

INTRODUCTION TO *LINGUA ROMANA*: OUTREACH/PUBLIC HUMANITIES

The Humanities: Our Human Journey

Ilona Klein

Brigham Young University

With this issue of *Lingua Romana*, we inaugurate a new, integral series on Public Humanities and Academic Outreach. From now on, every year a segment of our journal will be devoted to a topic in the Humanities, which we trust will be of interest to the public at large. As *Lingua Romana* Editor-in-Chief Robert J. Hudson explains, “we seek to topple the traditional notion of humanistic studies as existing exclusively within the ivory towers of academia and highlight instead the living humanities on a wider plane of experience.” Our guest writer for this inaugural number is Daniel E. Christian, recipient of the prestigious 2017 Robert M. Durling Prize from the Dante Society of America, which recognizes excellence in the teaching of Dante’s life, time and works by educators in North American secondary schools. For nearly forty years, Mr. Christian has taught English literature and Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in translation at Gilman School in Baltimore. His three articles appearing in this issue of *Lingua Romana* are the edited transcripts of three invited lectures, open to the public at large, on Dante’s *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, which he delivered in January 2017 at the Church of the Redeemer in Baltimore.

Life. The miracle of human life. Scientists believe that our incarnation as anatomically modern humans—*homo sapiens*—began on African soil about 200,000 years ago, as we started walking erect on two legs instead of four. We wandered upon our planet, a tiny, beautiful, blueish speck almost literally in the middle of nowhere, traveling elliptically around our sun within the cold, dark immensity of the universe.

It took us humans about another 140,000 years—when our worldwide population numbered just around one million people—to perfect our use of yet primitive tools. Some 30,000 years later, as established hunters and gatherers, we left visual, tangible testimonials of our creative expressions in the form of the wall paintings inside our earliest, safe, large cave dwellings, depicting and honoring the animals that roamed the landscape at our sides.

The migrations across the Beringian Land Bridge (today’s Bering Strait) approximately 25,000 years ago were an almost unimaginable feat of audacity, fearlessness, heroism and strength. East-Asian haplogroups spread slowly into the continental Americas from across the Pacific Ocean. And it took us about another 8,000 to 10,000 years to learn how to forge and utilize raw metals and invent clay vessels, allowing us to store and carry goods.

Learning to cultivate land to our agricultural advantage and to breed domesticated farm animals happened around 5,000 years BCE. With the use of the plow—aided 1,500 years later by the invention of the wheel—our labor became more focused locally, and the human race recognized the benefits of a less nomadic life, eventually settling in permanent, small communities

of (more or less) civic coexistence, sharing responsibilities and specializing in different inter-collaborative jobs. Around 2,500 BCE our protographic writing system had sufficiently stabilized to create, in stone or clay, the first cuneiform written legal documents. Mnemonic knowledge, until then transmitted orally through successive generations, was forever changed.

By the year 1 CE, Mesopotamia, the Greek and Roman Empires, the far-East Chinese civilizations, the Dravidian people in the Nepal region, the native human nuclei in the Americas and in Africa, and several trade routes were thriving. Global population had grown from one- to about 170-million people in 200,000 years. In the early 1300s, by the time Dante was writing his *Comedy* (or *Divine Comedy*, as scholars have ably retitled it), the world population had increased to 380 million. Florence's medieval civic structure was organized in political, social and economic factions that Dante so aptly described and criticized in his works. The centuries during the European Renaissance and Enlightenment further propelled the human expression with incomparable works in the arts, architecture, astronomy, philosophy, music and literature, among others. By the dawn of the 1800s, the world's population had spiked to 1 billion. Two hundred more years (1800–2000) were all that it took to reach the seven billion mark, a number that continues to climb exponentially and ever so rapidly.

