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THE LITERARINESS AND MATERIALITY OF WORD PROCESSING

Vincent Haddad

Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing by Matthew G. Kirschenbaum. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. Pp. 368, 22 illustrations. \$29.95 cloth.

Given word processing's integral function in today's writing process, it is surprising that a comprehensive history of it and its relationship to literary production had not been undertaken before Matthew G. Kirschenbaum's *Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing*. Of course, many important studies have considered the shifting relationships between writing, reading, and technology, as these shifts have been at the root of both Luddite hand-wringing over the status of print and optimistic celebrations of growing political access to writing and publishing for decades;¹ but *Track Changes* is one of the first to bring the technical specificity one finds in, for example, book history studies about the early printing press² to modern word processing. In contrast to other, more philosophical explorations of the historical relationship between language and technology, from seminal works such as Ong's *Orality and Literacy* and McLuhan's *Gutenberg Galaxy* to more recent works such as N. Katherine Hayles's *How We Think*, Kirschenbaum argues against making general prognostications about the overall impact of word processing on the craft of writing, warning, "Any analysis that imagines a single technological artifact in a position of authority over something as complex and multifaceted as the production of a literary text is suspect, in my view, and reflects an impoverished

understanding of the writer's craft" (7). With this admirable qualification in mind, I suggest that the reverse might be true: new inquiries into the relationship between technology and the craft of writing in the present will now be incomplete without the detailed, technical history of word processing that Kirschenbaum uncovers, organizes, and captivatingly narrates.

To many readers (especially readers such as myself who are too young and privileged to have experienced writing before the ubiquity of Microsoft Word), more surprising than the fact that this study is the first of its kind will be that the seemingly inevitable outcome of modern word processing was anything but. From our current vantage point, the concentration of just a few writing programs, such as Word, Open Office, and Google Docs, all with similar visual layouts and functional capabilities, has likely narrowed the range of experiences individuals have in the basic composition, revision, and formatting of a document; this was not so before or during the development and introduction of word processing. Kirschenbaum pinpoints 1981 as "about the time word processing entered public awareness at large and became a topic of conversation and debate in the literary world as elsewhere" (52). But this watershed moment was defined by "new software . . . released almost daily . . . [and] literally scores of alternatives

on the market, with choice dependent on not only features and capabilities but also compatibility with what were generally mutually incompatible host systems" (53). Even basic collaborative writing was therefore contingent on a number of cumbersome technical factors that writers needed to either adapt to or sidestep entirely. As Kirschenbaum puts it, "while the abundance of choice may seem empowering in retrospect, it was also a significant obstacle to getting started" (53). In part, this wide range of programs correlates with the multitude of creative fixes and shortcuts developed in response to the inordinate process of producing publish-ready professional documents, let alone a novel hundreds of pages long, before one could copy and paste a block of text or find every use of a word and globally replace it. The honing of this technology into what we know today—though, as Kirschenbaum's codex suggests, this technology is hardly finalized—depended on not only the engineering, marketing, and consolidation of hardware and software products but also a great deal of experimentation, input, and failure (including "overwriting" entire documents) from regular users and, in particular, long-form fiction authors.

As one might guess, tracing out all of the recombinant pathways of word-processing technologies presents a narrative challenge.

Thus, one of the first observations a reader will need to square is that Kirschenbaum does not structure his story linearly but thematically. Given the technical nature of the subject, the constant backward-and-forward movement between the early 1970s and the mid-1980s admittedly presents a daunting hurdle for any reader without firsthand, or secondhand, knowledge of a Kaypro, an Osborne 1, or a Wangwriter II. Arguably, the very messiness of this history—one would say that the path from the IBM MT/ST to the Lexitron word processor is not direct but incongruent and uneven—demands Kirschenbaum's stuttering narrative structure. Each new development opens up questions that demand a different interrogation of an earlier moment, and *Track Changes* offers a clear, if appropriately challenging, guide through this history. More impressively, however, Kirschenbaum uses the narrative challenges of technical innovation to his advantage, as he channels these achievements through a diverse, related set of literary-historical topics, such as the shifting literary and rhetorical divide between "writing" and "word processing"; the relationships between gender, labor, and word processing; the vanguard of science-fiction authors in adopting and advancing new technologies in composition; and how we might think about the challenges and

opportunities of archival literary research in the age of word processing. In this way, clearing the obstacle of tracing out these complex genealogies, as rife with technical jargon as they may be, proves to have tremendous complementary benefits.

