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THE HUMAN CURATOR: AI AND THE FUTURE OF WRITING

ABSTRACT: While academics in the humanities and social scientists tend to be political progressives, they often behave more like reactionaries when it comes to technological innovation. Some of our professional furor against ChatGPT and other AI chatbots is certainly by the ease of plagiarism it enables, though presumably a consensus solution will eventually emerge for this problem. Yet the real anger directed at this technology apparently stems from a misplaced pre-emptive nostalgia about the role of the writer. We mourn in advance the solitary author summoning words onto blank paper *ex nihilo*, ignoring that the essential feature of writers lies elsewhere.

KEYWORDS: artificial intelligence, ChatGPT, Martin Heidegger, Ronald Purser, writing

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I. ACADEMIC NOSTALGIA

It would be fair to say that most academics in the humanities and social sciences pride themselves on being politically progressive to a greater or lesser degree. This would suggest an openness to change, and more specifically, an awareness of the contingency of present social arrangements. Yet how quickly this openness vanishes whenever it is a question of technological change! Here I have found that my colleagues in the professoriate are often the first to resist the transformative implications of emerging media, forever focusing solely on what is about to be *lost* rather than gained. This discrepancy between an evident willingness (indeed, eagerness) to challenge the socio-political *status quo* and a reactionary clinging to existing technical procedures in intellectual life is not just a topic for abstract thought; it is also one that quickly instigates social crises among intellectuals. Namely, I have found that it often provokes outbursts of rage from those who apparently see themselves too clearly in the joint diagnosis “political progressive plus technological reactionary.” Recently I was shocked when a fellow professor of philosophy, someone of whom I have always thought highly, responded with a mixture of anger and (perhaps theatrical) disdain when I posted a ChatGPT exercise on social media. What I shared was rather innocent: ChatGPT’s staging, at my request, of an irreverent assortment of additional characters added to a famous scene from Shakespeare. The fellow professor in question was someone I have known for almost three decades. He had never aimed an unkind word in my direction at any time previously, or at least not to my knowledge. And this is just one such example of unexpected rage at the automation-in-progress of various intellectual functions at the hands of chatbots and other incarnations of artificial intelligence. While it is true that most teachers are at their wit’s end with such technologies due to undeniably rampant cases of student cheating, such overreactions to the newly automated strands of intellectual life must have deeper emotional roots. Where are those roots located? Here I will reflect on that question.

Let us begin with a thinker who was no political progressive: Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), widely known as both a major philosopher and a politically compromised Nazi, along with increasing evidence of much deeper anti-Semitic attitudes than was previously confirmed.¹ Heidegger’s retrograde grumblings in *The Question Concerning Technology* are

¹ M. Heidegger, *Ponderings II–VI: Black Notebooks, 1931–1938*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2024.

proverbial, and are never really salvaged by the efforts of his disciples to make them sound less negative than they are, or by related efforts to imply that there is something shallow or vulgar about calling them negative in the first place.² Here I will cite from a different piece of work by Heidegger, the 1942–1943 Freiburg lecture Course on Parmenides, though it displays the same spirit as his better-known remarks on technology:

It is not accidental that modern man writes “with” the typewriter and “dictates” “into” a machine. The “history” of the kinds of writing is one of the main reasons for the increasing destruction of the word. The latter no longer comes and goes by means of the writing hand, the properly acting hand, but by means of the mechanical forces it releases. The typewriter tears writing from the essential realm of the hand, i.e., the realm of the word. The word itself turns into something “typed.”³

Aside from the excessive scare-quoting (an alarming premonition of Derridean stylistic tics-to-come), the tone of dour pessimism is familiar to everyone who has read Heidegger. While he tries his best to adopt the decisive tone of a sage whose superior wisdom ought to be self-evident, there are multiple problems with this passage. First among them is that the somber Black Forest philosopher never explains what writing has to do with “the essential realm of the hand,” even though it is anything but clear that the hand has any *essential* relation to writing at all. Presumably no one would argue that the printing press “tears writing from the essential realm of the monastic quill pen and Chinese wood-block,” since the latter devices are generally viewed as nothing more than quaint relics of a specific stage in the history of technology, no more essential in their own realm than swords and battleships in the military field. Likewise, it would be hard to see the ballpoint pen as having torn writing “from the essential realm of the fountain pen,” even if the latter still has its devotees. It would also be odd to denounce Microsoft Word for having torn writing from “the essential realm of the typewriter,” even though prominent Heidegger scholar Richard Polt is a sworn devotee of this still lingering technology.⁴

² M. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, Harper & Row, New York, 1977.