The twentieth- and the twenty-first centuries saw the best of the best and the worst of the worst that humankind had to offer: from systematic world-wide racial and ethnic genocides and wars which killed millions, to nuclear annihilation; from legalized slavery to human trafficking; from penicillin to organ transplants; from electricity to landing on the moon; from artificial intelligence to the precise mapping of our genomes; from radio communications to the ubiquitous internet, and to social media. Today, we are globally interconnected—or interconnectable: we are networked, for good and for bad. Airline travel has compressed years of trekking into hours. We continue to witness evermore remarkable technological developments. The modest cell phone in our pocket is today more capable and more powerful than the whole computer system that launched cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin into the first human earth orbit in 1961. Technology continues to propel us into the future, accelerating us, and seminally changing how we interact with each other and with the environment, as information replaces knowledge. The next ten years will likely compress changes similar to what we have experienced over the past fifty years. More *is* possible. Our efficiency has catapulted us into a whirlwind of exponential acceleration.

Human explosion has created enormous stress on our planet, for its resources are limited. Today, there are more and more people to feed; we create more waste and disposables; urbanization divorces us evermore from our food chain; there are the problems of deforestation, bee colony collapse, climate change. Can we save the ecosystem that is the canvas of our own existence? Only recently, mankind has begun to seriously consider family planning, reducing consumption, recycling materials, curbing pollution, protecting habitats and animal species. The average human global-life expectancy has grown from about 30 years old in the late 1800s, to about 50 years old in 1950, to today's 72. Mankind has permanently affected all aspects of life on earth, human and non-human.

We are going faster and faster, but where are we going? For what? How can we make sense of all of this? The more global we become, the more interdependent countries are worldwide. All the more, then, ethics have become vital in political, social, scientific, financial, cultural decisions, for global arrangements have repercussions that affect all walks of life. Strong internal moral

compasses come into play more soundly. Transparency, integrity and honesty are seminal to the well-being of our planet's survival. We ask probing questions: What are the habits of our minds? Which direction have we followed in our moral and intellectual history as humans? Which principles have guided our ethical leaderships or our spectacular failures? What are our long-term strategies? Are we acting according to the welfare of all, and not just for one geographic or anthropological self? In a "grab-the-chance" approach, moral disasters could spread wider and faster than we have ever experienced.

How can the Humanities aid a broader conversation, rather than merely transmitting factual information? Why is it helpful (and necessary) that there be an institutional outreach of the Humanities to heal the current disconnection with the public at large?

The Humanities focus on the historical ebbs and flows of our mind by reading books, learning about, and from, literature, history, art, languages, ancient cultural traditions. Studying subjects within the Humanities promotes critical thinking. The Humanities offer the opportunity to listen to other perspectives, to others' thoughts, opinions and feelings. The Humanities enable us to examine failures and achievements of our human race. As an analytical springboard, the Humanities also offer transferable skills, as they feed other disciplines, from medicine to theology; from engineering to philosophy; from dance to anthropology; from graphic design to astronomy, from archaeology to linguistics; from sociology to music; from comparative religions to history, etc. Wherever there is a human brain at work, there is a decision-making hub based on the deep-seated, centuries-old questioning and thinking of mankind, for critical thinking is part of being human. By the same token, the Humanities form the back bone for ethical analyses and soulful critiques of scientific inquiries. Just as critical as technology, literature creates global cooperation of thought. Today more than ever, we seek shared intellectual platforms to make ethical decisions. Humanistic studies hone the necessary critical thinking for all the complex social, economic, ethical and cultural questions with which we grapple: stem cell research and the rights of frozen embryos; one-way-only manned missions to Mars; genetic manipulation; juridical ramifications of virtual-voice robotic assistants capable of executing human orders; first- and second-amendment rights and other debated issues; curbing animal abuse; medical death-with-dignity acts; *jus soli* or *jus sanguinis* rights of citizenship, artificial intelligence—to mention only a few. For sure, humanistic readings investigate our conscience as a human race, revealing us to ourselves, uncovering our mistakes, celebrating our successes.

