

Joseph Hutchison  
P.O. Box 266  
Indian Hills, Colorado 80454  
(303) 697-3344  
joe@jhwriter.com

“I Have Seen the Future, and It is Prose”  
Approx. 1,630 Words

## **I Have Seen the Future, and It Is Prose**

I lean into the writing, this writing happening here and now, a blue light from the color monitor bathing my face, thinking along with the flow of language, noticing how it comes. It comes haltingly; “flow” isn’t the right word. I space the winking cursor up and change it to “surge,” but the “ur-ur” stutter of “surge” and “word” annoys me, so I change it back. By now it *is* flow, or perhaps “floe.” I may space up and change it again, but later.

This is no time to meditate.

I’m processing words.

Writers tend to make themselves professional promises — often the only elements in their lives that resemble ethics. Among my self-promises is the one that goes, “I’ll never write an essay about word processors.” Let Andy Rooney be cute in the face of advancing technology, I’ve always felt. These are serious labor-saving devices, useful for accomplishing everything one would have accomplished anyway, only more quickly.

The essential neutrality of word processors became an article of faith for me soon after I

started using one at work. The attitude was soon so ingrained that when a friend of mine, one of Denver’s finest under-published fiction writers, recently got a processing system in his office, I was able to smile indulgently at his anxieties. Here was a man who’d made the transition from pen to typewriter composition many years ago, a man devoted to both exactness and intuitive flow in his prose; a man, in short, who could benefit like crazy from word processing. And what was his chief fear? That the computer would somehow undermine his style. That it might eliminate the pain of composition, and with the pain, the exaltation. Oh no, I told him. Word processors are simply tools; sophisticated, but incapable of using us badly.

But that was a few months ago, and lately I’ve started to think about the impact of word processing on language. Not only *my* language, but the Language at large. Frankly, what I think I’m finding disturbs me, because I’m beginning to believe I may live to see the end of the language that enchants me into poems, my own and others’, the kind of language that sustains the rich and peculiar texture of my inner life.

I have to explain that I make my living as a writer.

Most of what I write for a living is either promotional (that is, written to sell a product or a service) or journalistic in nature. There is a part of me, a Dante-esque part, that consigns the writing-for-a-living part of me to the eighth infernal circle along with Sinon, the Greek dissembler of Trojan Horse fame; but nevertheless, the damned part of me enjoys being paid for putting words on paper, which even at its worst is often a pleasure. I maintain my sanity in this divided state by believing that all word-work “furthers” (in the dated lingo of *I Ching*), that I

improve my “flexibility” by writing in a variety of modes, and that it all goes to support me while I write “the real thing,” by which I mean poetry.

If I’ve learned nothing else by writing for pay, I’ve learned what writers are paid for — and that is prose.

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I made the transition from pen-scratching on yellow, blue-lined paper to the swift, muted clackery of writing on a computer without much trauma. It’s okay to be leading edge, I told myself — and it was. Especially when I realized I could spend less time writing for pay (leaving me free, of course, to write more poetry) and be paid the same for each piece, I began to devote myself to the processed word.

Almost overnight I found I could no longer compose a developed paragraph by hand; the hand simply couldn’t keep up with my thought, and a constant sense of *lagging* filled me with anxiety and boredom.

Eventually, I decided that I would never be an efficient, professional writer — i.e., one who makes more than \$3.00 an hour at it — until I got my own word processor at home. Which has since come to pass.

Yea, e’en now these sentences of mine are being compos’d upon it, my sweet PC Junior, oh mighty IBM!

But the boon has extended only to my prose. Poems I’ve never learned to compose on the keyboard. I considered this inability to be a kind of mental block, at first. Now I believe it’s more.

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As I lean into the writing, this writing happening here and now, I’m aware of keeping pace with my thought — and that’s pleasing. I’m also aware that I can stop briefly at any time and make small or major changes easily, without the tedium of extensive retyping. The feeling is openness, like watching cloud-shadows skim over the undulating surface of a ripe wheat field.

But there’s something else — or, rather, *not* something. There is no sense of depth, no sense of layers underneath the language. Of course, I don’t have time to spend creating those layers.

What do I mean, I don’t have time? Word processing ought to give me the time. But when I pause, when I stop to meditate, the cursor blinks anxiously; it wants to hurry on down the page. No time to waste, it seems to signal. Forget your thorny sentences. Keep it simple, stupid. Come on. Drop that adjective! Let’s move!

And I move. My fingertips clatter over the keys, halting only now and then — and then only for a moment — while I stare rather blankly at the bright dot-patterns that make up the words I’ve punched up on the screen. At times they look utterly unfamiliar, like the points of light one sees in the distance at night while driving through flat, open country . . .

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The thing is this: no medium is neutral. Each has an implicit message.

The message implicit in word processing is that speed is an aspect of quality, so that writing quickly in a style that can be quickly read is a virtue. No particular style is dictated, of course, but over time the values implicit in the medium quietly become the writer's own.

I don't mean to say that the writing necessarily gets weaker; some writers may find their prose definitely improved by the processor. Others, though, will find that the writing becomes less varied, less complex, until it seems to register skimming thoughts at the expense of less easily expressible aspects of the writer's sensibility. A glibness sets in, and the writer must begin struggling for the richness that once seemed to spring up automatically in those hand-cramping hours of the slow going.

Now prose, as the dominant form of human speech, may never be truly damaged by word processing. Even if no one in the coming generation — which is now practically teething on soft-sectored diskettes — never develops a prose style as layered and rich as Faulkner's, good literary prose will probably get written.

But poetry is another matter. It's another matter because it exists in order to express those complex areas of the individual psyche that ordinary prose, especially word-processed prose, is not designed to express. This is why I worry about the future of poetry, and about the kind of inner life it springs from and nourishes.

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When I lean into the writing, the poem-writing as it happens, there is less a sense of flow than of stillness, of waiting. I lay a word or two or five down in pencil or in pen; I scratch them onto the page, and they have some kind of weight, a shape I've physically etched in the paper. I say them to myself; they create a certain resonance in my body. More often than not I cross them out and try a few more. Typically, there's a music happening somewhere, a music I feel compelled to approximate in language. Rooted in the mortal nature of being, in time itself, it's a music that has nothing to do with thought; it may never have anything to do with thought. It's something else, like a spell. It's a music that wants to enchant my words . . . .

Only a way of writing rooted so thoroughly in the body can produce lines like these of Yehuda Amichai:

I'm a clock hand  
which has run away from its clock  
but cannot forget its circling movement.

When I go straight toward my endless end  
it hurts, because I only know how to go round.

Or these, about a stray dog, by Jonathan Aaron:

While he jogs  
head-down toward  
the memory of a taste,  
a voice, a moment  
of doorway,  
his front legs

constantly fail  
to correct his hindquarters'  
sleepy need to travel  
somewhere else.

Or these by Robert Hass, writing about Jefferson's Monticello:

Outside this monument, the snow  
catches, star-shaped,  
In the vaginal leaves of old magnolias.

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What I'm suggesting is that word processing obviates much of the physicality involved in writing, and that makes it dangerous for poetry. And not just poetry as a form — lines on a page — but poetry as the whole species of language that exists to express the deepest human insights and experiences. In this sense, a prose future is one I wouldn't want to inhabit.

Of course, I may be wrong that we're losing this kind of language. Leaning, as I am, into the blue glow of the monitor, my rationality skimming over the surface of my concerns, I find myself thinking it probably won't happen.

In any case, there's no time to meditate on it.

My cursor's in a hurry to reach the end.