³ M. Heidegger, *Parmenides*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1992, pp. 80–81.

⁴ R. Polt, *The Typewriter Revolution: A Typist's Companion for the 21st Century*, Countryman Press, New York, 2015.

In fact, Heidegger offers no reason for why the human hand has any essential involvement in writing at all. If Homer existed as a human bard with no eyesight, then it stands to reason that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were orally recited poems that no hand recorded until later in their history. We know this with greater certainty about the *Qur'an*, one of the most influential books in human history, which for devout Muslims counts as a direct dictation to the Prophet Muhammad mediated by the angel Gabriel. Although Muslims still revere the practice of memorization and oral recitation of the *Qur'an*, printed copies of the book are not despised, but are themselves handled with special care in every household devoted to Islam. Plato's powerful dialogue *Phaedrus* famously recounts the objections of some ancient Egyptians to writing itself, based on the claim that this new technology will be more poison than cure: that it will only serve to erode human cognitive skills associated with memory.⁵ In the passage cited above from his *Parmenides*, Heidegger strikes the pose of a deeply serious and classical figure in opposition to the purported frivolity of typists. Yet his ostensibly grave and wizened commitment to "essential" handwriting would only make him look like an empty, trend-chasing hipster to those ancient Egyptians in the *Phaedrus* who swore by memory alone.

More generally, we can say that the insistence on pausing at any given stage of technology risks the same arbitrariness as the Amish commitment on horses, buggies, and barn-raising culture, when one might return instead to far earlier Neolithic social systems. Why continue to have dogs, given that they were domesticated only around 30,000 years ago, after tens of thousands of years of human history without them? Indeed, why stick with behavioral modernity at all, since music, dance, abstract thinking, and burial of the dead are all relative latecomer practices among *homo sapiens sapiens*? Why retain even language, given that it "removes human communication from the essential realm of grunting gesticulation"? Why not enforce global nudism, given that clothing deprives us of an "essential" relation to our natural bodily forms? Some will say I exaggerate, since there may be cases where technology ought to be halted in the name of the general good. Organized labor often demands a stop to ongoing automation, whether on the factory floor or in the Hollywood

⁵ Plato, *Phaedrus*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1995. For one helpful discussion see M. Coeckelbergh, D.J. Gunkel, *Communicative AI: A Critical Introduction to Large Language Models*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2025, p. 8.

Screen Writers Guild. But while such demands may be needed for a time to prevent widespread professional disruption, they are dubious as a long-range strategy. A century from now it will surely be ludicrous to aspire to assembly-line work or a scriptwriter's career, which are likely to be obsolete targets of derision, much like those antiquated positions financed to this day by the British Monarchy: Royal Shoe-Wearer, Warden of the Swans, Groom of the Stool, or Royal Bargemaster. Perhaps the sole exception concerns offensive weaponry, since the increasing speed, power, and radioactivity of wars threatens to make every inch of the earth a battlefield, so that few would survive even an accidental discharge of nuclear weaponry. At any rate, Heidegger's histrionics notwithstanding, no comparable case can be made against the harmless typewriter.

The problem at play, of course, is that of nostalgia. Individual human lives, like human civilizations more broadly, move from one phase to the next with what often seems like alarming speed. As a natural part of this process, humans end up adopting certain new things while leaving others behind, though often enough these abandoned entities resurface later in new guise.⁶ Whenever this happens, we encounter the melancholic human tendency (especially among those who reached maturity amidst objects now disappearing) to focus primarily on what has been lost. I suspect it is a subspecies of the natural envy towards youth felt by aging people as they grow increasingly unhealthy and unattractive, failing to appreciate sufficiently their own compensatory gains in wisdom and inner peace. This tendency can even be detected in one of philosophy's oldest thought experiments: the Ship of Theseus. Imagine that the ship of the ancient Athenian hero Theseus is slowly renovated by replacing one piece of decaying wood with a new one, then another piece, and then another, until at some point we have a ship that no longer contains any of the wood from the original historical ship. Imagine further that someone else takes the discarded pieces of old wood and secretly reassembles them, until finally the old pieces of wood are restored in the form of the original ship. Which of these two counts as the "real" Ship of Theseus? So goes this old chestnut of a problem. Yet what both options assume is that a thing remains the same thing primarily by way of *preservation*, though this need not always be the case. More specifically, what if the real

