

"GO WEST, EVER-YOUNG HUMANITIES"

Teresa Cid
University of Lisbon, School of Arts and Humanities,
CEAUL/ULICES

In the mid-nineteenth century, the politician and editor of the *New-York Tribune* Horace Greeley challenged his young countrymen to move forward and search further by continuing the journey of the then also very young USA into the future. "Go West young man" became a widespread motto to which many (both men and women) would respond to by traveling geographically into the vast expanses of the American West, mentally into the possible fulfillment of aspirations, and spiritually into an "errand into the wilderness" hopefully meant to reach the promised land.¹

Maria Laura Bettencourt Pires, in her own way, also went West in her exploration of the vast culture of the USA, doing so with unusual stamina and determination. The following pages are my modest way of acknowledging her long life-voyage of American explorations. to which Laura brought her sense of humanity and her belief in knowledge as an ever-moving frontier.

I recall a meeting of the League of European Research Universities (LERU), which took place in Barcelona, on the subject of "European Research Universities – Guide and Engine for Europe 2050," on 9-10 May 2012, when the discussion about the European research funding policy was at its peak.² In this meeting, all the speakers belonged to the so-called hard sciences disciplinary fields but not even one failed to include a vehement statement on behalf of the Humanities and the need to support them. So much so, that I remember thinking at the time that the Humanities had already acquired the status of endangered species.

¹ "Errand into the Wilderness" was used by Samuel Danforth's in an election sermon of 1670 in Massachusetts – "A Brief Recognition of New-Englands Errand into the Wilderness." It was later taken by Perry Miller as the title of his book of 1956 on the basic reason why early colonists went to America.

² Cf. <http://www.10yearsleru.org>

At stake was indeed a realization that without cultivating these not so luridly economic-- or profit-oriented disciplines all the edifice of education and communication would not only suffer but fail, because the basics for individual and shared knowledge growth, as well as critical thinking, would be weakened to the point of un-sustainability. Interesting defenses of the Humanities have appeared both before and after 2012,³ but even though a little more space was given in European funding to the fields cultivated by the Humanities, it has continued to be anything but nurturing.⁴ Hence the realization that we need “new forms of representation and new ways of reading”⁵ if we are to avoid the trap of simply preaching to the converted or that other trap of curtailing the blooming of thought by narrowly defined sterilizing discourses.

The West of the imagination, even more than the material American West, lent itself in the eighteen hundreds to all sorts of constructions, such as the one encapsulated by Horace Greely in the expression I appropriated for the title of these pages. So I shall draw on his inducement to go West, to try yet another look into “errand[s] into the wilderness” and briefly delve into the complexities that those who pursue studies in the Humanities are faced with.

Concerns with the Humanities and their status in the USA are not new. Suffice it to quote Ralph Waldo Emerson’s words in his Harvard commencement address

³ Cf., for example, Martha Nussbaum’s *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010).

⁴ In 2015, the Portuguese Scientific Council for the Social Sciences and Humanities issued a formal comment on the document that defines the “Research and Innovation Strategy for an Intelligent Specialization (“Estratégia de Investigação e Inovação para uma Especialização Inteligente”). It is a strong condemnation of the fact that previous recommendations of the council were in no way taken into consideration in the final text and that both the Social Sciences and the Humanities are present only as subsidiary and marginal fields in a research environment that privileges the relations of research to industry and their expected almost immediate economic return. Martha Nussbaum, in her book above mentioned, had already strongly alerted to the risk of distancing or dismissing the Humanities from the formative space of a person or citizen.

⁵ I quote from the subject title of the Portuguese Association for Anglo-American Studies (APEAA) meeting convened at Vila Real (2015), where I presented an earlier version of this piece as a guest speaker.

delivered to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard in 1837, an address that became the essay “The American Scholar.” He daringly argued that

Our-anniversary is one of hope, and, *perhaps, not enough of labor*. We do not meet for games of strength or skill, for the recitation of histories, tragedies, and odes, like the ancient Greeks; for parliaments of love and poesy, like the Troubadours; nor for the advancement of science, like our contemporaries in the British and European capitals. Thus far, our holiday has been simply a *friendly sign of the survival of the love of letters amongst a people too busy to give to letters any more*. As such, it is precious as the sign of an indestructible instinct. Perhaps the time is already come, when it ought to be, and will be, something else; when the *sluggard intellect* of this continent will look from under its iron lids and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill. (20) (my emphasis)

