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POETAS ANÁLOGOS, TIEMPOS DIGITALES ANALOG

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David Lehman
Editor, The Oxford Book of American Poetry
Series Editor, The Best American Poetry
Poetry Coordinator, New School Writing Program.
New School, New York

ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS { Poetry, Technology, Poetweet, Education and humanities }

In this text, the author explores the relationship between poetry and technology, emphasizing how humanists seem to have been left behind by the current state of science, while wondering what is the place of poetry is in our era. Author refers to how Twitter can be used as a literary device, fitting for a generation that has terrible trouble paying attention, then he elaborates on how, since the last century, humanists and scientists have been separating between a void of mutual incomprehension. He also describes the current state of humanist higher learning in the United States, focusing on the English departments. Lehman laments how the value (both economical and social) of literary education has decreased enormously in our times, giving special attention to English departments that were once held in the highest of academic esteems, and now have dismantled their renowned programs in order to keep a stable income of undergraduates, turning them into political self-indulgence. Lastly he criticizes outdated academics that shallowly declare poetry as dead, yet he ends by stating that the act of writing poetry redeems itself.

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RESUMEN

PALABRAS CLAVE { Poesía, Tecnología, Poematwitter, La enseñanza y las humanidades }

En este texto, se explora la relación entre poesía y tecnología, enfatizando cómo los humanistas parecen haber sido dejados atrás por el estado actual de la ciencia, así también, Lehman se pregunta cuál es el lugar que tiene la poesía en nuestra era. El autor se pregunta y hace referencia a la manera en que Twitter puede ser usado como un recurso literario apto para una generación con dificultad para poner atención, luego, argumenta cómo desde el siglo pasado los humanistas y científicos han sido separados por un vacío de mutua incomprensión. También describe el estado actual de la enseñanza humanística a nivel superior en los Estados Unidos, enfocándose en los departamentos de inglés. Asimismo lamenta el declive del valor (económico y social) de la educación literaria, dando especial atención a departamentos de inglés que alguna vez tuvieron un gran prestigio académico, y que ahora han tenido que desmantelar sus reconocidos currículos para mantener un nivel estable de estudiantes, convirtiéndolos en pura auto-indulgencia política. Finalmente, el texto critica a los académicos obsoletos que de manera superficial declaran a la poesía como muerta y termina afirmando que el acto de escribir poesía se auto-redime.

Maybe I dreamed it. Don Draper sips Canadian Club from a coffee mug on Craig Ferguson's late-night talk show. "Are you on Twitter?" the host asks. "No," Draper says. "I don't" – he pauses before pronouncing the distasteful verb – "tweet." Next question. "Do you read a lot of poetry?" Though the hero of Mad Men is seen reading Dante's Inferno in one season of Matthew Weiner's show and heard reciting Frank O'Hara in another, the question seems to come from left field. "Poetry isn't really celebrated any more in our culture," Don says, to which the other retorts, "It can be – if you can write in units of 140 keystrokes". Commercial break.

The laugh line reveals a shrewd insight into the subject of "poetry in the digital age," a panel-discussion perennial. The panelists agree that texting and blogs will influence the practice of poetry in style, content, and method of composition. Surely we may expect the same of a wildly-popular social medium with a for-

mal requirement as stringent as the 140-character limit. (To someone with a streak of mathematical mysticism, the relation of that number to the number of lines in a sonnet is a thing of beauty.) What Twitter offers is ultimate immediacy expressed with ultimate concision. "Whatever else Twitter is, it's a literary form," says the novelist Kathryn Schulz). True, the hard-to-shake habit causes its share of problems, "distractibility increase" and other disturbing symptoms. Nevertheless there is a reason that Schulz got hooked to this "wide-ranging, intellectually stimulating, big-hearted, super fun" activity (40-41). When, in an early episode of the Netflix production of House of Cards, one Washington journalist disparages a rival as a "Twitter twat," you know the word has arrived, and the language itself has changed to accommodate it.

The desire to make a friend of the new technology obliges us to overlook some major flaws: the Internet is hell on lining, spacing, italics; line-breaks and indentation are often obscured in electronic transmission. The integrity of the poetic line can be a serious casualty. Still, it is fruitless to quarrel with the actuality of change, though in private we may revel in our physical books and even, if we like, write with pencil on graph paper or type our thoughts with the Smith-Corona manual to which we have a sentimental attachment. One room in the 2013 "Drawn to Language" exhibit at the University of Southern California's Fisher Art Museum was devoted to Susan Silton's site-specific installation of a circle of tables on which sat ten manual typewriters of different vintages. It was moving to behold the machines not only as objects of nostalgia in an attractive arrangement but as metonymies of the experience of writing in the twentieth century. Seeing the typewriters in that room I felt as I do when the talk touches on the acquisition of an author's papers by a university library. It's odd to be a member of the last generation to have "papers" in this archival and material sense. Odd for an era to slip into a museum while you watch.

