

THE INNER STRIFE

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Laurent Dubreuil, *Humanities in the Time of AI*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2025, 104pp, £9 paperback.

‘Is this a path to a fruitful collaboration or a waste of time and energy?’, asks Laurent Dubreuil in *Humanities in the Time of AI*, his contribution to the *Forerunners Ideas First* short-book series of University of Minnesota Press (p79). The immediate context of that seemingly pragmatic question is a DeepL-assisted translation of Shakespeare, but the question can also be used as an entry point into a book whose main contribution lies in its performance of the question as question – that is, as an injunction to think, or to exist ‘authentically’ in the time of AI. The last of its fifteen brief chapters is titled ‘An Opening’ and observes, as in passing, that ‘the inner strife is in the open’ (p96). What does that mean, and why would it be worth the time and energy of a truly pragmatic scholar, one concerned with the ordinary tasks of teaching and research, to dwell in it poetically, perhaps in collaboration with a stranger, a foreigner, an AI?

Firmly rooted in a continental tradition of risky collaborations between philosophy and literature, Dubreuil’s writing is singular in its engagement with contemporary cognitive sciences and computational technologies. In addition to a critical analysis of hegemonic concepts and interpretive paradigms in those fields, and of their ideological effects – notably, Turing’s behaviourism and philosophical enthusiasms around the brain’s plasticity – Dubreuil cultivates what he calls a ‘paradoxical optimism’ about the humanities in the time of AI. In the wake of Rita Felski, such an optimism appears as a kind of postcritical disposition to not just ‘unmask’ AI ideologies and conspiracies, but also to wonder about how AI challenges the humanities to become what they are.

In the time of AI, a cultivation of style attuned to the untranslatable space between languages – in this case, at least French and English, but also between ‘natural’ and computing languages – might be able to de-activate, for good, lingering phantasmatic pseudo-antagonisms between French poststructuralism, deconstruction and psychoanalysis, on the one hand, and Anglophone trends such as new materialisms, affect studies and new metaphysics on the other. Dubreuil’s precise mobilisation of the former resonates, in that regard, with new rigorous and constructive readings of the poststructuralist tradition.¹ Yet the point in this case is not to produce better competing interpretations of the deconstructive tradition or to make them hegemonic in metacritical debates; rather, it is to show the stakes of relaunching an inventive kind of institutional critique by repositioning the

1. Deborah Goldgaber, *Speculative Grammatology. Deconstruction and the New Materialism*, Edinburgh University Press, 2021.

question of *what is called thinking* in the midst of a standardised, normalised and basically dead condition of the academic humanities in the time of AI. All in all, it seems to me that Dubreuil mobilises Heidegger's destruction of ontology while striving to eschew Heidegger's own metaphysical relapse.

At least since 2015, Dubreuil has thematised 'the intellective space' as 'the point of defection of cognition itself' not towards a mystical *noche oscura* but towards poetic thinking as an 'extraordinary, dialogic, defective, and affirmative' praxis (p25). This emphasis or orientation he described as a theoretical, epistemological, and political project at odds with:

... the present state of globalized academia, where poetic thinking is being marginalized at best and censored or ridiculed otherwise. Graduate studies, in particular, are a factory, where early careers are being mainly decided on an ability to obey and to conform, and where the desire for the unexpected stemming from organized knowledge is violently repressed. This paves the way for the entrepreneurial bureaucracy of the experimental (or the applied) in what Thomas Kuhn dubbed 'normal science' and, in the humanities, for the interplay between the empty stutter of professionals mutually glossing each other in a grotesque quest for authority – and the preepistemic subjectivism of 'my identity'.²

2. Laurent Dubreuil, *The Intellective Space: Thinking Beyond Cognition*, University of Minnesota Press, 2015, p110.

The above critique of globalized academia would appear to be Heideggerian doctrine if it entirely rejected epistemology, which it does not. The intellective project in fact straddles between epistemology and politics, on the one hand, and poetic thinking as an ethical or existential defection from the cognitive, on the other hand. But even at the epistemological level it promotes a defection from the globalised Western empire of the cognitive, defection that seems partly premised on the destruction/deconstruction of metaphysics, and more interestingly, on a rare acknowledgment of the psychic, affective, embodied, singular nature of poetic thinking. The latter is subtly and skillfully brought into relief within an Anglophone medium that has traditionally been hostile to deconstructive and psychoanalytic *styles*. Like the Lacanian subject perhaps, Dubreuil's 'intellective space' appears as transient and fragile: an excess that might or might not reach symbolic elaboration depending on a sort of ethical or existential or creative 'decision' *against* the structural trends of political economy and cultural politics: the automated subjectivism of 'my identity'. It is 'without guarantees', as Stuart Hall liked to say about Marxism in cultural studies. Yet, instead of producing knowledge about the ordinary – something that can arguably now be done by AI – Dubreuil's intellective praxis would create space for something extraordinary, something that rearranges 'multiple series of word senses and prepares the singular emergence of the unheard' (p38). In addition to 'extraordinary', the intellective space would be defective 'because the semantic attractors are as unstable as they could be', and 'intensely dialogic in so far as it fissures the consistent self-identity

