From the Editor

The Eloi, AI, and Ruskin

One of the texts I most frequently teach is H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), and one of my favorite episodes from this book to discuss with my students is when the Time Traveller meets the Eloi. The accomplished man of science wanders into their world, expecting to find advancement and achievement, only to be disappointed by their mental degeneration. I talk with my students about how new technologies are often trade-offs—you get something great, but you typically must give up something in return, and how the Eloi evolved because of their preference for ease and comfort over doing things for themselves. By now it's a familiar trope in sf—the society that has grown lazy because of its over-reliance on technology, but it is a powerful scene nevertheless. And even though this scenario is now a familiar idea, humanity has not always heeded its warning.

We now face a new technology that may change our lives much like the Industrial Revolution altered human society in the nineteenth century. When ChatGPT burst onto the scene in November 2022, some tech experts voiced concern and called for a halt to the development of AI until its dangers could be assessed. However, these protests were largely ignored and grew ever fainter as our society became more and more enamored with AI: It's fun! It helps corporations make money! It writes my papers for me! Yet it may well be that we are entering into a Faustian bargain with AI, and we stand to lose far more than we will gain.

You don't have to be a luddite to be wary of AI—many risks have been well documented by experts. Even if a doomsday, Skynet-like event never happens, there are many other serious concerns that have already come to fruition: the theft of intellectual property, the borrowing of celebrities' images and voices without their permission, the creation of deepfakes to spread

misinformation and propaganda, and academic dishonesty. To be fair, there are surely upsides to this technology as well. For instance, AI holds great potential in assisting doctors to diagnose medical problems and treat patients. However, from my perspective as an educator, I am troubled by what this technology may mean to my students' education.

I understand that there was never a golden age of academic honesty. Some students are always going to do as little as possible to get by (and I have found this type of student to be in the extreme minority), and they will no doubt find a way to plagiarize, whether by using AI, buying a paper from the internet, or asking a friend if they can "borrow" one of theirs. Educators have dealt with these types of cheating for a long time. What worries me is the gradual decay of students' writing ability by the normalization and institutionalization of AI. Already I have heard professors in multiple disciplines (even English!) say words to the effect of "AI is here, so we might as well teach students how to use it." This is a sentiment I will never endorse.

Why do we write? Why do we assign essays to students? Why do we spend years and years training them to write at the college level? Because when a student writes, they take in information, process it in their minds, and then express their own ideas through language. This is how students learn, how they make information their own, how they produce new knowledge, and how they critically think about the world around them. We don't assign essays to give students busy work or to be gate keepers of some ivory-tower community; we assign writing because the struggle with words and ideas that accompanies all writing is at the heart of education. Students need instructors to guide them on how to conduct academic research, how to test the ideas of others, how to organize information into a logical order, how to choose words that will effect an appropriate tone and appeal to a particular audience, and to see how their work fits into the broader conversation of an academic discipline. To sacrifice this type of education and substitute it with instruction on how

to work a search box until the system gives the student the essay they want is a woefully misguided notion. Firstly, students don't need instruction on how to use generative AI—it's easy enough to learn in five minutes. Secondly, teaching students how to produce texts with AI so they may then replicate this experience in the corporate world is an abandonment of education in favor of job training. There is of course nothing wrong with teaching skills for particular trades, but what I mean by "education" is the ability to think for oneself, and offering students instruction in AI instead of in how to write robs them of the opportunity to learn how to think for themselves.

My own institution has already purchased a subscription to AI software for the coming academic year. This software boasts several features: it can paraphrase an assignment, produce a research plan, "help" brainstorm, generate an outline, change the tone (with just the click of a button!), give feedback (without the hassle of interacting with a human by talking to a professor or visiting the writing center), and generate citations. Now that my students will have access to this university-sanctioned technology, how will I ever persuade them to write without it? How do any of us make administrators see that making sense of an assignment sheet, creating a research plan, organizing information, or carefully choosing words to achieve the right tone for a particular audience *is* the assignment? This technology robs our students of an education. AI may create more polished writing, but at what cost?

In *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853), John Ruskin writes, "To banish imperfection is to destroy expression, to paralyze vitality. The purest and most thoughtful minds are those which love color the most. Imperfection is in some sort essential to all that we know in life." The past half-century of composition theory has said something similar, that process is more important than product, because process is what causes intellectual growth. Ruskin again:

Understand this clearly: you can teach a man to draw a straight line, and to carve it; and

to copy and carve any number of given lines or forms, with admirable speed and perfect precision; and you find his work perfect of its kind: but if you ask him to think about any of those forms, to consider if he cannot find any better in his own head, he stops; his execution becomes hesitating; he thinks, and ten to one he thinks wrong; ten to one he makes a mistake in the first touch he gives to his work as a thinking being. But you have made a man[1] of him for all that. He was only a machine before, an animated tool.

If we are going to continue to offer a liberal arts education in our universities, if we are to provide experiences that teach our students to be humans and not "animated tools[s]" or mindless Eloi, then we can't allow AI-generated texts to replace writing. It is a betrayal of everything higher education stands for.

I hope I'm wrong. I hope that future generations will look back on people like me and smile at our unfounded fears. But I worry that we are at the edge of something destructive, something that will accelerate the already decades-long decline of the humanities. AI may one day give students access to flawless (if soulless) writing, but if our universities continue to sanction its use as a "tool," then we will be producing graduates who resemble the Eloi, unable to think for themselves, prey to whatever predators may be lurking in the dark, and liable to be swept away by even shallow streams, with no one capable of doing anything about it.

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[1] Substitute "human" here.