Typewriter Redivivus in the Age of the iPad

by Antonio D. Sison, C.PP.S

Don't look now, but a particular kind of “lo-tech” has been making a comeback in the age of the iPad (or rather, the iPad Mini). It’s the machine that was both boon and bane to writers and students who had found a mechanical ally that printed their ideas on paper but so did sans spell-check, word count, copy-and-paste, hyperlink, and other digital tools today’s rather spoiled generation takes for granted. I’m referring, of course, to the manual typewriter, that revolutionary writing machine that rapidly found a global market when, on June 23, 1868, Milwaukee-based inventor Charles Latham Sholes and his team acquired a patent for the first commercial typewriter. As a phenomenon, typewriter redivivus has been noted through, ironically, a virtual community of bloggers known as the “typosphere.” With a membership consisting of typewriter enthusiasts of varying nationalities, age groups, and socio-cultural backgrounds—academics, students, artists, and aspiring writers, among others—typospherians type their blog entries on one of their manual typewriters and then scan them for posting in what has come to be known as “typecasting.” Typecasting represents the marriage of analog and digital; it is not surprising that a typospherian might have both a 2013 Macbook Pro with Retina display and a 1952 Olivetti Studio 44 semi-standard typewriter (one of playwright Tennessee Williams’ favorites) on his or her work desk. Of late, over a hundred typewriter blogs have joined an omnibus site simply called “Welcome to the Typosphere,” which serves as the community’s online headquarters. Evidently, other typewriter enthusiasts do not blog and have not been directly linked to the typosphere, but they are there. Easily the most famous among them is Hollywood star Tom Hanks, who has, on occasion, posted photos of himself typing on one of the machines from his reputedly sizable collection. In a more concrete, communitarian sense, typospherians also organize annual gatherings called “type-ins” where participants bring their machine of choice and type in medley, usually in a public venue to encourage curious onlookers to participate. Related to this wave of interest is the continued presence of online merchants who sell typewriter paraphernalia, such as refurbished ink ribbons and vintage spools, and the survival of a few typewriter repair shops that continue to thrive though the zeitgeist warrants extinction. The media have noted the growth of this subculture, which has taken off mainly in the United States and, to some extent, in Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Australia. Both local and national print media such as the New York Times, New York Magazine, L.A. Times, and Chicago Tribune have done feature stories on the typewriter revival; a fairly recent news video produced by CBS Newsbannered it as “A Typewriter Renaissance.”

One question begs to be answered: is the “typewriter renaissance” merely a cultural anomaly born out of a group of retrophiles’ nostalgic attachment to a bygone era, or can it be viewed as writings on the wall in an age of breakneck-speed technological obsolescence and fragmentation that has precipitated from a digital world?

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Typospherian Ryan Adney, an English teacher at Alhambra high school in central Phoenix, would undoubtedly answer the latter. In 2010, Adney launched “The Classroom Typewriter Project,” in which he seeks to have his young students do creative writing on typewriters for a sustained period and then determine its impact on their ability to focus, organize their thoughts, and write competently:

The Classroom Typewriter Project is designed to get children to write without distraction. Computers have become distracting, annoying machines that can do everything poorly and nothing well. The typewriter is still the perfect machine for getting ideas neatly presented on paper. Moreover, the typewriter requires the author to be aware of GUMS (grammar, usage, mechanics, and spelling) because there is no talking paperclip to help. This is writing without a net.¹

Inarguably, “writing without a net” and using a single-use machine is the antithesis of what can be aptly described today as “writing with the Net,” in which students, or, more accurately, most of us, not only do online searches in-between writing but also check Facebook accounts, or watch viral videos on YouTube should the assignment at hand get too boring. Thus far, Adney’s findings indicate that there were higher spelling assessment scores among those who have used typewriters; the same group also felt that there was greater value in the writing they had done, precisely because it required more focus and rigor. Moreover, the students were unanimous in saying that writing on a manual typewriter is fun.

Another typospherian who believes in the value of the typewriter as a writing tool in the digital age is Richard Polt, current chair of the Philosophy department at the Jesuit-run Xavier University in Cincinnati. Acknowledged as the “guru” of the typosphere with his wide-ranging historical and technical knowledge of typewriters and with an astonishing 280-strong collection of museum-quality manual typewriters, Polt has recently volunteered to work as the “typewriter guy” for WordPlay, a non-profit writing and tutoring center “dedicated to helping children find their voice through literacy and creative expression.” Describing it as his dream job, Polt is responsible for the upkeep of several typewriters—a few of which he donated himself—that serve as the main writing tools for children at the center. On the WordPlay website, executive director Libby Hunter describes the typewriter’s role in inspiring children to love writing:

The kids love them, they are almost magnetic—even the most reluctant writers are drawn to these relatively simple, elegant machines. The very basic, physical task of tapping out a story and not needing to hit the “print” button is somehow mesmerizing for our young writers. Two of our regular after-school kids even tote in their own personal typewriters every week, working on their stories and homework, offering to share their treasured possessions with fellow students, all motivated by that mechanical, tactile, simple process

that is so un-computer age and yet so “totally cool” according to our students-in-the-know.2

It’s interesting to note that for both the Typewriter Classroom Project and WordPlay, it is the members of “Generation Next,” children who were born in the digital age, who are finding renewed relevance for typewriters; it is not nostalgia but the draw of a more engaged mode of writing that motivates these children to want to write using it. This mode of writing gives back to them, as human agents, some key functions in the writing process that had atrophied since digital technology had taken over. It is, as earlier described, “writing without a net.”

Be that as it may, typewriter redivivus is not some misplaced romantic campaign to convince people to eschew digital technology and to wean them back to using manual typewriters. As mentioned previously, typospherians are comfortable with both hi-tech and lo-tech; there’s no denying that they are grateful for the many opportunities and blessings that have come through advancements in digital technology. What the typewriter phenomenon does offer is a modest but meaningful signpost, one that reminds us that the fastest and most able runners in the blistering race to keep up with digital technology are not always the victors. Various spiritual practices teach us time and again that those who slow down, pay attention, and ponder are likely to have chosen the better portion. As theologians, teachers, and ministers, we hope we have learned that lesson well.

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