or performed meaning and holds together ideations that are usually received as incompatible' (p38). Unfortunately, Dubreuil does not foreground the question of sexual difference, or gender, here, but his general argument makes room for that question by situating thinking again in human existence (the body, or 'freedom'): the universal and ultimate object of violent extraction and pauperisation in the time of generative AI.

Humanities in the Time of AI provides a diagnosis and a provocative injunction, rather than a technical solution to the predicament of the humanities in the time of AI. Generative AI is for Dubreuil just another step down a road taken long ago, namely, that of humanity's 'reprogramming' through the technological downsizing and colonisation of 'our noetic space', especially of public speech, nowadays pure simulation. This is reminiscent of Bernard Stiegler's diagnosis of symbolic misery in the hyper-industrial epoch, but it also appears less programmatic, less focused on achieving planetary consensus and cooperation that would save humanity from itself, from 'anthropy'.³ One could describe the intellectual injunction to think the humanities as creation and speculation as a more modest, more prudent, approach to our aporetic predicament, or as not ambitious enough, politically speaking, if we take either state-building or radical self-effacement as the ultimate criterion for an authentic politics (as in Gary Hall's *Masked Media*).⁴ But one could also note that in fact it offers something different to politics in the usual senses of the term. The problem of the humanities, it says, is not neoliberalism, but the poverty of the humanities, our historic failure to become what we are. In the end, Dubreuil sentences, 'it is both logical and just that those who demote creation and promote repeated patterns would be replaced by a more performant machine' (p96).

The 'inner strife' of the humanities means that today and tomorrow, as Dubreuil writes, AI merely exposes 'how ordinary we usually are' (p96), when we could be otherwise. Being otherwise would involve a thinking of 'truth' that which has nothing to do with logical argument or correct information, and everything to do with the constitutive failure of being, of sense, of language. In defence of a poetic as distinct from a cognitive task and model for the humanities, Dubreuil writes: 'The literary is an exploration of language failures. Opacity is maximally deployed, undoing the ligatures of discursive conventions, thus opening its verbal density to the space beyond. Literature's main operation is to mean nevertheless, or to precipitate us into intellectual thinking, as much as we can stand' (p45). There is, of course, nothing new in the exploration of 'literature' as a terrain for thinking, but Dubreuil's remobilising of that continental tradition poses the question of thinking's institutional force vis à vis the cognitive and methodological and political demand of the AI conjuncture.

Humanities in the Time of AI leaves it to scholars to choose between the nihilism of becoming priests (again) or social media influencers, and the courage of devising new creative methods for preserving and transmitting

3. Bernard Stiegler and the International Collective, *Bifurcate. 'There is No Alternative'*, D. Ross (trans.), Open Humanities Press, 2021.

4. Gary Hall, *Masked Media: What it Means to be Human in the Age of Artificial Creative Intelligence*, Open Humanities Press, 2025.

‘intellective space’ in the time of AI. It contains a couple of experiments with Chat GPT among which Dubreuil’s own favourite is a generated goodbye letter from Odysseus to Penelope, which invites us to reflect on AI’s wonderful ability to use an emotional tone. LLMs are excellent, Dubreuil notes, at conveying the grief they do not feel, just by using the formulaic prose of Web 2.0. Against formulaic (Eurocentric) language he brings back the ethical and political issue of an authentic epistemic plurality. AI could be useful in ‘redesigning’ an ‘expanded plurality through the advent of horizons of intelligibility that are more than global and of transcultural zones for exchanges with the previously unknown, far outside our world or its digitised representation on the planetary network’ (p81). An expanded corpus, however, will be nothing without the humanities becoming what they are: a capacity ‘to follow and displace the facticity of facts’ (p70). Such a task is worth the time and the energy of those critical scholars who are currently trying to bring AI responsibly into their everyday practices of teaching and research, and who acknowledge the urgency of cultivating dialogic dispositions against automatic absorption into subjectivist fantasy. The inner strife is in the open.

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