

A Note on Typewriters Ryan Alfaro

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Manual typewriters are for the daring. Manual typewriters are for the risky, the bold and possibly even the perfectionist. Why? Once those keys are fully pressed, there is no stopping it. The type will strike the ink ribbon and the paper to leave behind a letter or number. You better hit the correct key or there is going to be a typo and then all there is left to do is sulk, hold in the shame and cover the mistake up. Better yet, don't make the mistake in the first place; see what I mean? The daring, risky and the bold.

Ah yes, typewriters, those old fangled machines people typed on before computers. To me they are much more than that. Between electric and manual typewriters, I prefer manuals and type a draft on one, but I use an electric to be more accurate the first time around. In fact, at this moment I have a slow growing collection of them. Listed below from the oldest to the newest:

Remington Standard No. 7
Remington Standard No. 16
L.C. Smith-Corona Silent Secretarial
Royal Quiet De Luxe
Rooy Portable
Smith-Corona Skyriter
Smith-Corona Silent Super (no longer owned)
Royal HH
Smith-Corona Coronet Electric
Smith-Corona Coronamatic 2200
IBM Correcting Selectric II
IBM Wheelwriter 30 Series II
Montgomery Ward Signature 088 (Brother re-brand)
Smith-Corona XD 5500 (no longer owned)
Smith-Corona XD 6700 (no longer owned)

An individual who knows the world of typewriters can distinguish that much of my small collection is of common specimens, but I do not care. Some typewriter collectors merely hunt for the rare machines, while there are others who simply collect machines that appeal to them, be they rare or not. I am of the latter group. I snatch up typewriters that stand out to me, that appeal to me: ones that I like.

Now before I get sidetracked, let me continue from where I left off before the list. As unusual as it may sound, especially in these times of computers, cell phones, iPods, and similar items, I actually prefer to type with my typewriters. I am even 23 years old at the time of this essay! I have my several reasons, but I must mention how I became enthralled with these wonderful machines. I can recall when I was eight or so I played around with my Mom's old portable typewriter, the brand slips my mom's mind. Then when I was around 10 or so I played around with her Smith-Corona Coronamatic 2200, an oversized electric portable. (On a side note: don't these old typers have neat names?)

For instance, Hermes Baby, Hermes 3000, Olivetti Valentine, Blickensderfer, Fox, Olympia Splendid 33, International Electromatic, the list goes on.) Then in 2003 I began to write seriously; sure, I wrote stories before then, but no poems. At that time I wrote everything by hand, although my parents did own a computer. I even wrote out over 60 and 80 page stories with pencil and paper. I continued in this manner up until 2007 when I ended up purchasing a Coronamatic 2200 of my own from an estate sale in town. What possessed me to buy a typewriter in 2007?

It was my third semester of college and one of my classes was Introduction to Poetry. It was in that course I was exposed to Sylvia Plath's poetry; more specifically, it was "Lady Lazarus." For some reason this poem fascinated me, and by the end of the course I checked out three of her poetry books and researched deeper into her life. I was intrigued further and discovered that she typed a good portion of her work on a typewriter, especially in the 1950s and early 1960s. It was then I decided I wanted to type my poems and stories on a typewriter too. Now I know there are plenty of other poets and authors who used a typewriter in the past, even some still today, but it was Plath's typewritten poems I was exposed to first. Thus, I went to some estate sales and at the first one, I found that good old Coronamatic 2200. I began to type up all my poems written from 2003 to 2007, which by that time were a little over 100. This, of course, was a feat and took some time to finish as I did not work on it continuously, being busy with college homework too. By early 2008, I ended up with six typewriters and the passing of my Coronamatic 2200. (May its parts live on in fellow Coronamatics.) Even in 2009 I acquired a very clean Royal HH desktop, a model similar to the typewriter that was owned by Sylvia Plath.