⁶ Here Marshall McLuhan's thoughts on "retrieval" are helpful. See M. McLuhan, E. McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1992. An earlier work on the same theme is M. McLuhan, W. Watson, *From Clické to Archetype*, Penguin, New York, 1970.

Ship of Theseus consists not in a particular physical state that ought to be maintained, but is more like a disembodied principle that surpasses any particular set of pieces of wood, or any specific configuration of them? Elsewhere I have argued that a shipwreck rotting on the ocean floor might even give us a more essential version of the ship precisely *because* it has lost the majority of its details.⁷ An analogous argument failed with the French public, which overwhelmingly demanded that the Nôtre-Dame Cathedral be rebuilt with literal sameness following the devastating 2019 fire. Although understandable given the historical and religious significance of Nôtre-Dame, a number of architects proposed alternative restorations that, in my view at least, revived the deeper *spirit* of the cathedral in ways that the chosen replication probably has not. The point I am trying to make is that Heidegger's view of the "essential" aspect of any technology is far too antiquarian in spirit, in Nietzsche's sense of the term.⁸ Any genuine care for essence—and I am not among those inclined to mock this term—would require an active abandonment of a building's or a technology's most transient and accidental features. Far from being an essential aspect of writing, the human hand is likely to prove no more than a transient historical scaffolding that supported for a time the more essential features of the art.

The danger of nostalgia, then, is the risk of becoming overly enamored of one transient historical moment of a thing while paying little attention to its underlying spirit, which requires growth and reconception rather than mere preservation. When Amazon introduced the Kindle in 2007, I remember the appalled reaction of many other academic friends. There were some obvious advantages to the new technology, ranging from the ability to order and read books instantly anywhere with a Wi-Fi connection, and the chance to reduce the number of trees annihilated to produce paper for printed books. Furthermore, many of us know through personal experience the incredible hassle faced by intellectuals whenever they change homes, with the need to move thousands of paper books weighing many tons from one place to another. How much better to have them all accessible at the touch of a button!

⁷ G. Harman, "The Shipwreck of Theseus: Philosophy and Maritime Archaeology," in S. A. Rich, P. B. Campbell (eds.), *Contemporary Philosophy for Maritime Archaeology: Flat Ontologies, Oceanic Thought, and the Anthropocene*, Sidestone Press, Leiden, 2023, pp. 57–73.

⁸ F. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984.

Naturally, paper books have their charms just like any threatened medium, and among academics (who are often especial devotees of some past age or another) the nostalgic element tends to retain the upper hand. It is not simply a matter of the superior tactile experience of a book by contrast with current electronic devices. It is also easier to take notes in a paper book, and often easier to flip through one in search of a particular passage, despite the ostensible speed of electronic word searches. More than this, there is the inherent draw of used bookstores, filled with dusty treasures in the form of paper objects randomly and suddenly discovered. I have felt few greater delights on this planet than accidentally finding a first edition copy of Heidegger's *Habilitationsschrift* on the pseudo-Scotus for a mere \$25.⁹ The difficulty of obtaining certain paper books has also long served to justify research grants to travel to distant libraries: another of the treasured perks of the modern academic lifestyle that is gradually ending before our eyes amidst budget cuts. But here as always, by focusing on these losses we miss the opportunity to embrace a new world, settling and exploring it at an early date. Before developing this thought further, let us consider some possible counterarguments by a critic.

