counting only adults as population, David mused, it might in fact be reasonable to assume 120,000 children.

"So," he concluded, "one might ask why God would kill 120,000 innocent children, no matter how bad their parents may have been. And I am also intrigued by the added 'and also much cattle'."

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ABOUT MY BOOKS, ETC.

I still have a few copies of a book my father wrote exploring Christian theology through Christian art.

The problem with art, of course, is that it cannot put an abstract concept on canvas. An artist cannot paint an Incarnation or a Resurrection without putting real humans, in real situations, into the picture. The expression, therefore, has to be grounded in a particular culture and society; the infinite and universal has to be represented in finite terms.

My father – who once took art lessons from members of Canada's Group of Seven – spent much of his life after retiring as principal of the Vancouver School of Theology, seeking out the ways artists through the centuries had attempted to deal with this dilemma. I'm probably biased, but I think that in examining the ways art portrays theological concepts, he explained those concepts better than most theological texts.

The book is *Seeing the Mystery: Exploring Christian Faith through the Eyes of Artists*, by William S. Taylor, 94 pages. There are only about 20 copies left in the world. Most of the illustrations are in full colour.

If you would like a copy, write to me – Jim Taylor, 1300 6th Street, Lake Country, BC, Canada, V4V 2H7.

Unfortunately, I can't send these out on the honour system, as I do with my biblical paraphrases. I will have to charge $30 Canadian to include postage, paid in advance.

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TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

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You can access several years of archived columns at http://edges.Canadahomepage.net.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

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PROMOTION STUFF…

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For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com

- Wayne Irwin's "Model T Websites." a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <http://www.modeltwebsites.com>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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