It may seem a provocation to imply a similarity between our times and those of Emerson’s audience, but may we not imaginatively place ourselves amidst his audience if one considers the “continent” Emerson refers to as that of the Humanities rather than the, at the time, so young USA? Can we say with no qualms whatsoever that we have unrelentingly exercised our strength and skills to try and meet the expectations of the world in what concerns the place and role of the Humanities? Perhaps not always. After all, to hope is sometimes easier than to labor. It also seems to me relevant to recall the practical sense observable in the biblical proverbs which would be quite familiar to Emerson’s audience, thus justifying his intelligent and effective rhetorical use of words such as “sluggard”, a term not so common in usual parlance.

Proverbs

6:9 How long wilt thou sleepe, O sluggard? when wilt thou arise out of thy sleepe?

13:4 The soul of the sluggard desireth, and *hath* nothing: but the soul of the diligent shall be made fat.

20:4 The sluggard will not plow by reason of the cold; therefore shall he begge in haruest, and haue nothing. ⁶

1611 King James Bible ⁷

⁶ On the biblical use of the term sluggard, see, for instance, Deffinbaugh.

⁷ Proverbs, King James Bible,

<https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/search.php?hs=1&q=sluggard>

The sluggard appears to be characterized as someone who does not have the energy to go the extra mile (maybe not even those miles preceding the extra mile) to reach the desired goal, preferring to find reasons (or excuses) for not doing so.⁸ If one chooses to focus on the “cold” conditions facing the Humanities’ rather than investing in their care, the result, as the proverb affirms, will be hunger rather than plenty.

About a century after Emerson delivered his address, the modernist William Carlos Williams would implicitly embrace his call to his fellow citizens to “look from under [their] iron lids” and pay a more consistent attention to the realm of poetry (Emerson’s “letters” or the Humanities), in the USA. Williams did insist, indeed, on the need of using what might be called a clinical eye to carefully and perceptively look at the world, thus making possible both the personal enrichment of the viewer and the transmutation of what is seen (and humanely internalized) into poetry. To exemplify this concern, we may recall two of his earlier poems, “By the road to the contagious hospital” and “So much depends,” included in *Spring and All* (1923) and a late one, “Asphodel, that Greeny Flower” (*Journey to Love*, 1955). This late poem was written at a time of great personal suffering due, among other reasons, to Cold War politics, which involved “the bomb,” both the nuclear threat itself and all forms of “avarice / breeding hatred / through fear.” As such, it is not surprising that in it violence and oppression at all levels significantly figure. This is a poem that though not perfect is, and I quote from Ann Fisher-Wirth, “a great poem. It was written by a man in his 70s who had to type it with the fingers of one hand, who could sometimes barely see. Yet it is one of those extraordinary utterances that prove the truth of

⁸ These proverbs and others in the same vein actually remind me of a 2008 song about procrastination (or laziness), “Movimento Perpétuo Associativo,” do album *Canção ao Lado* by the Portuguese *Deolinda* group:

Agora sim, damos a volta a isto!
Agora sim, há pernas para andar!
Agora sim, eu sinto o optimismo!
Vamos em frente, ninguém nos vai parar!
-Agora não, que é hora do almoço...
-Agora não, que é hora do jantar...
-Agora não, que eu acho que não posso...
-Amanhã vou trabalhar...[...]

Keats' contention that the world is a 'vale of Soul-making.' As a young man, in *Spring and All*, Williams wrote, 'Life is valuable--when completed by the imagination. And then only.' Thirty years later, 'Asphodel, That Greeny Flower' reveals a life completed by the imagination. Despite the ruin of the body, the made soul shines out indestructibly."

Both this poem and those of his early life as a poet express the confidence in the crucial role of poetry. This despite his acute awareness that poetry in his day and age is more often than not unacknowledged by the people who, like Emerson had affirmed, continue to be "too busy to give to letters" the attention they deserve, frequently failing to perceive the complexities and nuances of the life that is unfolding before everyone's eyes:

I
By the road to the contagious hospital
[...]
[...] Beyond the
waste of brown, muddy fields
[...]
Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
dazed spring approaches—
[...]