2. GRUMPY CAT CRITICAL THEORY

Users of social media (and who does this description exclude anymore?) will probably remember the "Grumpy Cat" meme, with its photo of a calico-tabby house pet with the sourest face imaginable. American President Barack Obama even referenced this meme in at least one speech.¹⁰ The cat in question was named Tardar Sauce, and was born in 2012 in Morristown, Arizona (with its human population of under 200) and deceased in the same place just seven years later. I must admit that I think of this cat whenever encountering the usual crabby academic dismay over the recent emergence of ChatGPT. It is not that I mean to ridicule the alarm felt in my line of work given the constant profusion of new and improved chatbots. The previous rules and standards of our classrooms were devastated instantly by the sudden release of ChatGPT to the public in November 2022. I am probably in the majority of the professoriate

⁹ For a non-vintage copy see M. Heidegger, *Die Kategorien- und Bedeutungslehre des Duns Scotus*, Sothis Press, Wallingford, 2023.

¹⁰ L. Koran, "Obama Compares Republicans to 'Grumpy Cat,'" *CNN* website, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/10/23/politics/grumpy-cat-obama-republicans>, (accessed 23 October 2015).

when I say that currently it is not possible to assign papers to students; at this point, I use a combination of in-class written exams and final oral exams. Although the accrediting agency that oversees the school where I teach does require us to develop the writing skills of our students, I have to be hopeful that they will understand our current need to suspend term papers while awaiting some new consensus about how to judge jointly crafted human/computer writing. I say this not in a spirit of excessive leniency toward the new generation of students, but in the recognition that at some point in the near future, more or less all writing will come from human/computer partnerships. Although this prospect seems as threatening to many academics as atomic warheads mounted on hypersonic missiles, or designer viruses killing off entire ethnic groups, I do not think AI chatbots and their more advanced successors will deserve to be judged by the criteria of weaponry. In the third and final section of this article I will explain why.

But before getting to that topic, let us consider the objections of a recent, entertaining, and widely read critique of ChatGPT: Ronald Purser's dramatically titled "AI is Destroying the University and Learning Itself."¹¹ Purser is currently Lam Larsen Distinguished Research Professor of Management at San Francisco State University, as well as a senior instructor at Dharma College in Berkeley. Despite his appointment in a Management department, a critical take on capitalism is evident from his most-cited publication: a book humorously entitled *McMindfulness*, published by Repeater in London, where I have published a book myself.¹² Purser's article is both polemical and witty; most academic readers will chuckle multiple times as they move through its pages. Yet the article is too reliant on low-hanging fruit, with several canned attacks on our supposedly benighted university administrators, and a smaller number of cheap shots. For instance, the author pointlessly derides Sam Altman as "Little Sammy," which would sound just as petty as Donald Trump's "Little Marco" (Rubio) if not for the fact that Altman stands a robust six feet, three inches tall. An OpenAI employee named Siya Raj Purohit is singled out for Purser's especial scorn, even when she does nothing more

¹¹ R. Purser, "AI is Destroying the University and Learning Itself," *Current Affairs*, <https://www.currentaffairs.org/news/ai-is-destroying-the-university-and-learning-itself>, (accessed 1 December 2025).

¹² R. E. Purser, *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality*, Repeater, London 2019; G. Harman, *Dante's Broken Hammer: The Ethics, Aesthetics, and Metaphysics of Love*, Repeater, London, 2016.

heinous than suggesting ways to use ChatGPT to improve the structure of syllabi. “The message was clear,” Purser cackles. “Let ChatGPT redesign your class.” Assuming we all agree that certain uses of chatbots by professors would count as professional fraud, it is hard to see Purohit’s advice as urging us to do anything illicit. Often enough the human mind falls into ruts and routines, and it strikes me as perfectly harmless to ask a chatbot to make suggestions to spice up a class, just as we might ask a human friend to do so. Although I have never used ChatGPT for this particular purpose, I have already found it useful for suggesting class discussion questions about certain assignments. Does this amount to letting a chatbot take over my class? Hardly. I am still the one who distinguishes good suggestions from poor ones, still the one who improves all such suggestions with tailored modifications, and still the one who chooses and prepares the course readings in the first place. One can certainly imagine lazy segments of the professoriate engaging in extensive abuses of the technology, as we now see students doing on a regular basis. But this problem cannot be addressed by banning chatbots, since it would be just as hard to enforce such a ban on professors as on students (as concerns the latter, I have not managed to catch a single instance of cheating since ChatGPT was introduced, though I have no doubt it occurred). Instead, both professors and students will have to be judged the same way as always: by the quality of their work. Admittedly, we are in a moment of academic crisis in which it is difficult to know whether the quality of work is owing to a human or to improper AI assistance. This is why I and others have scrapped term papers for now. Yet it is not at all obvious, despite widespread belief to the contrary, that this problem is a permanent one. At the very least, we should happily be able to expect perfect grammar and spelling from any future student work, even when written by non-native speakers of English, and to require them to reach such perfection “by themselves” may now be as futile and pointless as requiring them to learn Morse code. As for how to determine whether a student understands whatever they submit as academic work, this may require supplementary examination of such work: perhaps in the form of in-person discussion with the professor or (where appropriate) teaching assistants.

