

## Editorial

EVERY SO OFTEN WE ARE confronted with something from our past that we had long since thought had been retired or, at least, resolved. As *The Dalhousie Review* undertakes to digitize the entirety of its back issues, I recently encountered one such remnant in the form of my incapacity with numbers. Now, it should be said that this is not anything pathological or debilitating, as such. I can add, subtract, multiply, and divide (more or less) and could, if I had to, fill out my own tax return, although the result would take on the character of an only slightly educated guess to be carefully confirmed by Revenue Canada. Maybe that's everyone's experience. As a word person, I have been fortunate enough to have found employment in a field that does not require of me much in the way of mathematical ability. Certainly one of the perks of being an English professor.

At the same time, there are inevitable moments when our inabilities creep up to humble us. As we have been lucky enough to have the aptly named Michael Goodfellow working diligently on our digitization project, there came a time recently when we had to decide how large an external hard drive to buy in order to house the digital files Michael has been creating. We decided on a 500 gigabyte (or half-terabyte) drive. A gigabyte is one billion bytes, as many normally mathematically functioning people know, and I have learned. A terabyte is a trillion bytes (1,000,000,000,000—I produced this number based on the advice of a student in my senior undergraduate seminar on George Orwell. The student told me that you add three zeros for every “illion.” This is sensible and memorable advice.).

What is cause for at least a little concern is how much more necessary at least a little numerical ability is now as opposed to even twenty (20) years ago. To someone for whom a trillion sounds only slightly less fictional than a cujillion, the prospect of buying a new computer, any storage media for a computer, or any other computer-related product becomes a pretty bewildering exercise. How could a word person possibly be expected to know how much storage or, for that matter, RAM, he or she might need? When I bought my first computer in 1988, it had 386 kilobytes of RAM (I think), and 20 megabytes of hard disk space, and that seemed like all the computer in the world. But now, that first computer bears about the same relationship to my present one (already itself long obsolete) as I do to

most of the students I teach when it comes to numerical ability. In order to make sense of any of this, finally, I have to simply create a picture of the numerical relationships in my imagination and work from there.

But maybe that's the answer to this whole problem. Imagination is something that children have in abundance long before it is educated out of them by the eventual choices they must make in terms of what intellectual direction they pursue, if they have the opportunity to pursue any at all, of course. Having been lucky enough to speak to a certified genius in physics once when I was an undergraduate, what stayed with me from our conversation was this person's ability to extract what can only be called beauty from what he saw in the world of physics. His imagination sees beauty where it does, mine where mine does.

All of this put me in mind of something written by George Steiner, Extraordinary Fellow at Churchill College, University of Cambridge, and another genius, who wrote in 1971:

As electronic data-processing and coding pervade more and more of the economics and social order of our lives, the mathematical illiterate will find himself cut off. A new hierarchy of menial service and stunted opportunity may develop among those whose resources continue to be purely verbal. There may be "word-helots."

You don't forget reading something like that when you're in graduate school in English Literature. But what Steiner overlooks is what I stumbled upon when talking about physics with my friend. He and I spoke very different languages, but found common ground by, to paraphrase Smokey Robinson, just our imaginations. And yes, I'm aware of the power of ideology, the hegemony of late capitalism, and the natures of the various oppressions of our society, that conspire against such a simple solution. And yet it does seem at least possible that imagination enables us, if we would only allow it, to translate everything from how much computer storage space I need to how much affordable housing space a city can actually afford to build (as opposed to how much it tells its citizens it can afford), just by using our imaginations. And, of course, the great thing about imagination is, to switch from Smokey to Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong, that they can't take that away from us.

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