XXII
so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens

William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*, 11-12, 74

There is something
something urgent
I have to say to you
[...]
Of asphodel, that greeny flower,
I come, my sweet,

to sing to you!

My heart rouses
 thinking to bring you news
 of something
 that concerns you
 and concerns many men. Look at
 what passes for the new.
 You will not find it there but in

 despised poems.
 It is difficult
 to get the news from poems
 yet men die miserably every day
 for lack
 of what is found there.
 Hear me out

 for I too am concerned
 and every man
 at peace in his bed

 besides.

William Carlos Williams , “Asphodel, that Greeny Flower”, *Journey to Love*

For Williams, in poem “I” of *Spring and All*, spring (and all that goes with it such as the springing of life), rather than emphasizing cruelty (as Eliot would affirm at the beginning of his poem *The Waste Land*, published in 1921), may be happily contagious for the reader if the promises of renewed life are perceived as being present, albeit concealed within a “waste of brown, muddy fields”.⁹ The same might be said for the so simple rural scene of poem “XXII”, which may be seen as a call to making the effort of paying attention to the beauty of common things, pregnant with ideas that depend on our observant vision for unfolding themselves. Similarly, as the later poem urgently stresses, “despised poems” may be, after all, crucial channels for receiving the most important news, those that actually allow for life to manifest itself. It is this concern with the value of poems (i.e., the Humanities is general and, for Williams, the American literature in particular), that drives this poet

⁹ Williams expressed a vehement refusal of Eliot’s stance, which he considered the more damaging because of the high quality of Eliot’s writing: “Eliot had turned his back on the possibility of reviving my world. And being an accomplished craftsman, better skilled in some ways than I could ever hope to be, I had to watch him carry my world off with him, the fool, to the enemy.” *The Autobiography*, Chap. 30: 174.

to his defense of poetry, conceived as an art deeply rooted in the soil of everyday life, meant for the present moment without discarding history and, above all, humane. No sluggard attitude, quite the opposite.

About a decade ago (actually in the same year of the LERU meeting above mentioned), the Renaissance scholar Jennifer Summit, acknowledging the growing concern with the status of the Humanities, established the connection with a “growing body of scholarship [that] ha[d] been re-examining the origins and meanings of Renaissance humanism.¹⁰ In her 2012 address, delivered at Stanford, and in its companion essay, she proposes to inquire what that scholarship can contribute to our current understanding of the Humanities, their purposes and functions, as well as their future, and challenges. Drawing on the historian of philosophy Paul O. Kristeller, she proposes a return to the concept of *studia humanitatis* and clarifies that

“The *humanitas* at the term’s heart doesn’t refer to a pre-existing ‘human’ quality (like ‘human dignity’ or ‘the human experience’) but to the classical Latin meaning of *humanus* as both ‘benevolent’ and ‘learned’– [which] is not ‘discovered’ but deliberately cultivated through education.[...]”

Rather than studying the human *qua* human, *studia humanitatis* signified ‘the humane studies or the studies befitting a human being,’ as Kristeller defines it, in his own words, and the study befitting humans above all else was the knowledge and skilled use of language and letters (98). Humanists – that is, *humanistae*, the individuals who taught the *studia humanitatis* – were ‘professional rhetoricians, and their goals were both idealistic and practical: to build students’ character through liberal learning (the meaning of *paideia*) and to prepare them for a world of massively expanded literacy and immense complexity, where the skills of communication, interpretation, and negotiation of practical ethical problems were of paramount importance. The *studia humanitatis* took their meaning and rationale, in other words, not simply from their objects of study but from what they did and tried to do in the classroom and beyond.” (667)

To define the Humanities as the disciplines that offer knowledge on human beings is today ever more problematic since, as Summit adds, “No more is ‘the human’ the unique commitment of the humanities. The question ‘what does it mean to be human?’ is today receiving searching new analysis in the non-humanities disciplines

¹⁰ Summit, Jennifer, “Renaissance Humanism and the Future of the Humanities.”

of the social and natural sciences". (Ibidem) And she adds: "If the category 'humanities' is to remain relevant for the disciplines it comprises, we need to reexamine its long and dynamic history and accept that disputes over self-definition will not threaten but rather allow its survival into the future." Furthermore, Summit proposes that