Admittedly, a number of Purser’s critiques of the recent direction of our universities seem to hit home. He cites Henry Giroux’s still convincing complaint that “public universities [are] being remade as vocational feeders for private markets,” something that most professors will

have long seen with their own eyes.¹³ Many will nod in agreement with the reference to Benjamin Ginsberg's assault on the "all-administrative university," though I happen to think a certain degree of mythology has exaggerated our disdain for evil corporate administrators.¹⁴ Purser will even convince many when he riffs on the late David Graeber's "bullshit jobs" slogan, speaking by analogy of "bullshit education."¹⁵ Most readers will also be appalled by Purser's recounting of one Chungin "Roy" Lee, who passed cynically through the halls of Columbia University, where he claimed that he and his friends learned "nothing" in their classes (and that he was there only to find a spouse and a business partner), before launching a start-up called Cluely: a website openly devoted to the encouragement and facilitation of cheating. In a famous and still jarring case, low-wage Kenyans were contracted to select and remove the most horrific images from AI databases, leaving some with long-term mental trauma. Journalist Karen Hao was "blackballed" after publishing a critical piece about OpenAI, raising the specter that big-money AI companies are already as sinister as insurance and oil companies are widely believed to be. Purser alarms us further when he repeats well-documented problems with the environmental impact of AI training runs. Perhaps even more unnervingly, Ohio State University has declared that use of AI will no longer count as a violation of academic integrity: a policy that seems, at the least, premature.

Such concerns are clearly worth examining. Many of them call out for rigorous public policy measures. Yet as far as I can tell, Purser offers no credible remedies for the problems he outlines. My point here is not that no one should criticize something for which they have no solution; critique is often the initial step toward a solution. The problem, instead, is something I find completely missing from Purser's critique: namely, ChatGPT is already very good at what it does, and is becoming better and better over time. From reading Purser, one almost gets the sense that the only possible reason to use ChatGPT is to cheat. This is a failure of imagination, one that suggests he has not yet used the technology enough. At the very least, it is the best research assistant you have

¹³ Purser oddly refers to the Wikipedia article on Giroux rather than any publications, but one comprehensive source is C. Robbins (ed), *The Giroux Reader*, Paradigm Press, Boulder, 2007.

¹⁴ B. Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why it Matters*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011.

¹⁵ D. Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, Simon & Schuster, New York: 2018.

ever had, even if its findings still require significant double- and triple-checking review. Just as critics say, it does “hallucinate.” It has credited me with ideas that are not my own, and when asked to rank my books in order of quality, it omitted many of my own, while including books by others as well as utterly non-existent books. But that is only a partial and inadequate picture of the situation. In my own field, philosophy, I have found ChatGPT profoundly useful for a number of tasks that no human assistant could perform in a reasonable amount of time. Just try asking the bot if there is any intellectual connection between two philosophers who seem to have none at all; quite often it will provide useful leads that trigger breakthroughs in one’s own conception of the history of philosophy. If you cannot remember which author made a specific statement, ChatGPT will often remind you in less than a second. Ask it to rank the five most important theories of knowledge of the seventeenth century, and while you may disagree with the rankings, you at least have a quick reminder of the most likely candidates. Certain playful uses of chatbots can also bear intellectual fruit: although ChatGPT is known to give corny responses to requests for jokes, there is an easy workaround simply by asking it to respond to questions in the style of famous comedians. I have learned a great deal by having ChatGPT give comedy routines on the philosophies of, say, David Lewis and Saul Kripke in the voices of such prominent comics as Dennis Miller, Chris Rock, or Richard Pryor. Nothing about this exercise is frivolous. If done properly, it pushes our intelligence in speculative directions that would not have been possible with any previous stimuli.