The one-minute poem may not be far off. With its need for speed, Twitter's140-keystroke constraint brings the clock into the game. Poetry, a byte-size kind of poetry, has been, or soon will be, a benefit of

attention deficit disorder. (This prediction is not necessarily made in disparagement). Unlike the telephone, social media rely on the written, not the spoken word, and I wonder what will happen when hip-hop and spoken-word practices tangle with the virtues of concision, bite, and wit consistent with the rules of the Twitter feed. On the other hand, it is conceivable that the sentence I have just composed will be anachronistic in a couple of years. Among my favorite oxymorons is "ancient computer," applied to my own desktop.

In his controversial Rede Lecture at Cambridge University in 1959, the English novelist C. P. Snow addressed the widening chasm between the two dominant strains in our culture. There were the humanists on one side. On the other were the scientists and applied scientists, the agents of technological change. And "a gulf of mutual incomprehension" separated them. Though Snow endeavored to appear even-handed, it became apparent that he favored the sciences. The scientists "have the future in their bones" – a future that will nourish the hungry, clothe the masses, reduce the risk of infant mortality, cure ailments, and prolong life. And "the traditional culture responds by wishing the future did not exist" (3).

The Rede Lecture came in the wake of the scare set off by the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik in October 1957. There was widespread fear that we in the West, and particularly we in the United States, were falling behind the Russians in the race for space, itself a metaphor for the scientific control of the future. For this reason among others, Snow's lecture was extraordinarily successful. "The Two Cultures" introduced a phrase into common parlance and helped shape a climate friendly to science at the expense of the traditional components of a liberal education.

Much in that lecture infuriated the folks on the humanist side of the divide. Snow wrote as though humanistic values were possible without humanistic studies. In literature he saw not a corrective or a criticism of life but a threat. He interpreted George Orwell's *1984* as "the strongest possible wish that the future should not exist" rather than as a warning against the authoritarian impulses of the modern state coupled with its sophistication of surveillance. Snow

founded his argument on the unexamined assumption that scientists can be counted on to do the right thing – an assumption that the history of munitions would explode even if we could all agree on what "the right thing" is. Looking back at the Rede Lecture five years later, Snow saw no reason to modify the view that intellectuals were natural Luddites, prone to "talk about a pre-Industrial Eden" that never was. The humanists were content to dwell in a "pretty-pretty past".

In 1962 F. R. Leavis, then perhaps the most influential literary critic at Cambridge, denounced Snow's thesis with such vitriol that he may have done the humanist side more harm than good. "Snow exposes complacently a complete ignorance," Leavis said in the Richmond Lecture, and "is as intellectually undistinguished as it is possible to be" (8). Yet, Leavis added, Snow writes in a "tone of which one can say that, while only genius could justify it, one cannot readily think of genius adopting it" (id.). Reread today, the Richmond Lecture may be a classic of invective inviting close study. As rhetoric it was devastating. But as a document in a conflict of ideas, the Richmond Lecture left much to be desired. Leavis did not adequately address the charges that Snow leveled at literature and the arts on social and moral grounds. The scandal in personalities, the shrillness of tone, eclipsed the subject of the debate.

The controversy ignited by a pair of dueling lectures at Cambridge deserves another look now because more than ever the humanities today stand in need of defense. These are hard times for the study of ideas. In 2013, front page articles in the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal screamed about the crisis in higher education, especially in humanist fields: shrinking enrollments; the closing down of whole departments; the elimination of requirements once considered vital. The host of "worrisome long-trends" includes "a national decline in the number of graduating high-school seniors, a swarm of technologies driving down costs and profit margins, rising student debt, a soft job market for college graduates and stagnant household incomes." (Belkis, 20). Op-ed columns suggest that students should save their money, study something that may lead to gainful employ-

ment, and forget about majoring in modern dance, art history, philosophy, sociology, or English unless they are rich.

The cornerstones of the humanities, English and history, have taken a beating. At Yale, English was the most popular major in 1972-73. It did not make the top five in 2012-13. Harvard has issued a report. Stanford's Russell A. Berman observes that "the marginalization of the great works of the erstwhile canon has impoverished the humanities" (2013) and that the Harvard report came to this important conclusion. But he notes, too, that it stopped short of calling for a great-books list of required readings. My heart sinks when I arrive at a paragraph in which the topic sentence is, "Clearly majoring in the humanities has long been an anomaly for American undergraduates" (2013). Or is such a sentence – constructed as if to sound value-neutral and judgment-free in the proper scientific manner – part of the problem? The ability of an educated populace to read critically, to write clearly, to think coherently, and to retain knowledge – even the ability to grasp the basic rules of grammar and diction – seems to be declining at a pace consonant with the rise of the Internet search engine and the autocorrect function in computer programs.