Putting 'humanitas' back into the humanities asks us to define and defend not what we study ('what does it mean to be human?') but what we want an education grounded in the humanities to be and do. Seen as a vital component of a larger educational project, rather than an isolated and embattled interest group, the humanities could thus be positioned not against the natural and social sciences but as part of an interlocking system, in which the vital question is not what the humanities are that the other disciplinary formations are not, but what they bring to a collective and collaborative enterprise of learning and knowledge." (668)

A renewed focus on reading, writing, speaking, and interpretation, now faced with "technological and cognitive change," is a part of this equation. "This synergy of knowledge and skill extends to the humanist ideal of a life that balances 'virtue and wisdom,' the highest products of practical and theoretical knowledge". (670)

The school was, understandably "the primary locus of the *studia humanitatis*", being a place, which offered privileged occasions for the interaction of minds, development of critical thinking and learning that was to be put to practical use, as Jean Louis Vives cited by Summit, argues: "This, then, is the fruit of all studies; this is the goal. Having acquired our knowledge, we must turn it to usefulness, and employ it for the common good" (Vives, 284, apud Summit, 671).

Though this purpose may be debatable, in our context of an enhanced need to reconsider the main role of the Humanities as perhaps that of cultivating *humanitas*, tentatively defined as a combination of learning and benevolence, a sense of civility and empathy, slow narratives have been acquiring a new relevance. I have on previous occasions argued that they are especially significant in our days of ever-faster lives (despite the temporary slow-down caused by the recent pandemic), and how important it is that not only they challenge us but that we allow ourselves to be challenged. These slow narratives, going against the fast or flash reading practices induced by social media that tend to severely shorten our attention span, demand

from us that we relate to them in a way that engages sight and insight, that enhances the perceptive act, fostering a close attention to physical, tangible details, as much as to the contemplation of the mystery of life in its many forms albeit hidden under the surface.

Returning to the title and the beginning of this text, that is, accepting the invitation to travel West (in this case in the literary and cinematic imagination of the USA), I propose to briefly revisit Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), a novel that for Hemingway marked the beginning of American literature, and whose narrator chooses to go West at the end of his tale; and also to look into two recent films, namely *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), directed by Kelly Reichardt, and *The Homesman* (2014), directed by Tommy Lee Jones. The next paragraphs will sketchily look at some compelling features of these stories that draw us into the open field of *humanitas*.

In different ways, all present a Via Dolorosa, a sort of Pilgrim's progress, or a search for a kind of promised land that seems so close and yet eludes the characters at every turn, like it did the settlers who searched it in the first years of American colonization. Pain comes in many ways – persecution and the need to hide from immediate dangers, or severe lack of water, utter loneliness, loss of dear ones, among others – but so does *humanitas*, knowledge and empathy becoming ever more present as the narratives progress. It should be noted that Twain's novel, despite the excellent humor and irony it exhibits and which the two films manifestly lack, is no less violent and painful than these.

In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain repeatedly asks us to open our minds to the beauty of the interconnectedness of all things as an effective way to counter discrimination and indifference to suffering or violence. And also to learn empathy, depth of feeling, attention towards the other, a genuine concern for humanity. Huck learns to commiserate, not only with Jim, when he realizes the pain his pranks have caused him, but even with the scoundrels that have plagued him and Jim when they eventually get tarred and feathered. Huck does indeed feel pity for them as his empathic comment that “people can be mighty cruel to each other” clearly shows.

In *Meek's Cutoff*, the film by Kelly Reichardt, the plot draws inspiration from a specific historical event, that of a journey gone wrong in the mid-nineteenth century Oregon overland trails. A wagon train of three families who hired mountain man Stephen Meek in 1845 to guide them over the Cascade Mountains will face tragedy due to an irresponsible decision from the man who should be their guide in a safe journey. Deciding to take a short-cut, Meek takes these families on an unmarked path across the desert, becoming lost and subjecting all to hunger, acute thirst and high anxiety, extreme exhaustion and lack of confidence in each other, not to mention the painful loss of cherished objects and even family members. This is the setting of the quest for the achievement of dreams of families we might call Victorian, in values as in mores, of a middle-class background, who will be faced with a wilderness that not only pushes them to the brink of total disaster and annihilation but is, moreover, inhabited by cultures, in this case the cultures of American Indians, that strikingly differ from that of the newcomers and which present a challenge and a threat to their beliefs.

