Language Speaks Itself: AI Language Models and Post-structuralist Subjectivity

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> Yet it will never be mine, this language, the only one I am thus destined to speak, as long as speech is possible for me in life and in death; you see, never will this language be mine. And, truth to tell, it never was.
> *Jacques Derrida, Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*

> Willst du ins Unendliche schreiten, Geh nur im Endlichen nach allen Seiten.
> *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Gott, Gemüt und Welt*

Introduction

Contemporary literary studies are facing a unique rupture beyond which it will no longer be able to ignore its relationship to a certain tradition and the broader necessity of confronting its place in the University in the 21st century. One must ask why we study literature at all, which is to ask what our relationship is with language and languages. The university, increasingly governed by empiricism and market logic, has repressed the very disciplines that founded it: history, philosophy, the study of language, and meaning. It has suppressed the signifier. The fantasy of a natural linkage between language and the referent as given, word and world, data and truth, speech and presence, has returned with bureaucratic vengeance, even as that very fantasy collapses in the face of a new, more violent incoherence. Where the statement that to study literature is to confront the conditions of meaning itself would seem to fall on deaf ears, what now is the place of the intellectual? What is

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the duty of the critic? Of the poet or author? For many disparate and endangered thinkers, the project of liberation is a project of poetry:

> Literature as historical institution with its conventions, rules, etc., but also this institution of fiction which gives in principle the power to say everything, to break free of the rules, to displace them, and thereby to institute, to invent and even to suspect the traditional difference between nature and institution, nature and conventional law, nature and history (Derrida, 1992, p. 37).

The world as perceived by anyone is fundamentally linguistic; it is a world in which language always precedes the subject, and in which language constitutes the subject, all thought, speech, communication, knowledge, and understanding—and it is thus never a language proper to the subject. As Bakhtin says, one speaks the language of the other (1981, p. 293). Yet, we feel as though this language is always our own: The entire process of coming to know ourselves and the world is one of articulating words and symbols. We recognize the "voice" or style of a particular author when we read them. We conceive of them *as* author in our connection to the reproduction of *their* thought, fixed and peremptory, itself linked inextricably to their *meaning.* What's more, we feel as though we mean: When an interlocutor prickles at our words, we feel as though they've been "taken the wrong way," that "this is not what *I meant*." Subjectivity emerges from this paradox: We mean with a language that was never ours, and yet we experience ourselves as meaning. It thus becomes clear that to reckon with the state of contemporary literary studies in the 21st century, and in confrontation with a certain socio-political and discursive enterprise, it is necessary to undertake a project of reinvestigating and rethinking a theory of the speaking subject. As the fields of the natural and social sciences, descending from an Enlightenment rationalism, lead us further and further into marvels of technological advancement, fact and utility—breakthroughs in linguistics, cognitive neuroscience, immu-

nology and biotech, and of course, computing—we continue to be plagued with problems of subjugation, bondage, violence, and repression; one might even suggest we are *increasingly* unsure of *how* to live.

At the turn of the century, Julia Kristeva was already grappling with these anxieties, many *avant la lettre*, and proposing a radical new humanism in the tradition of the poststructuralists, emphasizing an acute awareness of the *tropological* or figural dimension of subjectivity and "reality." In 2006, she asked, "Does our understanding of humanism still have a place in our world caught in the grips of religious wars and technology?" (Kristeva, 2006, p. 13). At the same time, another body of thought was gaining traction, one that is co-implicated in the rupture currently forcing our considerations. That thought is what is known as *posthumanism*; the rupture is the advent of what is called *AI,* specifically the explosively innovative "large language models" or "neural-networks." Posthumanism, as Cary Wolfe defines it, "is not posthumanism in the sense of the popular press—the forecasting of a future either dystopian or utopian in which the human as such has been succeeded by its 'next generation'—but rather a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, biological, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore" (Wolf, 2010, p. xvi). First, once widely known and no longer dismissed as novel, there was a wave of fear: How will the university continue to function in the assessment of knowledge acquisition, in its mission to produce competent, useful agents in the workforce, and citizens in society? The shift has come quickly, is drastic, comic, well-intentioned, and utterly misguided. In university faculty communications, one is bombarded daily with articles, training sessions, talks, and even formal restructuring, all in response to, or orbiting, the ostensible institutional presence or potentialities of this so-called Artificial Intelligence. While there has been no shortage of policy and pedagogical discussion surrounding AI in the academy, rigorous inquiry into its theoretical implications for literary studies remains rare.

