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Song of The Disrupted

FRANCES MCCUE

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1.

I am, by trade and training, a poet. By day, I serve as Writer in Residence in the university honors program of a flagship state university. My courses are inquiries into literature and culture, and my students and I, collectively, pursue these through writing. In other words, I am a humanities native nestled within the honors world. And, while I write books about poetry, art, and other cultural matters, the honors community that I inhabit, at least in my part of the country, is overwhelmingly populated with young engineers and scientists.

With the corporatization of the American university, a trend in which curriculum is crowd-sourced, where budgets are set according to outside demand rather than to a compass of guiding values, where the sciences reign and “assets are monetized,” I sing from a place of vulnerability and rarity. But, sometimes, the stronger the cage, the more robust the song.

Poets, you see, thrive on that.

2.

We've witnessed it before: the ascendance of science, the worship of machinery, the surge of technological innovation. With the trend march our honors students and, in the stampede, lost are the humanists. Sputnik, mainframes, mobile devices—follow that trajectory for half a century and watch the engineers and scientists tinker in the labs; see them looking at screens and moving about in the glimmering online world where “gamification” creates new versions of the factory floor while our humanities fans are still wandering the museums outside.

Around us, culture production is surging. In my field, more venues for publishing fiction and poetry exist now than ever before. MFA creative writing programs are turning out thousands of writers a year while fewer people are buying books. Theaters may be losing audiences, but YouTube has the whole planet watching. Our old institutions are catching on. “Let the young curate their own shows. Let their bands play in the halls,” say the art museums—that way, they'll have something besides the Impressionist exhibits to keep the spaces alive.

While production is rising (see how I'm sucked into using factory terminology?), analysis is dropping off. More people, according to the National Endowment for the Arts, are writing poetry than reading it.

Will honors students be part of inventing and contextualizing our future cultures? Will our students be rolling out those thin fabrics of artistic material only to see others walk over them, onto the next thing? “Tread softly because you tread on my dreams” sounds so feeble right now. Poor Yeats.

3.

This little essay-contraption comes to you in thirteen segments, a modest takeoff of Wallace Stevens' great poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at A Blackbird.” The poem may be better known for the art and arguments created in its wake than for the original. As you see, I am joining the mimeticists in hopes of creating some revelation through splintered vision.

In the poem, Stevens displays a blackbird in a tree, then cuts language to its core, and uses metaphysics to drive the whole situation. The blackbird is a thing and the idea of a thing:

I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

And the poet/speaker is involved in knowing consciousness and artistic thinking just as he is a part of the known world:

I know noble accents
 And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
 But I know, too,
 That the blackbird is involved
 In what I know.

The poem pays attention to the glimpse rather than the resolution.

4.

On a typical Wednesday, we read applications for admission to our university's honors program. We look through the stacks until someone says, "A humanities person!" And then we say, "Ah good." These moments are rare. We celebrate the culture aficionado, the philosopher, the poet, the painter, the historian, and the dramatist. When we come across one, we pause as though we have found an honest and holy priest wandering in the conclave.

Oh medievalist in our ear-bud world, from whence have you come? Oh oil painter of portraits, where did you find the hours to pursue such a lost and exquisite craft?

In our ranks, they are elevated.

5.

"Among the Disrupted," a *New York Times Book Review* essay, is Leon Wieseltier's extended howl about the death of the humanities. In business, "disruption" is the latest buzzword. It sounds mischievous, fun, and adventurous. People like to use that word. Wieseltier says that we humanities people, the writers and the documenters of culture, are "the disrupted."

Disruption, in this case, is abusive, full of "theories and practices that flatten and shrink and chill the human subject." To Wieseltier, who sees this phenomenon as a condition in which "the humanities are disparaged as soft and impractical and insufficiently new," the humanist is "the dissenter." All around us the innovators are innovating, clicking together platforms and models and discoveries and cures. To this, he says: "Never mind the platforms. Our solemn responsibility is for the substance."

He means the substance of being alive, of being human.

To the disrupted, the adjunct, the knocked-aside, the forever-renting, the out-of-work bookseller, the broke painters of paintings and spinners of

resonant theories and conjectures and connections, I say this: The sifters and the sorters, our aggregators of bigger and bigger data, need theater to remind them of the parodies in which they live. The flood of images and the reduction of analysis crave philosophy and the arc of historical insight.

Otherwise, we are all activity and no values.

6.

My current students are from the Prompt Generation. Trained for the quick response rather than the engaged reflection, prepared to flinch rather than to think through an idea, these students are incredibly efficient producers of the five-paragraph essay and the “Three-reasons-why” PowerPoint deck.

What about writing as method of thinking? And what of the artistry of a mind upon some subject matter? What of the sustained encounter? How might we keep our attention when the machine is dinging with email and links to gifs and Vimeo clips and Facebook updates?