What would supposedly be a shortcut for a speedier arrival at the intended destination gradually becomes a journey into desperation. This literalized “errand into the wilderness” does not even lack a Moses-like mock-figure, becoming an errand which will offer no sighting of any promised land, either to the characters or to the film viewers.¹¹ *Meek's Cutoff* unusual narrative style – with extremely thin action, very long takes and scenes mostly defined by silence – does bring about a sense of uncanniness that demands from viewers much more than what is usually expected from watching a satisfying story unfold on the screen for a little over 100 minutes. What is perhaps harder to endure in the so slow progress of the travel, as much as of that of the narrative itself (purposefully sluggish cinematic pace?), is the

¹¹ For present-day viewers who live, and often also love, high speed in their ways of life, there is little room for the kind of thoughtfulness that requires slowness, such as the time to read a text that takes more than a couple of minutes. This does not mean that slowness is not needed in our world, just that we have forgotten that we need it and that we prefer not to be reminded of our forgetfulness. When I watched *Meek's Cutoff*, in Washington.D.C, the young woman sitting next to me could not endure the experience. She fell asleep, only waking up every now and then to check that, as she would later say, “nothing was happening”, not realizing that this “nothing” was, if one was paying attention, really a lot.

lack of a tool with which the characters (and also the film viewers) may decipher the world. This difficulty is enhanced by the actual presence of two languages (English and the language of the Native American character), a difficulty which is visually made explicit in both the real and metaphoric limits to sight and vision these travelers have to endure.

Nevertheless, in this dismal prairie setting (we may recall Williams's "waste of brown, muddy fields"), a long and hard journey of self-discovery and the discovery of others will supervene, unusual relationships with one another and with nature will arise, and a sense of the transcendent will even start to emerge. What might be seen as a mere progress in loss manifests itself as possibly a new way of realizing that "so much depends" on one's way of opening up to new realities and to ways of humanely seeing and living.

The Homesman, directed by Tommy Lee Jones, is based on a 1988 novel of the same name by Glendon Swarthout. It is an extremely peculiar film, what we might call a Western in reverse, since it presents a travel from West to East, from the pristine Nebraska territory to Iowa. In keeping with this reverse trajectory, the storyline turns the usual virile hero of traditional Westerns into a reluctant helper of a New York teacher who had travelled West searching for her promised land, a woman who, because no man would take this job, is the guide in charge of leading a group of frail, mentally unstable women across the Western wilderness to an hospice in a small town by the edge of the sluggish Missouri River. But this long, dangerous and highly painful voyage of return to civilization, which is partly reached in the final section of the film, is not a return to a safe haven either. For the Homesman, who is confronted with a loss he did not anticipate, desolation gives place to an awareness of fragility combined with an unexpected empathy for those he had previously despised but not exactly a sense of security; the travel will resume, and the West and what it represents in terms of possibility and creation of a self-fulfilling path will continue to make its call powerfully heard.

Both films are new Westerns with a strong focus on women who are at one time resilient and frail, that is, only human. Similarly, the men that interact with them no longer embody the stereotypical cowboy-like figure. In fact, both women and men

are presented as much more complex creatures than those found in traditional films of this genre. But they also pay increased attention to the difficulty of communication, to the effort one needs to engage in to move forward in the understanding of the world and one another. The vast expanses of the Western lands are here monotonous and merciless places, testing the limits of endurance. Nonetheless, at times, they will also explode in flashes of unadulterated beauty, the pristine beauty of American nature, verging on the sublime, but also that of faulty human beings that find in themselves and in their relation to fellow men and women the capacity to go the extra mile and somehow act for the common good.