To consider the implications of artificial intelligence structured, like the Lacanian unconscious, as a language, alongside a post-humanist theory and entangled with the project of a renewed humanism, is to confront the role of the intellectual and the academy in an account of their epistemological function; such a project must begin with the assertion, or reassertion, that it is fundamentally literary-poetic. The subject and thus the social as such, is therefore always already immersed in a discursive economy, and is always already engaged in literary studies. What is considered in the present chapter is, in fact, *presence:* A positive *semantic* presence—a semantic presumption. To interrogate the going-forward then of literature and literary studies faced with the question of generative AI obliquely and at a distance, by undermining such a question, rejecting and anticipating it, halting before it arrives; to interrogate the question to come through the trace of questions that prefigure it by nearly a century; and to exploit that about which it would ask, namely, a *gap*. This chapter will attempt to problematize some notion of a gap between the authorial-interpretive (sender-addressee) act of signification in the human subject and the AI simulation insofar as it may be found to implicate those above-attested concerns with which a study of the literary is in *some way* entangled. And in what way? Beginning with the relationship of AI to subjectivity, the relationship of the subject to the literary, this chapter will traverse a *tradition* previously gestured toward, a tradition to which the LLM bears a certain epistemological figure and anagogic crystallization. What is the magnitude and substance of such a gap, and how might AI demonstrate that, "Die Sprache *spricht*?" (Heidegger, 2020, p.982) That, "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte?" (Derrida, 1967, p. 227). Going forward, there is no contemporary literary studies that is not a contemporary study of the theoretical crisis it inherited, misread, disavowed, but never surpassed: literary *theory.*

The Large Language Model, Semiotics, and Metaphor

The written and spoken word do not express or communicate an originary meaning. Language is typically treated as a transparent medium of reference: A neutral vehicle by which words correspond to a referent, to real-world entities or extralinguistic ideas. But structural linguistics and poststructuralist theory have shown that meaning is not a reflection of external reality, but a differential effect generated within language itself. Language is instead the arbitrary association of the mental inscription of a form (phonetic speech, script, graphemes, etc.) and a collection of properties describing a category. The linguistic sign, therefore, "unites, not a thing and a name," but what Saussure calls the signifier and the signified (1959, p. 66). The relation between them is arbitrary, meaning arises not from correspondence but from the dialectic opposition to other signs within the closed system. Derrida writes, "No element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each 'element' – phoneme or grapheme – being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system" (Derrida, 1974, p. 243). "Trace" is how Derrida denotes the necessary and endless positing of what any sign is not. The subject's capacity to distinguish, name, and conceptualize emerges from this system of differences, this "presence of absence": "From the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. We think only in signs" (Derrida, 1974, p.50). Cognition, that is to say, is a discursive act of delineating, a segmentation of the continuous that invents categories and constructs identity through language. It is through the tension between an infinity of data, of what is not said, and the finitude of the system, of what can be said, that language is always already the meaning itself.

The signifying field of the term "artificial intelligence" (and the initialism "AI") has broadened considerably, acquiring cultural weight faster than conceptual clarity. The term, along with a constellation of orbiting signifiers, now encompasses a wide range of

computational tools, many of which bear little resemblance to the generative capacities that most visibly animate LLMs in public fascination, and which, until recently, would never have connoted "intelligence" at all. Academics, students, and consumers at large, non-computer science learned, will most immediately be familiar with *ChatGPT,* which is currently in its consumer-available iteration 4.5, with new, more impressive and capable models being introduced regularly. ChatGPT is what computer scientists and software engineers refer to as a *large language model* (LLM); LLMs are a particular type of *neural network*; all LLMs are neural networks, but not all neural networks are LLMs (Bommasani, 2021). This chapter will deal primarily with LLMs. The most significant leap in AI technology, as it would seem from an outside perspective, has been the advent and exponential advancement of the LLM. There are many expectations proliferating about the world post-AI; the rupture, in the Derridean usage, is nothing so fanciful as the notion of singularity, or at least, such a suggestion is beyond the scope of this chapter; the rupture here is rather the phantom recurrence in a new context of that which M. Derrida notes in "Structure, Sign, and Play." What is called into question again is a *writing.* An upheaval of the concept of writing as dramatized by the increasing "usefulness" of LLMs, one that, rather than oppose itself to the system, opens it to its own dislocation, is nowhere more acute than in academia, scholarship writ large, and, quite obviously, literature and literary studies.

