

"Slogging"

Hans Jørgen Thomsen's philosophy of technology

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During this edging year of 1999, I have learned to use a PC as an advanced typewriter, and in the new century, I will probably get the programs for internet and e-mail installed. For me, technological appropriation has taken a little longer than for the common human, as one can witness by the fact that for the last ten years I have not written anything at all on any tool other than a typewriter. And I intend to treat my PC in this exact way. Honestly, I have no other choice.

Back in the day, the task of typing on a machine rather than by hand took the best of my 1980s, and maybe I never get to write truly whimsical and inspirational drafts on a PC because I still feel that the ease with which one can correct, reassemble and set up a text threatens to undermine the definiteness that for me belongs with the expression of scripture. I typewrote for the first time in 1983, and I had the feeling that I was a brand-new galley slave. And in these last years with the computer and so on, this feeling has returned. What I write - and it's not so much - come as it comes by the definitive way that written language exerts itself.

I have been working on only one script my whole life. My typing fingers get tired after a few hours spent with the text, and when this is the case I feel like I'm back in the old days, looking at my dumbed-down text with pleasure. When I sometimes have to confront a new writing medium, I however come back to the text in such a way that what I have already written seems like a xerox of the first draft done a year earlier. The PC is not the only producer of this time warp, as even my old friend, the typewriter, has begun to change. I do fear that one day I may encounter a perfect writing machine that would unnerve me completely.

Plato, I think, would have been a writer who would type directly in CD-Rom, the disc you could use to type in all human history. His language would be a scribbled-on bitmap. He would show impatience, be the stamp-press typer, he would pull out his long sentences and re-arrange them randomly. He would be a new kind of writer who would no longer need to feel typing pain. Whereas Nietzsche would have been a kind of web-crawling writer who would perform with camwhoring. Some would begin to fear him for his ever-moving, yet ever-reliable text. Neo-Plato would roam in the chat rooms and leave his XY file, while new-Nietzsche would have six-six-two email addresses. And as the story goes, old Plato would have been the one to use the computer and e-mail to fine-tune his writing, while young Nietzsche would be a texter who practices acrobatic writing on a mobile phone.

But that will be a story for the new century.

These baroque themes almost force me to become baroque myself, even though I feel both gratitude and commitment to the moment of general comprehensibility that lies in the very love of language and grammar. Call me abnormal, nonsensical or inelegant, but when it comes to computers I'm like those old Swedes who I have heard still played "tick-tack" with their clocks when the electronic age began.

This means that it is out of the question for me to write manuscripts intended solely for oral presentation since orality is quite different, eg. less definitive and more ravaging than writing. I cannot fulfil my duties as a lecturer by constantly conceiving new manuscripts. In my case, I cannot even meet the tempo requirements for lecturing if this is to be based on written manuscripts. If I have to lecture what I like, it must happen via exuberant associationism based on lapidary notes.

To write it down - that is the trouble, writing it down. It is possible that because of this I prefer, for example, to write quickly, that I have no time in the heat of the moment for what could be a definitive version of the text. Maybe the temporal distortion which prose writers know all too well is an indication that texts have been invested with spontaneous time. Perhaps this is the rationale behind my stubborn typing. But the screen cannot keep it down. A printed script, on the other hand, would always seem definitively completed, and the reason for this, I now realize, is that when you have finished with a text, it is finished. It is out there, and it has stopped. Anything that comes after is not written by the same person. Written language is conceived in a spirit of non-existence, and if we want to imagine the definitive and complete work of a writer we must imagine a printed work. Completing the script is crucial - always; much less so the printed version, and as far as writing on the computer is concerned, it certainly does not count at all.

That's how it is, and if it is random, it is not interchangeable. The contingency terms reveal the - random, yet given - fact that the author of this work has not managed to transform his intellectual process so that it aligns with the demands that IT imposes. For me, the linguistic expression in terms of writing is associated with an eruptive capacity for meaning, which means that the hard found - written - expression is irreplaceable in its singularity. Using a computer means that one must abandon this singularity, and when I wait for my text to appear on the screen, I no longer know if I will receive back my own text. When I finish writing, I always know that I have acted on my own texts to an extent that the printed version will reflect.

These thoughts are fairly basic, and they are also non-literary, but that's how it is for me since I have always and only written, never talked about it. This brings home the fact that I am not particularly gifted when it comes to the implementation of my ideas. But what keeps me going is a feeling of being in debt to the spirit of the language in a way that goes beyond the mere facts of my articulation. I am grateful for my language, and every time I write, I write for the language. When I type, I'm typing for everyone with a language, since what I write is the condition of my own existence, I cannot live without language.

And writing in this most exceptional form is a definite way of writing, invoking a feeling of death, a feeling of the end of those who are familiar in a far-off manner with a language. Even though I get my tails up at the thought of a final and definitive text, I am still attached to the idea of an authoritative manuscript. I know that a text should leave nothing out. This is the ideal of expressive perfection which I like to have as a frame of reference. This is the envisioned notion of a manuscript that I would like to hold in my hands. It should follow the exact and hallowed pictorial model of adding to a Bible. It should be a solid book with no loose pages. It should have the grace and the severe clarity of a literary Bible. In that sense, I would say that it is part of my idea of the text that it should be considered by its recipients as part of the Bible. I like to think about this as I am typing away at my own special Bible script, and sometimes I even feel like a saint compiling the holy word.