At the end of Twain's novel, Huck Finn refers to the exertion that being a storyteller represents – writing his book has been an arduous task and he would not have begun it had he known it would be that hard. Nevertheless, we, the readers, know that he is just flexing his muscles to proceed with his life of humane labor and personal fulfillment. He will light out for the Territory, i.e. the American frontier, to go on with his search for riches that go much beyond those that Judge Thatcher has been judiciously keeping for him and Tom Sawyer. That same Territory that will eventually include the Oregon trails and the Nebraska region explored in the two films of Kelly Reichard and Tommy Lee Jones, full of hardships but fraught with the idea of possibility, of new and better reconfigurations of the self and community. Because of all that Huck Finn has, as a young narrator, unwittingly or obliquely told the readers about his educational process, we know that he will find anywhere he goes a way of building a raft (“You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft”, 107¹²), that is, a mighty comfortable community of equals in dignity and respect that will allow all to grow and continue to pursue their dreams, not only in individual but also in fruitfully shared ways, in which no one will be ignored or simply dismissed, not even if he be Satan.¹³

¹² Twain, *Adventures*, Chapter XVIII: 107

¹³ Twain will later place this demanding question, attributing it to his mother, a woman of the kindest and most considerate heart: “But who prays for Satan? Who, in eighteen centuries, has had the common humanity to pray for the one sinner that needed it most [...]?” *Autobiography*.

Both Twain's novel and the new Westerns above mentioned are indeed narratives that want the viewer to labor, to feel discomfort and ponder, rather than just to read or watch and forget about them in the next hour. And they achieve this, not so much because of their subject matter but mostly due to the way of the telling itself, the slowing narrative aesthetics they embrace. Such an aesthetics demands that readers or viewers slow down and engage in a different way of storying the world, where reflection is mandatory and an awareness of living on a frontier is inspirational. They represent for me a call to the need of bringing a new light to ways of seeing and living in our world of pain in order to properly appreciate the blessed moments and even miracles it also contains, hidden as they may sometimes be. They place the idea of *humanitas* at the center of poetic (broadly understood) creation and pressingly invite us to pursue our studies in the Humanities in a really humane way, intent on a common good.

Rethinking the role of the Humanities is not synonymous with finding easy solutions. However, we live in a time in which it is urgent to find ways of bringing at least a cup of water to the thirsty, so that they may go on and continue to move forward, rather than give up and succumb on the road, hard as it may be.

A most inspiring invitation to embark on such a path of study translated into action is offered by Pope Francis. As such, to conclude these notes, I borrow at length from one of his letters which also refers to a frontier, addressed on 3 March 2015 "To my Venerable Brother Cardinal Mario Aurelio Poli, Grand Chancellor of the Catholic University of Argentina," hoping that we may draw inspiration from his words:

Dear Brother,

The celebration of 100 years of the Faculty of Theology of the Catholic University is an important moment for the Church in Argentina. This anniversary coincides with that of 50 years from the closing of the Second Vatican Council, which was an updating, a re-reading of the Gospel from the perspective of contemporary culture. It produced an irreversible movement of renewal which comes from the Gospel. And now, we must go forward.

How, then, do we go forward? Teaching and studying theology means living on a frontier, one in which the Gospel **meets the needs of the people** to whom it should be proclaimed in an understandable and meaningful way. We must guard against a theology that is exhausted in academic dispute or one that looks at humanity from a glass castle. You learn so as to live: theology and holiness are inseparable.

[...] At this time theology must address conflicts: not only those that we experience within the Church, but also those that concern the world as a whole and those which are lived on the streets of Latin America. Do not settle for a desktop theology. **Your place for reflection is the frontier.** Do not fall into the temptation to embellish, to add fragrance, to adjust them to some degree and domesticate them. Even good theologians, like good shepherds, **have the odour of the people and of the street** and, by their reflection, pour oil and wine onto the wounds of mankind. (my emphasis)