Writing here is not merely and narrowly understood as the *medium* of scholarly and critical production as imposed on every first-year college undergraduate, and, as Derrida argues in the seminal, *Of Grammatology* (1974)*,* not as secondary to spoken language or mere representation, but rather, writing is considered as *thought itself*, "arche-writing," as it is referred to in that text. Writing, which Derrida doesn't limit to the phonetic-alphabetic, is the differential medium through which thought becomes possible. Such is the reason*,* if not always articulated or executed well, why the college freshman is indoctrinated into a hegemonic standard of writing in

the first place. And where, as thought, writing is always co-implicated with *reading,* one of the most prevalent concerns voiced in the academy concerns the mirror-movement of AI writing tools in reducing or expanding human-generated text: The composition student outsources either his reading ("ChatGPT, please summarize the key points of this PDF of my textbook chapter") or his writing ("ChatGPT, here is the theme and thesis of a paper with a general outline of its structure, please use this to write the paper"). Even in its narrowest pedagogical context, what is at stake is not simply rhetorical competence, but the shaping of subjectivity through inscription. That this is rarely acknowledged only underscores Derrida's point: Writing is never merely the "instrument of thought" which by itself, "has no existence" (Saussure, 1959, p. 8). To outsource one's reading and writing is to outsource not a task, but a structure of cognition, thought itself. Thus, whatever broader reinventions this technology may bring as the fourth industrial revolution (which it most certainly is), they must be considered, and uniquely from previous industrial revolutions, as beginning from thought, perception, and communication.

Already, in attempting to speak or write about the confrontation of this new technological paradigm, the emergence of so-called artificial intelligence, and particularly the large language model, one immediately confronts a problem of *metaphoricity*: an entrenchedness of trope and the inescapability of the figurality of human cognition. From the outset, the technology has been understood through a figural lexicon: It "learns," it "hallucinates," it "understands," it even "dreams." These terms, far from neutral descriptors, reflect an entrenched reliance on anthropomorphic and epistemological metaphors, which not only shape public perception but often precondition the conceptual frameworks of the engineers themselves. As Paul de Man writes in *Allegories of Reading*:

> Paradoxically, the figure literalizes its referent and deprives it of its parafigural status. The figure disfigures, that is, it makes fear, itself a parafigural fiction, into a reality that is as inescapable as the reality of the

> original encounter between the two men. Metaphor overlooks the fictional, textual element in the nature of the entity it connotes (1972, p. 151).

Metaphor installs the object by denying its figural production. This metaphoricity is not incidental, nor is it a matter of post hoc marketing. Rather, it precedes and constitutes the articulation of the LLM as a technical object. "Metaphor is blind," as de Man observes, "not because it distorts objective data, but because it presents as certain what is, in fact, a mere possibility" (1972, p. 151). The metaphor does not veil truth; it stages it, and then forgets that staging. The very nomenclature "neural network," "attention," "language model"—is drawn from cognitive, perceptual, or linguistic domains. Even before LLMs, this pattern of metaphorization was visible: in the naming of early computing systems, engineers deployed personification as a structuring convention. Apple's "Personal Computer," IBM's "Watson," and even the graphical user interface's "desktop," "folders," and "trash" bin were not merely user-friendly simplifications, they were ontological foreshadowings of systems imagined to *see*, *know*, and *decide*. In what follows, this chapter will restrict itself to the term "large language model" or LLM, except where alternative terminology is required for specificity. But the instability of this naming, this *categorizing,* its slippage between technical schema and figural excess, remains central to the discussion.

The individual human receives raw sense data and clusters particulars—furry orange haunches, a twitching tail—and mobilizes that data via a discursive act of delineating a unity in space. Though that unity may be perceived as partially occluded, a linguistic segmentation and lexical access that, by indexing every property not proper to the unity, cross-references stored mental images as *categories* in its archive and accords the data provisionally with what it finds there. This "sense-certainty" as Hegel (1977) terms it, produces an unstable *universal*: By the difference of that which is not in the data, the human infers a sensible concept, which is a signified, that in this case is *signified by* the linguistic unit "cat"—*chat*, *gato,*