Rather than looking for ways to restructure our intellectual situation in view of this powerful new technology, Purser prefers to appeal to bland and familiar academic tropes. He insists in anodyne fashion on “faculty input,” which sounds democratic enough, unless you have ever served in university administration and seen for yourself that such input often takes the form of complaint, obstruction, self-righteous shouting, angry demands for more faculty funding, or bizarre conspiracy theories about the motives for university decisions. Purser also ensures that “critical thinking” makes its expected appearance, as if the *primary* role of human thought were to object to whatever it hears. Multiple appeals are made to “resistance,” along with claims that the young student generation stands at the forefront of a promising resistant upsurge. But while today’s world is certainly rife with currents that deserve resistance, the idea that the mission of the mind is to say “no” seems very much a relic

of modern philosophy. That era's famous duality of subject and object wrongly implies to many that unless the subject is purified of any entanglement with objects, the result can only be "alienation." Yet quite often it is the procession of inanimate objects through history, or even the forces of reality unleashed by commercialism (that demon ritually loathed by intellectuals) that force intellectual change more than an ocean full of critical thinking. In recent decades, academics have grown fond of the remark that it is now easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. But as I once asked Mark Fisher, was Steve Jobs really less imaginative than Fredric Jameson?¹⁶ What AI gives us the opportunity to question is the model of the intellectual as someone who critiques whatever emerges from beyond the academy, especially when it emerges from the vicinity of wealth. Admirers of Karl Marx too often forget the part where he and Friedrich Engels credit capitalism with annihilating so many dead forms of life.¹⁷ The *primary* lesson of this time of ours, in which an increasing number of universities are financially on the ropes, may not be that tech bros and hedge fund managers are demons prancing in our midst, but that too many intellectuals are almost religiously devoted to a model of critical refusal and opposition that is no longer suited to our task.

Some evidence for this can be found in the specific way that Purser draws a distinction between tools and technology. Whereas tools help us achieve some task, he says, technologies reshape the very environment in which we act. This seems plausible enough. Technologies can also have obvious political effects, some of them clearly deleterious: Purser cites Langdon Winner, who of course wrote a famous article on how bridges were constructed in such a way as to prevent black bus riders from using certain beaches.¹⁸ But naturally, it does not follow that all artifacts are encoded with oppressive politics, or even that oppression and greed can ever be the *primary* effects of technology even when intended, except in certain narrowly defined cases. Whatever the motives of oligarchs or deranged Lex Luthors may be when introducing a given technology, its effects will probably outrun their best-planned schemes. Purser argues further that earlier technologies, unlike AI chatbots, "expanded human

¹⁶ M. Fisher, "Dialogue with Graham Harman," *k-punk* blog, http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/2010_01.html, (accessed 6 January 2010).

¹⁷ K. Marx, F. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, Penguin, London, 2004.

¹⁸ L. Winner, "Do Artifacts Have Politics?," *Daedalus*, 109, 1, 1980, pp. 121–136.