References

- Danforth, Samuel and Royster, Paul [transcriber & editor] "A Brief Recognition of New-Englands Errand into the Wilderness: An Online Electronic Text Edition" (1670). Faculty Publications, UNL Libraries. 35.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libraryscience/35>
- Deffinbaugh, Robert. *The Way Of The Wise: Studies In The Book Of Proverbs*. Chap. 6.
<https://bible.org/seriespage/6-sluggard>
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The American Scholar," *Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York, Charles E. Merrill Co., 1907.
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/16643/16643-h/16643-h.htm>
- Fisher-Wirth, Ann, Williams's "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower", *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*,
<https://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/asphodel.html>
- Francis. *Letter Of His Holiness Pope Francis to The Grand Chancellor of the "Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina" for the 100th Anniversary of the Founding of the Faculty of Theology*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana. 3 March 2015
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150303_lettera-universita-cattolica-argentina.html
- King James's Bible*. <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org>
- Nussbaum, Martha C. *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton. Princeton UP., 2010
- Summit, Jennifer, "Renaissance Humanism and the Future of the Humanities." *Literature Compass*, Volume 9, Issue 10: 665–678, October 2012.
<https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2012.00921.x>
- Twain, Mark. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. 1885. Oxford, New York. Oxford UP, 1999.
- Mark Twain's Autobiography* (1924)
<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks02/0200551h.html>
- Williams, William Carlos. *Spring and All*. Paris : Contact Publishing Co., 1923.
https://archive.org/details/spring_and_all/page/n17/mode/2up
- *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* [New York, 1951] New Directions Paperback, 1967.
- *Journey to Love*, New York: Random House, 1955.

Films

Reichard, Kelly. Director. *Meek's Cutoff*. 2010.

Jones, Tommy Lee. Director. *The Homesman*. 2014.

NOTA BIOGRÁFICA

Teresa Cid é professora associada jubilada de Estudos Americanos. Leccionou na Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa, tendo sido, ainda, Directora do Centro de Estudos Anglísticos-CEAUL e do Instituto Confúcio da Universidade de Lisboa. As suas principais áreas de interesse nos Estudos Americanos são Estudos Luso-americanos, Modernismo, Cinema e Cultura Popular. As suas publicações incluem: "Preferring not to: Bartleby's NO in...Silence!" (Lisboa, 2013), "Walking the Lisbon Night Through with Johnny Guitar" (Lisboa, 2009), "Lively Modernism(s): the Comic Strip as/and Modern American Art" (Bern, 2008), "Fate, Diaspora and the Melody of Storytelling: The Portuguese-American Fado/Blues of Katherine Vaz" (Lisboa, 2007), "Antigas Raízes e Novos Rumos: o fado/blues de Katherine Vaz e a Diáspora Portuguesa nos EUA" (Rio de Janeiro, 2001). Foi co-autora ou co-organizadora das publicações Portugal Pelo Mundo Disperso (Lisboa, 2013), Narrating the Portuguese Diaspora: Piecing Things Together (New York, 2011), Ceremonies and Spectacles: Performing American Culture (Amsterdam, 2000) e Literatura Norte-Americana (Lisboa, 1999).

Teresa Cid is retired associate professor of American Studies. She taught at the University of Lisbon, School of Arts and Humanities, and was Director of the University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies (CEAUL-ULICES) and Director of the Confucius Institute of the University of Lisbon. Her main research interests are Portuguese-American Studies, Modernism, Cinema, and Popular Culture. Her publications include: "Preferring not to: Bartleby's NO in...Silence!" (Lisbon, 2013), "Walking the Lisbon Night Through with Johnny Guitar" (Lisbon, 2009), "Lively Modernism(s): the Comic Strip as/and Modern American Art" (Bern, 2008), "Fate, Diaspora and the Melody of Storytelling: The Portuguese-American Fado/Blues of Katherine Vaz" (Lisbon, 2007), "Antigas Raízes e Novos Rumos: o fado/blues de Katherine Vaz e a Diáspora Portuguesa nos EUA" (Rio de Janeiro, 2001). Selected co-authored or co-edited volumes include Portugal pelo Mundo Disperso (Lisbon, 2013), Narrating the Portuguese Diaspora: Piecing Things Together (New York, 2011), Ceremonies and Spectacles: Performing American Culture (Amsterdam, 2000), and Literatura Norte-Americana (Lisbon 1999).

ABSTRACT

The mid-nineteenth century politician and editor of the New-York Tribune, Horace Greeley, challenged his young countrymen with a forceful pronouncement, "Go West young man." Inspired by this assertion to move forward and search further by creatively continuing the journey into the future, I appropriate this call to action to the realm of the Humanities. Thus, the following pages propose to briefly reflect on the value of the Humanities as well as on the challenges they have met in the USA and elsewhere, especially in our own time, and the ways they may contribute to a better understanding of the complexities of being human and, above all, humane, as argued in the work of Jennifer Summit on the future of the Humanities.