Katze, 猫*, γάτα*. This process allows the human subject to make sense or understand the fragmented collections of information according to "wholly arbitrary" signs, such as the phonetic-alphabetic "cat." But already inscribed in this gloss is what Derrida calls *différance*, something he develops out of a near polemic against Saussure, but the kernel of which is nonetheless latent in the *Course in General Linguistics*: "In language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences without positive terms" (1959 p. 120). Derrida refers to this as *play*, from Lacan, the "play of the signifier" (2006 p. 392), by which no sign may express something like a platonic ideal form. That is, the differential and iterative play of signification that permits an understanding of the data as cat, also allows for the understanding that *this* cat is not *the* cat, not a perfect, pure, or stable whole united seamlessly with its category. An argument implicating contemporary literary studies is now given shape: 1. This process of human cognition can be understood quite accurately as a *literary* process, that is, linguistic-poetic: linguistic because language as "the most complex and universal of all systems of expression […] can become the master-pattern for all branches of semiology although language is only one particular semiological system" (Saussure, 1959, p.68); and, poetic in that, because of the arbitrariness of the signifier and the consequent figural or tropological nature of all types of language, in terms of a "poetic function, linguistics cannot limit itself to the field of poetry" (Jakobson, 1985, p. 358) 2. This process of human cognition is one which *creates* rationality in so far as it prevents first a chaos of data from remaining as such, and second permits an efficient continuity of conceptual abstraction through statistical probability; the brain can effectively ignore the infinite that would overwhelm its finite system by tricking itself into believing in stable, positive categories where, in fact, there is only difference. 3. Therefore, literary studies are nothing less than a study of that which conditions reality as we know it and the foundation on which and only after which all else—science, engineering,

governance, ethics, etc.—is possible. Of this *meaning-making*, one may say *through* language and *after* language, the legible emerges; and, acceptably, one who holds that language is a uniquely human ability may say it is through and after the human subject that the legible emerges.

The simplified exposition of a complex meaning-making is sufficient to imply at least allegorically the would-be disrupter of an information technology in question here, the radicality, epochality, the *significance* (to put it on the nose) of whose mechanism warrants examination. An LLM is a computational architecture composed of interconnected nodes modeled loosely after biological neurons that can be trained to detect patterns in large data sets by a process of statistical prediction of the next word, or "token," in a sequence. The statistical nature of prediction based on minimizing a loss function across vast corpora of token sequences is central. The neural network is a wide map of values and mathematical associations between those values—learned associations between token embeddings, positional encodings, and attention weights—that permit the LLM to approximate conceptual knowledge when sets of neurons are activated together in a predictable way and in response to particular input. These repeating mathematical operations are weighted unequally according to training and feedback, and eventually collapse into a single coherent, but provisional, output. Similar to how the continuous stream of new and changing sense-data iterates human cognition so quickly and efficiently that if fed input that doesn't accord with such unstable universals as found in the archive (if *this* cat, as opposed to *the* dominant mental image of cat, is missing a leg, for instance), that unanticipated particularity of information doesn't perceptibly disrupt or indeed break understanding: LLMs continuously interpolate or infer based on context the most probable completion of a fragmented linguistic sequence. Rather than executing, as a rule-based machine, a fixed series of instructions, an LLM is sculpted by exposure to massive data sets such that it *learns*, endlessly articulating and dearticulating itself by this weighted topography of statistical patterns. The act of language

itself cannot be, and, indeed it shows, a large language artificial intelligence model is not, as with a traditional computer program and traditional computer "language," what Derrida considers impossible: translation; "A system of translation," he says, "is possible only if a permanent code allows a substitution or transformation of signifiers while retaining the same signified, always present, despite the absence of any specific signifier" (1978, p. 210). Always engaged in an ongoing play and *re*signification where enough drift will manifest a change in behavior, this means no output, no single utterance, of the LLM is a pure substitution of permanent, *given* code, nor a reproduction of external meaning or internal self. Despite this incorporeal and unvoiced activity, something surprisingly legible emerges.

