

## Beyond Beautiful Knowledge: Reclaiming the Humanities for the Humanity to Come

Marina Schwimmer

*Université du Québec à Montréal*

In her article, “Excellent sheep or wild ducks? Reclaiming the humanities for beautiful knowledge,” Naoko Saito claims that American philosophy, and Dewey’s pragmatism and Thoreau’s transcendentalism in particular, offer fruitful lines of thought in order to rethink the idea of useful knowledge and, hence, the place of the humanities in higher education. I really appreciate the invitation to “cross boundaries” and think “on the threshold,” remaining in the uneasy space in which, like Nietzsche’s tightrope walker, we must be careful not to fall on one side or the other, a space where dualities are surpassed and something new might happen.

The first line of thought is embodied by Dewey’s philosophy of praxis, his transgression of the boundaries between the pure and the applied, the hard and the soft, the useful and the useless, and so on. By bringing occupations into the school, Dewey opens the possibility of making them a humanizing activity in the same way traditional humanities were meant to be. More importantly, by rejecting the superiority of theoretical knowledge, he emphasizes the importance of intelligence first. The second line of thought is embodied by Thoreau’s art of living, his transgression of the boundaries between the material and the spiritual, the high and the low, the known and the unknown. By spiritualizing nature, Thoreau raises the possibility of thinking about knowledge as conversion and as revelation, as a lived thing that can transform you. I agree that these sorts of transgressions are important if we ever want change to occur.

At the end of her article, Saito claims that “the humanities *must be* the site for the cultivation of Man Thinking, for cultivating the art of the criticisms of criticisms.” This art is described earlier in the article as a creative critique of our critical methods and seems to refer once again to the quest for a middle space. That is to say that in order to transcend boundaries, the university

should encourage the interpenetration of liberal learning and daily occupations, humanities and science, productive and non-productive activities. Hence, the idea seems to be to preserve the project of the humanities but to transcend its attachment to the enlightenment by transgressing rationalist and instrumental tendencies and opening a space where a multiplicity of languages (such as the language of science, of art, of literature, of labor, etc.) may meet, interact, and form the person. It is through this type of formation that dualities, and critiques, may be surpassed.

I would like to reflect on this idea of the university as a place “for the criticism of criticism.” In the current neoliberal context, where criticism is often only a mean(s) to enhance innovation and productivity,<sup>1</sup> I welcome this call. However, I still wonder to what extent the conception of *Man thinking* and the *criticism of criticisms* as untamed and wild thinking is able to function “without subjugating itself to the global economy,” as Saito suggests. Can this type of thinking, located on the boundaries of multiple languages, really be used to resist the current force of neoliberalism? What kind of Thought is required to resist it effectively?

The activity that best exemplifies what happens on the boundaries of languages is translation. Students should not be subjected to only one type of language, because this is what limits, constrains, tames thinking. The natural exposure to multiple languages should contribute to humanization in a higher, richer, less constrained way than traditional humanism has tended to. I am sympathetic to this. However, I would like to offer another line of thought as well.

Derrida’s work on the place of the humanities in the university might help further the discussion. In his talk entitled “L’université sans condition” (“The university without condition”<sup>2</sup>), Derrida claims that the role of the university, in its universal dimension, is to deconstruct the social semantics ideologically inscribed in our history. Deconstruction should be the university’s first responsibility because it provides tools of resistance and subversion that may help students acknowledge and resist the colonization of certain kinds of languages, hegemonic ones, in the first place. It is important to specify that engaging in this kind of thinking, namely deconstruction, does not only entail

critique: it is performative. By unveiling certain traces that history has concealed, deconstruction destabilizes the meaning of the things under study and creates a vacancy that then needs to be filled again. New meanings become possible, necessary even; that is to say that meaning can and must be performed. It becomes a responsibility. And in this space of responsibility, the availability of other languages, as Saito has proposed, becomes particularly relevant.

Reflecting on the role of the humanities, Derrida insists on the place and role of the professor. It is the professor, through his or her faith, who can make such a space of resistance and creation possible. As Derrida puts it, to profess, as professors do, is to declare openly a belief, a faith. It is a public commitment that engages the one professing. This implies a relationship with transcendence. However, unlike Thoreau, this transcendence is not in things, in nature, down here. It is in time, in a moment still to come, as if it had been promised but forever postponed, and *as if* this supposed promise was calling for our engagement. For Derrida, the profession of the professor should entail an engagement, a commitment to a higher truth, without condition, without compromise. The faithful professor should do "*as if*" the university was to become what it was always meant to be, as it was dreamt to be: independent, sovereign, uncompromised by any form of power. The modern university was meant to be a place of freedom, of resistance, a place where every utterance would be possible, where everything could be critiqued, even the very notion of critique itself: a true *public space*, a space for uncompromised *thought*. In this sense, Derrida argues, the modern university should be a space for active deconstruction and performative creation. It should be a place where knowledge is shared, but also and foremost, a place where new ideas can irrupt.

According to Saito, occupations should be part of the university curriculum because they would provide different languages to look at and think about the world. According to Derrida, they could indeed be part of the curriculum, but for the purpose of deconstruction. It is the very notion of occupation, work, labor (*travail*) that should be deconstructed to begin with. Without doing so, we remain blind to the ways it functions in general, to the ways it permeates our thought and our language, to the performative action of the discourses it

relies on. It might be important to specify here that, when discussing the notion of work, Derrida speaks in the context of a time when intellectuals had been announcing “the end of work” for some time and he is deconstructing the meaning of work in a society of leisure. He is trying to disrupt its usual meaning so that new ones may emerge in the society to come.

For example, Derrida underlines the fact that work, or labor, is not only a praxis, not only the action of a worker; there are layers of meaning inscribed in the notion of work. In Antiquity, the word means toil, the difficulty of the work, and has nothing to do with the work being produced or accomplished. But at least since the Middle Ages, the idea of work has been associated with a market, with the creation of value. A worker (*travailleur*) is not considered as such if he or she is not paid for his work. A student who works sixty hours a week on his or her thesis, no matter the toil, is not considered a worker. Derrida then also remarks that some modern kinds of work, such as writing, are associated with a different form of production. They produce something with an original signature (we talk of “Derrida’s work,” for example). Deconstructing the meaning of work, then, provides a critical foundation that may render the learning of multiple languages in the university a more transgressive practice.

---

1 Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

2 Jacques Derrida, *L'Université Sans Condition* (Paris: Galilée, 2001).