This tribe of responders-to-the-prompt conceives of an argument ahead of time. Writing is a way of packaging what one already knows. Instead of pushing off through the seas of articulation, reconsidering, revising and then moving into action, my students smile, obediently, and say, “A rubric please.”

7.

Last Monday, during office hours, I greeted five students who dropped in. At first, things seemed casual. Then, three of them wanted letters of recommendation to medical school. *Is it that time of year again?* One wanted a letter of reference for a position as a researcher in a lab, and the last one was letting me know that he was a business major who found my assignments “pretty out of the box.”

I suggested this to each one of them: “Read *Citizen*, Claudia Rankine’s new book. It claims to be a poetry book, but it’s really a series of tiny essays about living in America.”

8.

The Handmaiden Argument: In this, we sell the humanities as a group of servants who wander the metallic, shiny showrooms of science and engineering. Humanities handmaidens staff the HR Department or the uncompensated Sales Team of a STEM startup. The skills of the handmaiden

are those of the servant in support of the master. The handmaiden makes the master feel good.

To process the events and history of the world around us—these are crafts of domestication, activities for handmaidens. Handmaidens are female. They have the manners of those seated in beautiful restaurants with pressed linens and endless wine lists, places where the handmaidens’ CEOs wipe their chins and whisper of the city’s latest Impressionist exhibit.

To our honors students, the handmaiden says this: “The humanities teach you to think, to argue, to document, and to articulate. These are softer skills that you use to help with the real work of STEM.”

9.

“The contrary insistence that the glories of art and thought are not evolutionary adaptations, or that the mind is not the brain, or that love is not just biology’s bait for sex, now amounts to a kind of heresy,” screams Wieseltier. When I hear the handmaidens singing about STEAM as a revision of STEM, (Science Technology **ARTS** Engineering and Math), I, too, want to scream. STEAM is a lot of hot air.

10.

The *For Its Own Sake Argument*: Humanities offers an array of pursuits that are not, on the whole, useful. They do not translate directly into jobs. But we study the humanities because they are beautiful. They have their own merit. Because they are unrewarded by the marketplace, they are intrinsically valuable.

The *For Posterity and Heritage Argument*: We’ve always studied these things; let’s keep studying them. We owe the past something. We are the culture keepers. We will carry this on and embed our own perspectives into culture, layering our human record of experience into the world around us.

11.

The *Helen Vendler Argument*: Vendler is a Harvard professor and poetry scholar who served on the Admissions Committee at Harvard. After that experience, she mourned the lack of poets, writers, artists, musicians and other humanities folk admitted to the college. She wrote a *Harvard Magazine* article about this.

In it, Vendler offers the Nationalist Perspective. “Universities are the principal educators, now, of men and women alike, and they produce the makers of culture,” she writes. “Makers of culture last longer in public memory than members of Parliament, representatives, and senators; they modify the mind of their century more, in general, than elected officials. They make the reputation of a country.”

And, as a fan of the Handmaiden, Vendler also claims that “With a larger supply of the sort of creativity that yields books and arts, fellow-students whose creativity leans toward scientific experimentation or mathematical speculation will benefit not only from seeing an alternative style of life and thought but also from the sort of intellectual conversation native to writers, composers, painters.”

Indeed, Helen Vendler is the Handmaiden Nationalist who believes that, if Harvard admits more poets and composers, America will be indebted to Harvard: “America will, in the end, be grateful to us for giving her original philosophers, critics, and artists; and we can let the world see that just as we prize physicians and scientists and lawyers and judges and economists, we also are proud of our future novelists, poets, composers, and critics, who, although they must follow a rather lonely and highly individual path, are indispensable contributors to our nation’s history and reputation.”

Would it be too presumptuous to substitute “Honors Programs” for the word “Harvard”?

Something feels a bit off about the whole thing.

12.

Culture is rooted in stories. Both science and the humanities rely upon narrative arcs: rising action, climaxes, and denouements. In science, we ask, “What’s going on?” Or “Why is that happening?” Then, we conjecture: “This might be what’s going on.” And we test it. At the climax, we find out. Then we state the results.

In the humanities, we follow that arc too: “How did this happen?” “What does it mean?” “How does it guide us to understanding?” “What does it tell us about the human experience?”

Finding out anything is a journey. Being alive is a journey. Everything is enmeshed.

13.

If you put a poet in the chair, you will expect to hear singing. But if you are listening closely, you might hear more. Disquiet, truth-telling, off rhymes. Writing does not thrive if it stays dutiful. Poems are neither platform nor data.

Like dialogue, writing is the stuffing between all encounters, present and past. Between the digital and the sky, between the poet and the software engineer, between the music from the grand hall and the tweets of a disloyal fan, we live, the disrupted. Join us.

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