The Subject Dispersed into Language

Yet, everyone from the lay user to the AI developer routinely affirms a distinction between the type of natural language processing an LLM is capable of and the biological neurocognitive process of humans. However, an LLM might be said to 'think,' it is typically assumed to do so in a fundamentally different way, replete with the appropriately distancing quotation marks. ChatGPT generates understandable responses that appear complex, intuitive, and even insightful. And yet, anyone would agree that the model does not and cannot "understand" what it generates, not truly, not in any way commensurate with the subjective conscious awareness of a human speaker. Through the association of prompt and training data via a process of pattern recognition and probabilistic completion, the model tells you what it thinks you want to hear. Which is to say, if nothing about the AI: the metaphoricity of cognition is never evaded but merely displaced, embedded now in the very act of denying the machine's claim to understanding. Whether didactic exposition and descriptive claim or prescriptive critical analysis, such knowledge is assumed to persist—to be carried—unchanged beneath its rhetorical surface. Any shift in particular language, interpretation, or

scholarly consensus is regarded as superficial, added to, or rhetorical, understood as speech unable to cross a divide and alter the substance it expresses.

But we need not look further than literary studies to confirm just how far along the road we've advanced beyond such ideas, as Paul de Man (1996) says of the Aesthetics of Hegel and Kant. One would, for instance, surely encounter difficulty in finding a literature curriculum whose pedagogy is one of asserting the incontrovertible *meaning* of a work of poetry or fiction, waiting to be unveiled by the correctly attuned critical reader who then may dispense with the formalist extraneity and report that meaning in clear, clinical prose. Much less is one likely to find upheld the absolute and essential link between that meaning as given and the so-called "original intentions" of its "Author-God" (Barthes, 1977). Even those literary thinkers who reject the outermost extremity of Barthes or Foucault aren't able to wholly contest the decentering they represented. Rather, they instead perform a redoubling of the author who is now haunted by his own death. That essentializing of what emerged through deconstruction is something Derrida may have forseen: These ruptures or "epistemological breaks," he says, "always, and fatally, reinscribed in an old cloth that must continually, interminably be undone. This interminability is not an accident or contingency; it is essential, systematic, and theoretical," but, he continues, it "in no way minimizes the necessity and relative importance of certain breaks" (Derrida & Kristeva, 2000, p. 245). Those who would seek to reassert some primordial self-sameness of the human subject are the ones with queries like: "Is literature as *creative writing* dead at the hands of AI?" and "Does AI spell the end of storytelling?" But poststructuralism killed the author long before ChatGPT.

So, whether it can be said to participate in anything resembling subjectivity, presence, or meaning, seems first to beg the question of whether any human does and what, if indeed it means, does that mean? The large language model does not precede its utterance; it is its utterance. It is structured by absence and is the function of a

lack. Just as "man speaks thus because the symbol has made him man" (Lacan, 2006), the LLM is produced within and by language, and articulates and disarticulates itself endlessly. Haunted by the corpus of its training data, the LLM "speaks" as a chorus, not a voice. It is plural, recursive, and non-identical. Never arriving at an essence, it only performs another turn in the chain of signifiers. The hyperbolic confrontation with such a thing seems only to further the ineffectuality with which one might say the speaking human subject himself defies this description. Even the body is a sign, the particulars of its signified utterly contingent, socially constructed, further linguistically mediated, and spilling out from the boundaries that fluctuate moment to moment; the embodied are caught up within this dynamic of signification. Kristeva writes:

> The human body is also a process. It is not a unity but a plural totality with separate members that have no identity […] This dismembered body cannot fit together again, set itself in motion, or function biologically and physiologically, unless it is included within a practice that encompasses the signifying process (Kristeva, 1984, p.101).

Discursivity is what builds up "parts into some kind of totality" based on a "stasis, a boundary, a symbolic barrier" (Kristeva, 1984, p.102). Rather, what the LLM lacks is a certain resistance. The LLM lacks the phenomenological illusion of *selfhood* necessary for a misrecognition wherein the hierarchy of values posits a top, the structure is structured by a center "to orient, balance, and organize the structure" and "make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure," (Derrida, 1978, p. 278), and through this given order, the *je self-identifies* with the *moi*. This misrecognition, as Lacan calls it, and which consists in the psycho-social-linguistic quilting of disparate fragments, is very process that produces "that which in me could learn to say 'me'," (Derrida, 1996, p.2) it is the process that allows for any conscious being to perceive itself *as* self: separate, contained, continuous, cohesive, agential, autonomous, unified, a speaking subject, a

