



## Writing and Technology

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**A** WHILE AGO I WAS ASKED to help with archiving the work of a well-known Scottish poet who had sadly died. Whilst it was a sombre task, poring over his journals and correspondence as well as thirty years of poetic output, I gained a fascinating insight into one person's process for fashioning poetry. The poet's Byzantine process began with a handwritten first draft, which was then transcribed into a Word document on the poet's laptop, followed by many redrafts, each one saved as a new document. Finally, once the poem was deemed to be complete, the poet wrote it out longhand in a notebook, *this* becoming the definitive version.

This process, beginning with pen and paper, then moving to digital, and then back to pen and paper, generated a long and comprehensive paper trail for each poem. Future scholars of the poet's work would therefore have a deep and rich collection of source material on which to draw in order to study his creative process — every stage of a poem's development, with the numerous asides, observations, marginalia and items of ephemera all meticulously recorded and preserved.

Before I retired to seek my fortune in poetry – no, don't laugh – I worked in a University. I carried an iPad with me wherever I went, taking notes on it at my meetings and then synchronizing those notes with the PC back in my office. Almost without noticing, I 'went paperless' as the modern parlance has it.

My process for writing poetry has also gone paperless, in that I don't



use a pen and paper to write poetry, and haven't done for twenty years. Kind and well-meaning friends sometimes buy me a posh notebook for my birthday, somewhere to jot down all those things a poet thinks of. I haven't the heart to tell them I'll never use them. I'm a digital poet — always connected to my body of work in progress, all of which I can find 'in the cloud' and just a few mouse clicks away. But, and this is where I return to the story about my old friend and his meticulously preserved archive, being paperless means I'm not the kind of poet whose life and work is archivable in the conventional way. The first draft of my poem is overwritten by the redraft, and all subsequent edits until the final version emerges, leaving no easily visible trace of its evolution. Only a forensic IT specialist would be able to go back and retrieve all the earlier iterations of a poem of mine.

All this, of course, presumes that someone might be interested in knowing how my poems came to be written in the first place, and I am well aware that it's unlikely that my work will be picked over by future generations of scholars. But should my house go on fire, or succumb to a biblical flood, unlike my late friend, whose writings might well be lost, my work would still exist somewhere in the cloud, humming away in a subdirectory of a subdirectory of a subdirectory of a server among a thousand servers in an IT warehouse in Taiwan or Los Angeles or somewhere. So, if that's immortality, I'll take it!