agency” over a long period of time. It is not clear that either part of this sentence is true. No technology—whether it be the cotton gin, the dishwasher, or the car—can easily be assessed as either adding to or subtracting from human agency. Nor is it the case that such changes occur only over long periods of time, as can be seen in the case of ChatGPT itself. Far from needing a long incubation period prior to its social effects, this technology has induced near-total disorientation in the professoriate in just a few years: witness Purser’s own anecdotes about academic colleagues now contemplating sudden retirement. Indeed, I suspect that Purser made the claim about long periods of time being needed in order to bolster his call for additional faculty consultation and “research.” And anyway—needed *for what*? AI is infiltrating society at a speed that no sleepy professorial assembly will be able to oppose; our ability as a profession to “resist” is really very limited, despite our frequent delusions of political grandeur. We can stop assigning term papers, which I and many others have already done. We might also try to demand that university employers, like Purser’s own San Francisco State, stop making deals with AI companies over the heads of their faculty; this may or may not work, but even if it succeeds it will slow the spread of AI in society not a whit. We can behave like critical thinker Cassandras bemoaning the inevitable downfall of the human intellect. The better option, I think, is to recognize that our typical assumptions about how an intellectual should operate in (and benefit from) society was built under earlier conditions of society. When Purser asks rhetorically “why retain tenured professors at all?,” he apparently aims this barb at corporate sell-outs in university administrations who fail to “resist.” But surely he knows that our profession has reached a perilous economic situation that is, to at least some extent, independent of anyone’s particular good or ill will.

The university was born at a specific point in human history, and will end at a different specific point in human history, and that point may come much earlier than employees of universities would like. But intellectual life existed before the university and will continue to exist after it, even if some particular generation will end up drawing the short straw and inheriting horrible professional luck. On this note, I would like to shift from the possible fate of universities to the likely fate of writing itself.

3. FROM THE HUMAN CREATOR TO THE HUMAN CONNOISSEUR: CHATGPT AND AUTOMATED WRITING

Earlier I cited a passage from Martin Heidegger, who among all serious philosophers is surely one of the grumpiest of cats. Let's review his absurdly pompous passage against typewriters:

It is not accidental that modern man writes "with" the typewriter and "dictates" "into" a machine. The "history" of the kinds of writing is one of the main reasons for the increasing destruction of the word. The latter no longer comes and goes by means of the writing hand, the properly acting hand, but by means of the mechanical forces it releases. The typewriter tears writing from the essential realm of the hand, i.e., the realm of the word. The word itself turns into something "typed."¹⁹

I will not belittle the notion of "essence," which has received too much negative press in recent decades.²⁰ Yet I will not hesitate to ridicule Heidegger's romanticism of the human hand. For it is the very definition of nostalgia to overidentify the essential features of a thing with one particular transient stage through which it passes. It is a fact of human psychology that we tend to appreciate best those moments in the history of music, cinema, television, or sports that happened to coincide with our youth; or if not with our youth, then perhaps with some later pinnacle of our worldly success. There was seldom a greater white devotee of black American music than my father, but this holds only for the music of the 1960s; as for hip-hop, he detests it so much that he falls into a depressive mood even when he hears a few bars accidentally. Nor am I any better when it comes to those areas that interest me most, no matter how hard I try to stay abreast of changing fashions: for me, the conditions of the 1990s (in sports, music, and culture) will always represent what life ought to look like. As briefly mentioned above, nostalgia is exactly what Nietzsche means when he speaks of the "antiquarian" approach to history.²¹ It can be useful to study under certain elderly antiquarian professors, despite their often pedantic reverence for earlier routines, but only because

¹⁹ See footnote no. 3.

²⁰ One place where I develop this point further is in D. Varn, "Marginalia on Radical Thinking: An Interview with Graham Harman," <http://skepoet.wordpress.com/2012/06/01/marginalia-on-radical-thinking-an-interview-with-graham-harman/>, (accessed 1 June 2012).

²¹ F. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*.

they have access to a treasury of facts and anecdotes that the generation just above us has forgotten.

I hope that most readers of this article will agree with me that to treat writing as having an “essential relation to the hand” is absurd. The world has now experienced any number of great writers who never used anything but a typewriter or a word processor. Most of us are willing to take Heidegger’s elderly-sounding Ludditism with more than a grain of salt. My worry, though, is that most are still overly attached to other features of writing with which it may be assumed to have an essential relationship. Namely, I hold that our image of the writer is bound up too closely with the idea of a solitary human being generating sentences *ex nihilo* on a blank screen. This is what we imagine as the ideal existence of a writer. This person closes themselves up in a room and wages a battle with nothingness, drawing words out of thin air in heroic fashion. This may happen in a rapid, caffeine-fueled way, as with Balzac; it may involve long stretches where nothing at all is written as the author pouts face-down on a couch, as with Flaubert. It may involve more eccentric routines, such as Jack Kerouac typing *On the Road* on a single uninterrupted roll of paper.²² Perhaps it needs the assistance of drug trips, or must be preceded (or followed) by marathon sex sessions. The room for autobiographical variation is limitless. But what we think writing *ought* to be always involves the personal generation of words from out of nothing. The human writer is the human creator, a kind of deity in miniature, especially in a country such as France that knows how to revere its writers properly.