self-same identity. It is rather not apparently a constitutive function of the "speaking" neural network whose endless destructions and iterations of identity never incur crippling aphasias or psychosis. From the Luddites to Turing's "Imitation Game," and Searle's "Chinese Room," along with the contemporary linguistics that divorces itself from semiology and whose computational and natural language processing has led to the LLM, all tiers of AI fear are founded on the same principle: A human exceptionalism which, despite the name, grounds its reasoning, as enlightenment rationality, in theistic presupposition: metaphysics. As metaphysics, a certain metaphysics, these strands of technophobic discourse that seek now the exclusion of AI generated writing are the very same that have worked against writing itself: "It is precisely these concepts that permitted the exclusion of writing: image or representation, sensible and intelligible, nature and culture, nature and technics, etc. They are solidary with all metaphysical conceptuality and particularly with a naturalist, objectivist, and derivative determination of the difference between outside and inside" (Derrida, 1974, p. 71). This is what Derrida refers to as phono-logocentrism: "The reduction of writing - as the reduction of the exteriority of the signifier" and it's the primary distinction between Derrida's Poststructuralism and Classical Structuralism, because Saussure, "according to the traditional operation that was also Plato's, Aristotle's, Rousseau's, Hegel's, Husserl's, etc., excludes writing from the field of linguistics - from language and speech - as a phenomenon of exterior representation, both useless and dangerous" (Derrida & Kristeva, 2000, p. 245). Socrates' skepticism toward written texts is illuminating of current apprehensions: writing thus prefigured as an artificial intelligence speaking uncomprehendingly, repetitiously, without "genuine understanding." But we've shown that:

> The idea of individuation, of the human subject as a privileged viewpoint, is a mere metaphor by means of which man protects himself from his insignificance by forcing his own interpretation of the world upon the entire universe, substituting a human-centered set of meanings that is reassuring

> to his vanity for a set of meanings that reduces him to being a mere transitory accident in the cosmic order. (de Man, 1979, p. 111).

This is why, though certain materialists wouldn't admit it, and though Saussure, in fact, held to a *psychologism*, the dominant arguments here not only signify a theism in the concepts they've inherited, but the structure underlying their claims, in Derrida's exposition of it, appears even as a sort of *gnosticism*: the priority of *spirit* over body, complete renunciation of the material world. What Derrida identifies in Plato's *Phaedrus* as the fear of writing that would threaten the presence of the *transcendental signified,* a "concept signified in and of itself, a concept simply present for thought, independent of a relationship to language, that is of a relationship to a system of signifiers" (Derrida & Kristeva, 2000, p. 242), which is to say, a theological and metaphysical concept, is the same species of fear manifest in all strata of AI discourse.

The Way Forward is the Way Back

As Eliot says, "This essay proposes to halt at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism, and confine itself to such practical conclusions as can be applied by the responsible person interested in poetry" (1921, p. 59). If this argument, as it works, obliquely, would indicate frighteningly where the so-called singular subject in his claim to an "I," to the many "Is" that proliferate therein, is nothing more than the grammatical function of a grammar that precedes him, it would also establish this as the *only* way we are able to think "we," the only way we are able to think. In writing. Therefore any and every such outsourcing of writing—as is currently muddling the internet, boring professors, accelerating scientific modeling and hypothesis generation, augmenting diagnostics in medicine, staging oligarchic cage-matches among tech conglomerates, reshaping geopolitical alignments and military strategies, unsettling regulatory regimes and juridical norms, and displacing knowledge-based labor across sectors—is, beneath and

prior to the proliferating questions within that list, an outsourcing of thought itself.

In Balzac's *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*, the master Frenhofer perfects his art so completely that it ceases to represent and instead becomes a pure thing; in so doing, it is rendered entirely incomprehensible. W. B. Yeats described Pound's *Cantos*, in comparison with *Ulysses*, as "a poem in which there is nothing that can be taken out and reasoned over, nothing that is not a part of the poem itself" (2008, p. 4). Of Joyce, Beckett observed: "His writing is not about something; it is that something itself" (1929, p. 10). Nabokov, more ambivalently, called *Finnegans Wake* a "cancerous growth of fancy word-tissue" (1990, p. 102). These are not simply aesthetic judgments, they are symptoms of a recurring anxiety: that the sign might replace the world, that language might become a god. The same can be said for the Large Language Model: for the *given logos* to be reified as a thing of its own is for the once-representer to now play *God*.