A technology that is basically designed to "treat" texts - i.e. change and correct the already painstakingly found expressions - such a technology is extremely annoying. For me, the handwritten or typewritten maintains contact to the risks and the bets which is broken by the incessant text "treatment". That it is so easy to replace each letter in a word with a different letter is actually more than annoying. I can no longer say that I am in control of the text. I have the feeling that what I type is now a message in a bottle that I have thrown into a deep and bottomless sea, a text in which each word drifts and pecks around, an incomprehensible message to a remote shoreline. For me, it's an entirely new form of severance from language, an unprecedented rupture point, which means that the way I read a text is different when it comes from a computer. I have thrown it out into the world, and the world's processes are quite incomprehensible.

The computer leaves no text undisturbed, the computer is an instrument of movement, determination, and a change of course. It is quite clear that all this also touches on how we see the thing that is our language, since time and again we find ourselves thinking in terms of the "informationalist" paradigm. Language is about content, about levelling down, as if language was identical with the message that it conveys so that the thought of radical exuberance in the structure of language is alien to the IT age since processing is a form of editing. And in this case, editing is a form of reduction of all formal elements of language. It is ruled by the need to develop a language that is demystified, which means that the enigmas of language are eradicated.

In other words, I have had to reflect on the techniques to which my intellectual productivity is attached for random historical reasons. Since my ability has proven to be incapable of "treating" texts - as doctors treat patients - I have had to realize that I am dependent on an almost lyrical impulse, which is put to death if it is adjusted in too dramatic a sense of IT, where any written expression is changeable, and could just as well be corrected - or treated - so that it comes out as something quite different from its original version.

Luckily, I can state with some relief that the technology religiosity and technology intoxication based on the development of IT in the damned eighties, thank God, has subsided. Technological development has proved not to have led primarily to facilitations and less monotony in human work processes, but on the contrary to more work of a trivial nature. Today, a librarian is a being who spends most of a working day servicing a queue of library users through a PC. In any case, it is worth noticing that the United States, which is at the forefront of the application of IT, has become a society where both men and women work considerably more than ever before in world history. Nowadays we are confronted by an amplified ontology of IT, which follows from the development of IT in a period that has reached such maturity that it is about to become metaphysics.

At the faculties of humanities, for the first time ever, a whole litter of indispensable computer engineers has been employed, who have apparently become necessary for researchers to be able to research, write books and articles at all. But what happens if all our time goes into repairing, adjusting, upgrading and getting frustrated when the systems go down? In the libraries, the librarians have become sitting animals in front of the screen all day long, and university secretaries no longer have time to help researchers with editing and reviewing research results, as they too are tied to the screens' rays all day, why everyone suddenly has to sit for rolled-down curtains. I know melancholic researchers who have had to invest in light therapy to keep their spirits up.

Based on all this, a speculation could be ventured as to whether the whole new technical apparatus increases the amount of socially necessary work by implementing a whole series of new necessities to produce itself, which after all is still wage labour and only profitable for those who can then invest in new technological necessities and stress the working families and individuals even more. Could the 300 billion spent on the millennium problem on a global basis well spent have been used instead to alleviate hunger problems? Will it be possible to save the information that my wife has posted on the new church register network 500 years from now, ie. could it be reproduced on the necessary machines at that time?

Or is there no problem at all, just as the turn of the millennium was not considered a problem when IT was conceived all those years ago? Or do we just pretend that the problems do not subsist because they do not exist right now? In that case, history and memory are being abolished, by Mnemosyne!

Whether it is reasonable to call such new social formations capitalist, possibly late-capitalist must depend on whether the increased amounts of unnecessary, monotonous, and stressful work are still productive in the old Marxist sense. Or maybe it is a completely new system of necessities where people are doomed because then you could well call it all an information society, concerning the nature of the means of production, just as you in old times spoke of agrarian societies, industrial societies, etc.

But even historical speculation like the one above would have a hard time proving and arguing that technical evolution means progress in the quality of life and happiness. Heretic as I am, I will ask instead how IT has come about and what, historically, it might promise under these circumstances. IT arises when a paradigm in computer technology is assumed as a whole. In this sense, technology is a whole range of methods. For the historical background to this paradigm, we must therefore look to developments in sociology such as that the family ties of importance to future generations are breaking in unfathomable ways. So that in the Western world we have a growing group of working people living alone because they may not be able to endure anyone but themselves, just as others with their different jobs and career opportunities may not be able to endure anyone but themselves.

The individual becomes more alone than ever before in history, as an employee or "jobholder" derived of the meaning of existence in the new jobs and career opportunities that the aforementioned development of a late-capitalist information society creates. To the extent that species reproduction, nursing care and disability benefits are professionalised, the individual just has to pay the tax bill. The prospects for the information society is that people spend most of the day in traffic jams and sitting in front of the computer. The IT infatuation has placed us on greasy wheels.