Now with a little background out of the way, my other reasons for enjoying typewriters begin like this: I admit I get that "old fashioned" feeling when I type out my stories and poems on a typewriter. I love hearing that characteristic "smack" of the typebars against the paper and leaving behind that inked letter. The whole motion of returning the carriage to the right manually rather than hitting a button. "Ding" goes the little bell, reach up to the lever and push the carriage to the right. Continue typing, "ding," and repeat. It makes me smile. Now getting to actual typing, I prefer it because almost every time I sit down at a computer to type, I'm distracted by the Internet, by games, or by other installed programs. On a typewriter, that is all it can do and all I can do on it, type! This reminds me of the words of an essay by former U.S. Army journalist Lawrence P. McGuire. He said, "Unlike multitasking computers, manual typewriters perform only one job and they execute that task reliably and well." He continues with his comparison of computers and typewriters, "They (manual typewriters) let people put thoughts on paper, without need of electrical power, complicated programs, or silicon chips... they devour no batteries. Except requiring a ribbon, they are complete in themselves." I have to agree with Mr. McGuire. When it comes to computers, there is the tower, monitor, keyboard, mouse and printer. The exceptions, of course, are laptops, but still a printer is needed to print. To sum things up: I overall stay far more focused composing on my typewriters.

Convenience and comfort with ease is the rule nowadays. Now sure, working on a computer's word processor is convenient with all its fancy features and all, but that takes away my creativity and feeling of accomplishment I receive when I type out my work, proofread my drafts, find errors, and use the dictionary and thesaurus. Sure, sometimes,

not always, I use a tad more paper (I try and recycle often) and Wite-Out, but I feel more satisfied and evolved with my stories and poems. In doing such I feel an accomplishment, even if it is only to myself. In the words of the late fiction writer Kevin McGowin, “it (the computer) almost seemed to do the work for me. I became careless, sloppy, hasty and complacent.” Thus he preferred to type on his manual typewriter, as do I. I look at it this way: I suggested those words, not the computer. I thought of the words’ arrangement, not the computer. I located those typos, not the computer. Sure, you can save and come to a document later on a computer. I can do that on a typewriter: stop typing, cover the machine and come back to it later, voila! Sure, you can make corrections as you type by using the backspace or delete keys on a computer. I am daring and take risks, so I make no mistakes on typewriters! Just kidding. I can make corrections as I type on a typewriter too; hit the backspace key and whip out that trusty bottle of Wite-Out. If on my IBM’s, I hit the (X) backspace key to use the correcting ribbon. As one can see, much of the basics you can do on a computer can be done on a typewriter, just differently. Although there are still things typewriters can do that you can’t do with a printer! Like labeling an envelope or filling out certain paper forms. Why else would the city of New York, recently, spend a million some dollars to purchase typewriters, their supplies and paper to use in the government offices and even the NYPD? I rest my case.

Regarding convenience again, computers have this, but they sure are not “convenient” on your wallet. They are costly, especially if all you want to do is type! Quoting from McGuire’s essay again, “(they) turn consumers into the consumed.” Indeed computers can do this, think about it: they cost typically from \$600 up into \$1000’s, then you have to pay for anti-virus, spyware/malware programs, pay for extra programs not originally installed, pay for fees for an internet provider, pay for a printer, the wire to connect the two, paper, and finally the overly priced (tiny sized) ink cartridges! Ouch! As for typewriters, they are far easier on the wallet. You pay for the typewriter itself, which is generally far below \$100, unless it’s a rare one, pay for the ribbon(s) or ink cartridge(s) that is (are) quite inexpensive, and pay to get the machine serviced (cleaned and lubricated). This is every six to eight months (unless you do it yourself), which will generally cost as much as one time purchase of black or color ink cartridges for a printer, or less. Now granted, computers can do much more than typewriters other than typing; but financially it makes more sense to get/use a typewriter.

Computers are not entirely without pain when it comes to the final paper copy. As Bill Meissner said in his article ‘Tribute to The TyPEwRiTEr’, “I type because there is Wite-Out, CorreCtType, and MagiWhite. These marvels of the modern age enable you to use the same sheet of paper and type over your mistakes.” Mr. Meissner brings up an interesting point. Some say you would use and waste more paper using a typewriter since you cannot correct typos before printing. Not entirely true. Think of it this way: yes, a computer’s word processor can catch several grammatical errors, but what if you typed “fro” but meant “for,” or “met” instead of “meet,” or vice versa, or similar misspellings. Spell Check does not always catch the difference and you print it out, believing the Spell Check corrected everything, and then you notice the typo. Oops! Now you have to reprint the entire page and throw away the other. Somewhat wasteful. The key is not to solely and heavily rely on the computer’s Spell Check, and to proofread it yourself. Now with a typewriter you do not actually have to retype the entire page, just Wite-Out it and retype over the mistake. If there’s a wrong or misspelled word, simply erase it in the same

manner, and if needed use the half-spacing feature on some typewriters, and there you have it!