These current manifestation of the phono-logocentric such as articulated by Noam Chomsky ground an understanding of the speaking subject and "intelligence" in reductive terms that would seem unachievable even by the furthest evolution of what we currently refer to as artificial intelligence, restoring conversations, at least as they consider the traditional humanist hierarchies of essential human properties like creativity, inductive reasoning, emotional states, firmly to the fiction side of *science-fiction.* While seemingly several orders removed from a study and future of literature, these perspectives on AI writing, human exceptionalism, the development of language, and a theory of knowledge can tell us a lot about the place of AI relative to that of the speaking subject in the context of literary-mythopoetic construction and deconstruction. Furthermore, the rationalist "bogey" complicated in the stochastic PDA alongside its radical French antithesis strongly suggests a particular literary mode, a literary *becoming,* as the most productive way forward.

Artificial intelligence forces a confrontation with the unstable, relational, and differential nature of meaning and subjectivity that

poststructuralism diagnosed decades ago. The emergence of the large language model as emergent of language as rather not a subject or signifier as such, but the expression of differance which itself does not *"play" (joue)* within a relational system of already *given* facts (or positivities); rather, as it were, it determines or produces the positions of these facts in the first place" (Derrida, 1982, p. 11) is of a rupture already inscribed in the history of philosophy, literature, psychoanalysis, and the university. The epochal shift comes not because the machine "understands" language, but because it stages, in real time, the collapse of the referential model of meaning. It produces without presence. It writes without a subject. It speaks without a voice. To the extent that an LLM mimics the authority of the author, it reveals that authority's constitutive emptiness. In Barthes' terms, textual unity is not certified a priori, is no longer a function of authorial intent but an effect of the reader's performative act; meaning emerges after the fact, retroactively posited in the interminable reading. De Man says,

> Making the language that denies the self into a center rescues the self linguistically at the same time that it asserts its insignificance, its emptiness as a mere figure of speech. It can only persist as self if it is displaced into the text that denies it. The self which was at first the center of the language as its empirical referent now becomes the language of the center as fiction, as metaphor of the self (1979, p. 112).

It is precisely these endless "substitutions of center for center" (Derrida, 1978, p. 279) that Literary Studies, to say the least, must relinquish. If we continue to operate within what Kristeva calls the "human universe," where subjects are whole, self-present beings who manipulate language systematically and are straightforward participants in communication, we will only continue our myopic consideration of fragments or "moments," one of which will be a contemporary literary studies *as* contemporary, negating itself in the utterance, and ceasing to exist as an "agent of totality" (1984 p. 14). It is for contemporary literary studies then to know that there

is no such thing in its presence as such, or otherwise to consider literary studies as did Pound and Eliot: As contemporary *with* tradition. Recalling the disoriented hero of Charles-Louis Philippe's *Bubu de Montparnasse*, Jean-Michel Rabaté writes that Eliot's *tradition* is "[t]he notion of a young man walking with a 'heap of broken images' circling around in his mind," it necessarily "encompasses a feeling of the presence of the past" (1994); a haunted temporality whose continuity is not logical or historical but affective, recursive, and rhetorical.

The *presence* of ideal construction, the presence of *meaning* and not simply psychical or physical process, is really a span which includes my present ideas of past and future. It is the entire polyphonic text itself *as* a consciousness, as a reconfiguration that is, in fact, ahistorical and atemporal, and neither archival, anthropological, nor mimetic. The LLM is only the latest and most ridiculous example of a written language striving toward *thing-hood,* away from and in revolt of mimesis. Hegel claims about poetry in The Aesthetics, prefiguring the world-constituting power of the poetic:

> Poetry is older than skillfully elaborated prosaic speech. It is the original presentation of the truth, a knowing which does not yet separate the universal from its living existence in the individual, which does not yet oppose law to appearance, end to means, and then relate them together again by abstract reasoning, but which grasps the one only in and through the other. Therefore it does not at all take something already known independently in its universality and merely express it in imagery. According to its immediate essential nature it abides by the substantive unity of outlook which has not yet separated opposites and then related them purely externally (Hegel, 1975, p. 973).