The reference to the concerns of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Williams Carlos Williams with the role of the Humanities in their different times, and their defense of literary imagination will be complemented by a reexamination of the richness of the American West, more specifically as a locus for historical and creative dialogues with the spiritual journey towards a much searched-for promised land, known since Puritan colonial times as an “errand into the wilderness.” Examples of this search for humane responses to human dire predicaments are discussed via two films, *Meek’s Cuttof* (2010), directed by Kelly Reichardt, and *The Homesman* (2014), directed by Tommy Lee Jones, both new Westerns which, in their own way, follow up on the ethical citizen concerns present in Mark Twain’s novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). The call for an active involvement in the social and educational realms in order to aim at building a more humane world is also a deep concern of a major figure of our time, Pope Francis.

The mid-nineteenth century politician and editor of the *New-York Tribune*, Horace Greeley, challenged his young countrymen with a forceful pronouncement, “Go West young man.” Inspired by this assertion to move forward and search further by creatively continuing the journey into the future, I appropriate this call to action to the realm of the Humanities. Thus, the following pages propose to briefly reflect on the value of the Humanities as well as on the challenges they have met in the USA and elsewhere, especially in our own time, and the ways they may contribute to a better understanding of the complexities of being human and, above all, humane, as argued in the work of Jennifer Summit on the future of the Humanities.

The reference to the concerns of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Williams Carlos Williams with the role of the Humanities in their different times, and their defense of literary imagination will be complemented by a reexamination of the richness of the American West, more specifically as a locus for historical and creative dialogues with the spiritual journey towards a much searched-for promised land, known since Puritan colonial times as an “errand into the wilderness.” Examples of this search for humane responses to human dire predicaments are discussed via two films, *Meek’s Cuttof* (2010), directed by Kelly Reichardt, and *The Homesman* (2014), directed by Tommy Lee Jones, both new Westerns which, in their own way, follow up on the ethical citizen concerns present in Mark Twain’s novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). The call for an active involvement in the social and educational realms in order to aim at building a more humane world is also a deep concern of a major figure of our time, Pope Francis.

KEYWORDS:

Humanities, Western, W.C.Williams, *Meek’s Cuttof*, *The Homesman*

RESUMO

Horace Greeley, político americano de meados do século XIX e editor do *New-York Tribune*, desafiou os seus jovens compatriotas com um imperativo “Go West young man”. Inspirada por esta asserção de incentivo a ir sempre mais longe, continuando criativamente a viagem em direcção ao futuro, aproprio-me deste apelo à acção, trazendo-o para o campo das Humanidades. Assim, as páginas seguintes propõem uma breve reflexão sobre a importância das Humanidades, bem como sobre os desafios com que se confrontaram os seus cultores nos EUA e noutros países, também no nosso tempo, e a forma como aquelas podem contribuir para uma melhor compreensão das complexidades do ser humano que se quer,

acima de tudo, solidário, como defendido na ensaística de Jennifer Summit sobre o futuro das Humanidades.

A referência às preocupações de Ralph Waldo Emerson e Williams Carlos Williams com o papel das Humanidades nos seus próprios tempos e à sua defesa da imaginação literária será complementada por uma reavaliação do Oeste americano, mais especificamente encarado como espaço de diálogos históricos e criativos com a viagem espiritual rumo à muito almejada “terra prometida”, conhecida desde os tempos coloniais puritanos como “demanda no deserto”. Exemplos desta procura de respostas solidárias a situações humanas difíceis são discutidos por meio de dois filmes, *Meek’s Cuttof* (2010), de Kelly Reichardt, e *The Homesman* (2014), de Tommy Lee Jones, ambos novos westerns que, à sua maneira, dão corpo à preocupação com uma cidadania ética também presente no romance de Mark Twain, *Aventuras de Huckleberry Finn* (1885). O seu apelo a um envolvimento activo nos domínios social e educativo, visando a construção de um mundo mais solidário é também uma profunda preocupação de uma figura maior do nosso tempo, o Papa Francisco.

PALAVRAS CHAVE:

Humanidades, Western, W.C.Williams, *Meek’s Cuttof*, *The Homesman*