Yet this is precisely what I would like to persuade readers to put behind them once and for all: this vision of the “essential relation” of writing with visionary personal experience in the face of blank paper. And ChatGPT, I believe, is the first sign that the role of the writer will change. We all have reasons to regret that we were not born a bit sooner than we were. In my own case, for instance, I regret that I was just 14 months old when the first moon landing occurred, so that I am left with no memory whatsoever of the event. But in other ways, we are all born at exactly the right time, and manage to benefit from it. My own stroke of historical luck is that I began publishing in 2002, fully twenty years before the appearance of ChatGPT. What this means is that nearly everything I have ever written is accessible to most chatbots. Thus I am able to ask them questions about what I might have done differently in certain books to

²² J. Kerouac, *On the Road*, Penguin, London, 1960.

have made them better; what subjects I have not written about that I really ought to write about; what aspects of my personality come through most clearly in my books, and which past authors I would likely have gotten along with best or worst.

Nonetheless, what I really look forward to in the coming decades is something well beyond such opportunities. What I would like to ask some future successor of ChatGPT is the following: “please write 100 draft manuscripts on [whatever topic] in the style of my previous books.” Now, from the standpoint of the present day, this looks like rampant cheating. That is why I will not even think of doing it until many others have done it before me; I do not have the temperament of an early adopter, or that of someone who enjoys provoking controversy and fighting through it. Such an episode would leave me drained of energy and sad. Even so, does it not indicate a sort of secret cheater’s mentality that I would even fantasize about AI doing all of the writing “for me,” so that I did nothing “by myself”? This is where my earlier point becomes relevant. Why do we assume that writing “by oneself” requires that we endorse an “essential relation” between writing and sitting face-to-face with a piece of blank paper? Did I not create the style and content of my previous books, written in a pre-AI universe? Would it really be “cheating” to ask AI to generate further products written in the same spirit, and to take ownership for myself? Imagine that I asked the more powerful successor of ChatGPT to generate one hundred book drafts about a subject that interests me, but about which I have never written a thing: say, climate politics. Is the world really best served by my spending three years in a library, followed by six months of torment trying to summon exactly the right words from the void? This is what we now insist a writer must do, and I must admit that I have enjoyed it, and will probably continue to enjoy it for a while longer. Yet it is increasingly clear that however much someone might try to romanticize the life of a writer as we currently know it, this life is probably not the best use of a writer’s time. The blank page is not only frightening; it can also be a waste of time in the name of heroic *ex nihilo* creation. Would it not be objectively better to work with AI-generated drafts, shaping and editing them on the basis of lifelong intellectual experience?

What I am trying to say is that what we romanticize most is the idea of the human *creator*, perhaps because we have been taught to view ourselves as made in the image of God. But what if that is not really what we are, at bottom? What I want to suggest is that human beings are at their

best not as creators, but as *connoisseurs*. As a rule, the connoisseur is seen as someone respectable, but not quite at the level of the creator. Dr. Johnson is a literary giant, but pales in the company of Shakespeare; the same for Clement Greenberg by comparison with Jackson Pollock, at least among those who admire Pollock. But what if the ability to create something from nothing was simply an unfortunate necessity for humans in the pre-AI age, when there was nothing else to do our creating for us. Even the creative artist has no greater skill than the ability to distinguish own their best work from their less-than-best work. And so what if some future human, entirely unskilled in executing works on canvas with oil or acrylic, nonetheless had the most immaculate taste in how to ask AI to do it? I once had a professor whose own lack of respect for hip-hop stemmed from the fact that they merely “sampled” rather than playing musical instruments with their own hands. But perhaps this was just an unknowing relapse into Heidegger’s claim that writing has an essential relation to the hand. The thesis I venture here is that our new essential relation is not to the creative process, but to connoisseurship.

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