When such a big deal has been made out of this simple technical-linguistic expression problem, one must surely as a reader be able to expect a certain aesthetic beauty from the established philosophical prose excelled in above. Unfortunately, the answer to this is no. I can write well, I have occasionally been told, but not when I write philosophically, theoretically and principled. Then it somehow becomes some ugly grumble that comes out of it. Too many words, too long sentences, too much-distorted syntax. I repeatedly make the experience that the first formulation of philosophical cognition means something clumsy and ugly.

Something has always gone wrong with the construction of the sentence, the sequence of the thinking, the clarity of the expression. I try to force it and so it goes worse. This and that is not where it should be. Where one could have said it in three words, it is said in an abominable string of eight monstrosities. You always get a text that is far too wordy and far too repulsive to the ear and the eye.

This is what Nietzsche in his *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (1886) talks about when he refers to the practice of philosophy. He says that a philosopher will never be able to write as well as a good essayist if he starts by clarifying his idea. Never, he says. The philosopher has to say his ideas aloud to himself until the time comes when he can write them. And only then does he start.

As with IT, this has to do with the fact that the philosophical writer in his intellectual work style primarily sees himself reserved for the predominantly passive, pathetic desire that reading consists in. We are concerned with reading of others prior to the production of our own. This predominant part of the philosopher's physiognomy - the passive, if one will masochistic incorporation of foreign textuality - does not allow itself to be reconciled with accountant-like writing over and over again on our lousy, private material. Time is too short, the scope of "necessary" reading material too enormous. The reader of this is thus left to assess whether a possible loss of quality in the submitted text as a result of the above can be described as fatal, or possibly could be partially compensated by the larger foreign textual material it has been able to assimilate, simply because almost all the time has passed with constipation of foreign text. In any case, the author hopes that the hardships are not mainly due to the boring tendency to generalize that he shares with most philosophical heads.

For every philosopher, there is a simple, practical problem during the writing work: how to keep the dragon of stupidity in the brain locked up. This is - at least in connection with the writing work - a talent, but a talent not unlike knowing how to keep your mouth shut while performing a delicate surgical operation if you have not lost that talent through youthful nerve-shattering experiences. And then you are at the mercy of the tiniest little flea that decides to march in, jump up and sit down right in the middle of writing.

The hope for the form and style of this work is therefore that they may be characterized by a uniform language tone, which should preferably not look like endless and endlessly laborious text "treatment", but appear reasonably "afresh", as the English say but as we for cultural reasons can hardly say more without coming to think of toothpaste and advertisements for the same. It is Dylan who has said that for him "words" is just another word for "numbers", and I stand alone - or feel that way - when language does not seem to behave that way within me. It is possible that, above all, there is contingency going on in the IT-based innovations in the writing culture, but if that is the case then this is a contingency that I have to displace. The alternative has turned out to be that this brain I carry otherwise dries out.

Why not be the last Neanderthal and go back to pen and paper? Well, pen and paper are not nature anymore. They are already a product of the blue lightning from the capitalist info society's computers so that our hands are extensions of IT and now letters and words written with a pen on paper inevitably joins the big clusters of computer memory at some point in time. This is so tragic because paper is an apocalyptic material and all eschatology has become completely exhausted, culturally speaking.

So let us put the paper aside and the fingers on ALT F4 or CTRL SHIFT OFF, and let us open the file with the already scribbled down, extremely reduced text. It says a lot that such a reduction is possible because the "necessity" corresponding to the foreign text, with which one has been faced for some time, always strikes one as too big for the amount of time left to produce something that can surpass it. We must continue to slog and slog, slog away, slog on, slog along, slog through, slog to, slog under, slog through, slog for, slog at, slog of, slog through this endless woolly fog. But that's not beautiful prose. Plenty of bad words here, there are no big words any more.

When I wrote this I thought all my life that there was no system. But now I know that there is a very simple system that can be applied to anything. You gotta write badly. If it were possible to do something well, then there would be only one chance, but by writing badly, one has many chances. So many that everything goes by the board and stays at the paper. It can almost be an exercise in self-discipline for the writing to be as ugly as possible. That's how you write well. You must become an expert in the terrible. But the main point is that by writing badly, one can still put something down. And only by pushing the text beyond any reasonable rule can it become a text.

Somebody who writes beautifully is an exception. And that is probably connected to the fact that the liberal, Western writing culture as the humanist paradigm is the one that determines the global, cultural system of writing in the world today. Inclusive of the cultures and civilizations that are trying to circumvent this system.

You should therefore not write beautifully. You should write tersely. You should write French, badly. You should write Chinese, badly. You should write like an illiterate, badly. You should write a bit like I do, that is, in a Western writing culture that still believes that we are capable of being the best. We are the imitators of this and that, but we are the best emulators in the world. And thus I write like I always write, this manuscript in front of me, you may be sure that I will not write in such a way that it produces stylistic pleasure. I just put words down on whatever slate is given me.

/ Hans Jørgen Thomsen, 1999, Rolighedsvej, Risskov