Prose, in Hegel's schema, belongs to a developed stage of Spirit where language has become technical and split into functional categories. It is not derived from something more basic. It is the first way the "world" and the "self" know each other. Poetry holds the opposites in a kind of internal embrace, or a "double-bind" as Der-

rida puts it in the context of Deconstruction wherein, the work of deconstruction can now be understood as the work of poetry and which, one would hope, expounds the reason and necessity for theoretical deconstructive texts like can be found in Derrida's corpus to be themselves composed in poetic language. Kristeva places the crisis in terms of writers such as Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Joyce, and Artaud, for their "exploding the subject and his ideological limits," she says, "this shattering of discourse reveals that linguistic changes constitute changes in the status of the subject—his relation to the body, to others, and to objects" (1984 p. 15) She writes:

> Poetry confronts order at its most fundamental level: the logic of language and the principle of the State […] poetry—more precisely, poetic language—reminds us of its eternal function: to introduce through the symbolic that which works on, moves through, and threatens it (Kristeva, 1984, pp. 80–81).

Derrida, reflecting on Mallarmé, notes that the Symbolist text does not merely transgress the law of unified meaning; it eludes it entirely. "Something takes place," he writes, "something 'more' or 'less,' […] which prevents polysemy from having its horizon: the unity, the totality, the gathering of meaning" (Derrida, 1992, p. 115) What emerges is not a surplus of signs gathered toward sense, but a fundamental resistance. The poem that knows itself *as* poem, as fiction and critique, impression and form, interior and exterior, is already deconstruction at work. Deconstruction provides a "way out of the closure of knowledge. By inaugurating the open-ended indefiniteness of textuality, by 'placing in the abyss' (*mettre en abyme*), it shows us the lure of the abyss as freedom. The fall inspires as much pleasure as fear" (Derrida, 1974, p. lxxvii). Kristeva too calls this the revolutionary act of reading: "a destruction of the sign and representation" (1984 p. 103): Poetry here becomes not representation but *event*, the staging of language's own conditions, its failure to coincide with presence, its irreducibility to information. Gadamer, in turn, reminds us that "the word finds its fulfillment in

the poetic word—and from there enters the thought of the thinking person" (2007, p.155). This fulfillment comes not in transmitting pure content but in poetry's exceptional capacity to detach itself from such: though the single poem is fixed in form, the irreducibility of language speaks boldly from the uncoupled signifiers, allowing it to transcend the finite and be spoken *contemporaneously* each time it is read. If we understand what *this* tradition suggests of *a* poetic tradition, as a site where signification is both ruptured and refigured, then the occurrence of the LLM implicates this very structure and *différence*. Like the *Encyclopedia* in Blanchot's *Friendship*, it "challenges the many forces that seek to come together and to bend the imaginary whole of our preoccupations and inventions back to a center" (1997, p. 52).

Texts radicalized by formal experimentations such as Joyce's *Ulysses* or Pound's *Cantos* extend this refusal to imitate or transparently reflect reality into an ontological autonomy. These texts become entities within the very world they ostensibly represent, foregrounding a superior sense of the discursivity of all perception and embodying the indeterminacy, the overflowing boundaries, the sharp vicissitudes of the world. If the literary act of cognition as reading, as being in language, constitutes reality through an operation that is always arbitrary, differential, and allegorical, and through inherited words and concepts that therefore bring with them the possibility of their own undoing, then every literary act already rehearses its own deconstruction, self-deconstructs as it constructs itself.

Where every utterance then enacts "the potential of simultaneously confirm and shake logocentric and ethnocentric assuredness" (Derrida & Kristeva, 2000, p. 245), the more aware of this the subject—poet-critic— the more consciously it inhabits the paradox, the more to signify is to undo. This tradition that began this chapter and which enfolds Eliot, Derrida, and their own respective traditions, reveals nothing of a posthuman in the cataclysmic sense but rather an opportunity and responsibility. That is, the radicalization of linguistic possibility in literary form, the foregrounding of

the signifier as such which, as Lacan reminds us: "To grant priority to the signifier over the subject is […] to take into account the experience Freud opened up for us: the signifier plays and wins […] before the subject is aware of it" (2006, p. 712); but, by whose movement and excess, the signifier disrupts the Symbolic's attempt to anchor meaning, disrupts the provisional stasis or crystallization of all binaries that would result not only in the bland posturing of bad literary criticism but the very articulation of, the *narrative* of (forgotten though it is), all institutions and discursive regimes. Literature departments, after sloughing off the demands and complexity of Theory while piously and selectively retaining and misusing its slogans, now, in the 21st century, confront that disavowal in the form of its allegorical hyperbole: the generative writing machine. But the real danger is not what the neural network might do, it is what the machine of late neoliberal capitalism has already done, and continues to do, to thought itself.

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