As in centuries past, still today we are interested in the cultural history of the human race: How did our civilizations develop intellectually and morally (vs. technologically) from the dawn of *homo sapiens* to the twenty-first century? The Humanities study and continue to study ourselves, our deep-seated atavistic questions to which we still have no provable answers: Who are we? Where do we come from? Is it nurture or nature? Is 97% of the human body really formed by the same atoms found in stardust? Who and where is God? What is the state of the human soul before we are born, and what happens to it after we die? Are there forms of life beyond our planet? If a tree falls in the forest with no one around to hear it, does it make noise? Why do examples of both unfathomable evils and supreme altruistic sacrifices exist among humankind? What is beyond $E=mc^2$, and time warps? And exactly who defines what "life" is, and what constitutes a "meaningful" form of life? Although at first blush some of these questions might appear to belong to the scientific world, they actually are all firmly embedded in the Humanities. Though not quantifiable, the Humanities narrate qualitatively, for, to cite William Bruce Cameron (or Albert

Einstein, depending on who can actually claim the credit), “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.”

The Humanities study our existence, our spiritual and intellectual growth. Through public Humanities outreach, the academic discussions shared outside of the traditional “ivory tower” become richer and more meaningful, because the more diversified our voices, the better multiple interpretations and opinions will strengthen the understanding of our existence. The humanistic body of writings is best shared with other interested people, who are not academicians, and who bring to the text diverse, new and welcome points of view, which, in turn, help us to find innovative interpretations and to grow out of old habits. Through outreach Humanities efforts, our understanding of ourselves, the human race, will be more encompassing, with stronger narratives coming from all walks of life: LGBTQ+, minorities, low-income, offenders, scientists, retirees, homemakers, etc.

It is *Lingua Romana*'s sincere hope that these (and more) voices, when added to those of students, graduate students, professors and unaffiliated researchers, will strengthen our multi-cultural community relations and facilitate opportunities for dialogue, to create a mutually beneficial intellectual future for all. Please consider this first volume on Dante's *Divine Comedy* by *Lingua Romana*'s Public Humanities and Academic Outreach initiative as an invitation to participate in this open dialogue.

We would love to hear back from you at lingua_romana@byu.edu.

Happy reading!

Works Consulted

- Allen, Danielle. "The Future of Democracy: How Humanities Education Supports Civic Participation," *Humanities, The Magazine for The National Endowment for The Humanities*, vol. 37, no. 2, (Spring 2016).
<https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2016/spring/feature/the-future-the-humanities-democracy>. Accessed 29 July 2018.
- Cave Art May Have Been Handiwork of Neanderthals*. <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2018/02/22/587662842/cave-art-may-have-been-handiwork-of-neanderthals>. Accessed 29 July 2018.
- Frank, Adam. "What Is The Value of An Education in The Humanities?" *Cosmos & Culture*, vol. 13, no. 7. <https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2016/02/02/465239105/what-is-the-value-of-an-education-in-the-humanities>. Accessed 29 July 2018.
- Gilbert, Sophie. "Learning to Be Human," *The Atlantic* (30 June 2016).
<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/06/learning-to-be-human/489659/>. Accessed 29 July 2018.
- Haas, Jim. "For the Sake of Humanities, Teach the Humanities," *Education Week*, 14 November 2016. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/11/16/for-the-sake-of-humanity-teach-the.html>. Accessed 29 July 2018.
- Holm, Poul et al. "The Value of Humanities," *Humanities World Report 2015*: 12-40.
https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=rcF-BQAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR8&dq=poul+holm,+humanities&ots=qwKLt3HYt_&sig=hIfqzqjW6VPgeLd3bDr4kXb4ExU#v=onepage&q=value%20of%20humanities&f=false. Accessed 29 July 2018.
- Human History Timeline*. <http://humanhistorytimeline.com/>. Accessed 29 July 2018.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton UP, 2016.
- Quote Investigator*. *Chasing quotations*. "Not Everything That Counts Can Be Counted."
<https://quoteinvestigator.com/2010/05/26/everything-counts-einstein/>. Accessed 29 July 2018.
- Russell, Peter. *Waking up in Time. Finding Inner Peace in Times of Accelerating Change*. Origin Press, 2009.
- Wickman, Matthew. "What are the Public Humanities? No, Really, What Are They?" *U of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 85, no. 4 (Fall 2016), pp. 6–11.

World Health Organization. Global Health Observatory (GHO) Data.

http://www.who.int/gho/mortality_burden_disease/life_tables/en/. Accessed 29 July 2018.