Not merely the cost but the value of a liberal arts education has come into doubt. The humanists find themselves in a bind. "The folly of studying, say, English Lit has become something of an Internet cliché – the stuff of sneering 'Worst Majors' listicles that seem always to be sponsored by personal-finance websites" (10) Thomas Frank writes in Harper's. To combat the new philistinism, we can fall back on the old arguments. "The study of literature has traditionally been felt to have a unique effectiveness in opening the mind and illuminating it, in purging the mind of prejudices and received ideas, in making the mind free and active", Lionel Trilling wrote at the time of the Leavis-Snow dust-up (84)[1].

It is, however, vastly more difficult to mount such a defence after three or more decades of fierce assault on canons of judgment,

1. See also Trilling's lucid account of the Leavis-Snow controversy in the same volume, pp. 126-54.

the idea of greatness, the related idea of genius, and the whole vast cavalcade of Western civilization. Heather Mac Donald writes more in sorrow than in anger that the once-proud English department at UCLA – which even lately could boast having more undergraduate majors than any other department in the nation – has dismantled its core, doing away with the formerly obligatory four courses in Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton. You can now satisfy the requirements of an English major with "alternative rubrics of gender, sexuality, race, and class" (2014). The coup, as Mac Donald terms it, took place in 2011 and is but one event in a pattern that would replace a theory of education based on a "constant, sophisticated dialogue between past and present" with a consumer mindset based on narcissism and political self-interest.

In the antagonism between science and the humanities, it may now be said that C. P. Snow in "The Two Cultures" was certainly right in one particular. Technology has routed the humanities. Everyone wants the latest app, the best device, the slickest new gadget. Put on the defensive, spokespersons for the humanities have failed to make an effective case for their fields of study. There have been efforts to promote the digital humanities, it being understood that the adjective "digital" is what rescues "humanities" in the phrase. Has the faculty thrown in the towel too soon? Have literature departments and libraries welcomed the end of the book with unseemly haste? Have the conservators of culture accepted the acceleration of cultural change that may endanger the study of the literary humanities as if – like the clock-face, cursive script, and the rotary phone – it, too, can be effectively consigned to the ash-heap of the analog era?

One thing you can count on is that people will keep writing as they adjust from one medium to another, analog to digital, paper to computer monitor. The "democratic" idea that "You, too, could write a poem!" has been praised as "the genuinely 'best' thing about the Best American series". Is everyone a poet? Freud laid the intellectual foundations for the idea. He argued that each of us is a poet when dreaming or making wisecracks or even when making slips of the tongue or pen. If daydreaming is a passive form of creative writing,

it follows that the unconscious to which we all have access is the content provider, and what is left to learn is technique. It took the advent of creative writing as an academic field to institutionalize what might be a natural tendency. In the proliferation of poems that meet a certain standard of artistic finish but may lack staying power, I cannot see much harm except to note one inevitable consequence, which is that of inflation. In economics, inflation takes the form of a devaluation of currency. In poetry, inflation lessens the value that the culture attaches to any individual poem. But this is far from a new development. Byron in a journal entry in 1821 or 1822 captured the economic model with his customary brio: "there are more poets (soi-disant) than ever there were, and proportionally less poetry" (Byron 335).

Another thing you can count on: at seemingly regular intervals an article will appear in a wide-circulation periodical declaring – as if it hasn't been said often before – that poetry is finished, kaput, dead, and what are they doing with the corpse? In its July 2013 issue, Harper's published a typical example of the genre, Mark Edmundson's "Poetry Slam: Or, The Decline of American Verse". The piece by an older academic bewailing the state of something he calls "mainstream American poetry" and praising the poetry he loved as a youth is embarrassing for what it reveals about the author, who is out of touch with the poetry in circulation. And then "mainstream American poetry" is poor turf to stand on: Would you take or offer a course with that label? The professor complains that "there's no end of poetry being written and published out there" and though he knows he shouldn't generalize, he will do just that and say that today's poets lack ambition – "the poets who now get the balance of public attention and esteem are casting unambitious spells" (7) which is at least a grudging acknowledgment, if only by virtue of the metaphor, that our poets remain magicians. Is poetry dead, does it matter, is there too much of it, does anyone anywhere buy books of poetry? The discussion is fraught with anxiety and perhaps that implies a love of poetry, and a longing for it, and a fear that we may be in danger of losing it if we do not take care to promote it, teach it well, and help it reach the reader whose life depends on it. Will magazine editors continue to fall for a pitch lamenting that

poetry has become a "small-time game," that it is "too hermetic," or "programmatically obscure"? Obituaries for poetry are perishable. So are many poems that will slide into oblivion without needing a push. But the activity of writing them redeems itself even if it is only a gesture toward what we continue to need from literature and the humanities: an experience of mind – mediated by memorable speech – that feeds and sustains the imagination and helps us make sense of our lives.

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