Granted, computers do make certain routines better and play a vital role in today's developed societies; I am not against them. I am not saying everyone should trash their computers for typewriters and books. As a college student myself (at the time of composing this) I use a computer often when it comes to research and presentations for classes and for leisure; they have their benefits. I am merely comparing their functions of typing. Quoting from Kevin McGowin again, who also was an instructor:

Indeed I've noticed a significant improvement in freshmen writing since I first taught composition at the college level in 1992; fewer misspelled words, for one thing, (which may be the result of the spell-checker in the word processing programs), and better diction, probably the result of their (computer's) built-in thesaurus and dictionary at the touch of a button.

He continues to say this does not bother him, as his students' in-class writing also improved and the students "gradually learned from these devices." I can admit typing on a computer is not entirely a nightmare.

However, there is a darker side to the computer's word processing features like Spell Check, dictionary and thesaurus. Unfortunately, there may be those students or non-students who become too reliant on those features. Does calculator v. mental math ring a bell? It may lead to students in grade school to think and say things like, "Why do we need to take an English class?" or "Why do I need to learn how to spell well or learn the rules of grammar? The computer will tell me and/or do it for me." That would not be an ideal situation for schools, colleges and society in general. I've already read an article, can't seem to recall the name, but America's literacy rate among graduating high school seniors and college freshmen is declining. That can turn into a nightmare if we do not watch it.

On a different note, I noticed when I sit down at my typewriters, especially the older models, I tend to imagine about the fingertips that may have pressed down on those key tops. Did some "type-girl" pound the keys of my Remington Standard No. 16 back in 1936? Did some other aspiring writer sit down at my Royal Quiet De Luxe in 1947 or my late Smith-Corona Silent Super in 1956 and create a piece of literature? Did some college student type a massive term paper on my IBM Correcting Selectric II? My imagination flows wild with the possibilities of dancing fingers across those keys.

Again do not get me wrong, I don't hate computers, not a problem, I own a laptop! I also have been working with computers since grade school and typing seriously since middle school. In fact, I retype my stories and poems onto my laptop and save them as backups, and then those files are saved onto a flash drive. If my typewritten hard copies are lost or damaged, I still have the digital copies or vice versa. I use e-mail frequently and still type up my longer "academic" papers with Microsoft Word.

However, obviously, there is still something that holds me close to typewriters. Again, Mr. McGowin sums this up perfectly for me: "Manual typewriters seem to me to have their own personalities, unlike electric machines or especially computers - they have different feels, different sounds, and different looks. One has to find the appropriate rhythm to work on such instruments and that rhythm to a large degree dictates the tone

and flavor of the writing.” I could not have said it better myself! I agree entirely with him. Each of my typewriters seem to have a character, a personality, all their own. If I want that old feeling—sturdy and robust, loud and clangy—I type on my Remington Standard No. 16. Sure, I get more of a finger workout and the experience is indeed more primitive than my others, but it works great and I love it! If I want portability, faster typing, but still that olden look and feel, that familiar snap of the type bars, I go for my portables: Royal Quiet De Luxe or Smith-Corona Coronet Electric, or one of the others. If I desire crisp letters, much faster and accurate typing, then my IBM’s do the trick. However, I find myself using my manuals far more often than my electrics. I love the feeling of pressing down on those keys, in a sense, being more intimate with the machine rather than just tickling the keys on an electric; that’s just me.

Typing on a typewriter seems to be a dying art, but not entirely! Thanks to all the people in the world who collect and/or restore these brilliantly designed writing instruments, like Richard Polt or Will Davis of my day, for example; kudos to them! Mr. Davis started a Yahoo! Group online for typewriter collectors and/or users and enthusiasts that has well over 1,000 members, and Mr. Polt has a wonderful site to put typewriters (and his own) into a good light as well, as it is very informative. I may collect, but it (my collection) is dwarfed by Mr. Polt’s and Mr. Davis’ collections of hundreds of typewriters!

As the ancient Egyptians believed, as long as the dead’s name is spoken and/or remembered, they will live forever. I know not literally, but it’s the notion; if people continue to talk about, collect, restore and use typewriters, it saves them from collecting dust up in an attic, or rusting in a basement, or being savagely turned into “modern art” and the keys clipped off for jewelry. Just maybe they won’t fade into history, lost and forgotten. Type. Type. Type on.

Bibliography

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