For example, the most technical chapter of the book, the detailed history of IBM's Magnetic Tape Selectric Typewriter (MT/ST) outlined in "Think Tape," may be the most powerful. As Kirschenbaum explains, "The MT/ST was a compound device: an IBM Selectric typewriter (still cutting-edge in its own right, having debuted only three years earlier) that was connected to a magnetic tape storage unit. . . . The MT/ST was the first mass-market general-purpose typewriting technology to implement something we can identify as suspended inscription" (168). IBM marketed the device, retailing at \$10,000, for "so-called volume typing" because "the correctable nature of the magnetic storage medium made it particularly relevant to scenarios wherein a line of prose might be worked over multiple times, which was precisely what slowed down even the most efficient typist and forced the endless dilemmas between stopgap solutions like erasers and correcting fluid versus retyping pages in their entirety" (172). However, to actually use this technology, one had to undertake the intensive task of

not just familiarizing oneself with a new technology but retraining oneself to read, write, and see in “a format composed entirely of codes (actually minute fluctuations across a band of magnetic tape coated in iron oxide)” (182), a task most often shuttled to a female secretary.

As one would expect in any technical history, Kirschenbaum details the engineering of this incredibly complicated technology in 1964, as well as its direct impact on the organization of corporate offices and, especially, secretarial labor. More unexpectedly, Kirschenbaum brilliantly and tightly organizes this chapter around the British spy novelist Len Deighton’s—and his “literary secretary” Ellenor Handley’s—composition of the 1970 novel *Bomber* on the MT 72, “the European market’s name for IBM’s [MT/ST]” (168). This story allows Kirschenbaum to describe what the basic applications of this technology for literary production entailed:

There must have been unselfconscious leaning over shoulders, gestures, pointing, and quick staccato conversations of the kind that characterize intense long-term collaborations. There must, in other words, have been moments when Deighton, Handley, and the MT/ST fused together in something like a cybernetic loop—the

every essence of word processing in its full systemic practice. (181)

However, Kirschenbaum’s incredible retelling of the intellectual and physical intimacies required in operating this complex technical apparatus also provides a persuasive challenge to conventional constructions of (male) authorship. As he explains, while the book had garnered a tremendous amount of attention exactly for its pioneering use of this technology, Ellenor Handley has been almost completely erased from this history. As Kirschenbaum puts it, “[This erasure] cannot be mere happenstance. Handley represented an unwelcome intrusion into the ‘private’ and ‘creative’ world that is the presumptive sanctum of traditional literary authorship” (182). Kirschenbaum’s ability to hew from these technical histories such clear and compelling connections to fields of interest to many scholars, such as gender, labor, and authorship, makes this a necessary reference of contemporary literary criticism.

Looking forward, the ways in which word-processing technologies intervene on, enhance, or fundamentally alter the composition process pose an interesting question to scholars interested in literary style during this period. In a recent comprehensive survey of the field of what the authors

call “postmodern|postwar” literature, Jason Gladstone and Daniel Worden observe a trend of new studies that look past the stylistic or formal features of postmodern literature—and how these formal experimentations have been simultaneously incorporated and disavowed in works of contemporary literature.³ Instead, these recent studies trace out the historical and material continuities and discontinuities in literary production from modernism to contemporary literature, from the rise of creative-writing programs to the shifting relationships between publishers and consumers over the second half of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century.⁴ Often uncovering the “distinctive medial, literary, and material appurtenances and genealogies” of a wide range of aesthetic forms, such as comics, digital media, and electronic literature, it has become fashionable, according to Gladstone and Worden, for scholars to do so by “[circumventing] the postmodern” and the stylistic and theoretical questions contained therein.⁵

Such a characterization would fairly include *Track Changes*, which Kirschenbaum quickly warns, with justification, is “not a stylistic study” (xii). Despite the fact that Kirschenbaum’s study examines the period from approximately the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, precisely the literary period widely referred to as postmodernism,

the word “postmodern” appears only once, in a passing reference to the “postmodern poetics of word processing—copying and pasting, finding and replacing, deleting and overwriting” (206). Thus, while Kirschenbaum’s “literary history” of word processing largely bypasses questions about the relationship between developments in word processing and stylistic experimentation, this might arguably be the very stress test for this emerging trend, as scholars adapt and apply this significant monograph in their future research. I concur with Andrew Hoberek’s suggestion that “if we believe that stylistic shifts in works of literature presage, rather than merely symptomatize, larger cultural changes, then such shifts may have relevance beyond the aesthetic realm.”⁶ With this thoroughly researched history, does Kirschenbaum gift us with the tools to assert new, and more accurate, hypotheses about the confluence of technology and style, and thereby a broader understanding of literature’s role in the present? Or does this monograph reveal the limits of the relationship between the two? Answering these questions will be the impetus of future research in this field, as literary scholars continue to interrogate the connection, if any, between the material history of literary production and the materiality of language and aesthetics.

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NOTES

1. For an early, popular example of this trend, see Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994).
2. See D. C. Greetham, *Textual Scholarship: Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
3. Jason Gladstone and Daniel Worden, introduction to *Postmodern|Postwar—And After: Rethinking American Literature*, ed. Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Worden (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), 1–26.
4. See Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Ted Striphas, *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
5. Gladstone and Worden, introduction to *Postmodern|Postwar*, 9.
6. Andrew Hoberek, “Introduction: After Postmodernism,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 53, no. 3 (2007): 237.