On Naming the Digital Humanities

1 Preamble

Chapter 2 questions the term "digital humanities" by drawing on the philosophical background of Derrida's monograph *On the Name*, where he notes the following: "The name: What does one call thus? What does one understand under the name of name? And what occurs when one gives a name? What does one give then? One does not offer a thing, one delivers nothing, and still something comes to be, which comes down to giving that which one does not have"[1]. This quotation makes clear why the act of naming presents a challenge and makes us question what is at stake in a cultural term like "digital humanities".

The first section[2] of Chapter 2 presents an inquiry into what happens to this expression when translated into the French expressions "humanités numériques" and "humanités digitales". What is perhaps the most significant revelation concerning this translation is not the alternating final word "numérique/digital" but the return of the outmoded French word "humanités" – pointing notably to the body and flesh. The second section[3] of Chapter 2 begins by focusing on Turing's article "Computing Machinery"[4]. When considered alongside the work of Ada Lovelace and Federico Luigi Menabrea[5], Turing's article brings forth notions related to the mind. Chapter 2 expands on this and combines the concepts of spirit, brain and unthought.

This latter issue allows for a closer examination of what is at stake in how two languages introduce the contrasting mind-spirit vocabulary in their translation of DH: Hebrew refers to *Ruaḥ Digitalit*, literally the "digital spirit" even if there are online claims that this expression is "untranslatable"[6]. One should

1 J. Derrida, *On the name*, T. Dutoit (trans.), Stanford University Press, 1995, p. XIV.

2 The first part of this chapter is partly translated in French from Clivaz, "Lost in Translation ?" (2017), with the kind permission of the editor.

3 The second part of this chapter is partly translated in French from Clivaz, "Thinking About the 'Mind' in Digital Humanities", with the kind permission of the editor.

4 Turing, "Computing Machinery".

5 Lovelace, "Notes on Menabrea's Sketch"; Menabrea, "Notions sur la Machine Analytique".

6 See Galina, "Geographical and linguistic diversity". At the time of writing, the website of the Israelite DH association, *Ruaḥ Digitalit*, does not work (http://thedigin.org; inaccessible at least since 20.01.18). The website Elotroalex gives the following definition of this name : "*Ruaḥ Digitalit* is the untranslatable name of an initiative for the promotion of

not forget that *Ruaḥ* is used to designate the Spirit in the Hebrew Bible (see Gen 1,2). As a counterpoint, German makes use of the term *digitale Geisteswissenschaften*, or sometimes *der digitale Geist*, translatable as "the digital spirit" to describe our times. The work of Menabrea, Lovelace and Turing enlightens aspects of these Hebrew and German translations of the DH label.

Numerous scholars have previously attempted, or are now in process of attempting, to write about the historical roots of the emergence of DH[7]. Aurélien Berra points out that this is a collective, long-term task[8]. Chapter 2 presents a complementary, genealogical approach by focusing on the naming issue and what is at stake in the DH label and some translations thereof.

2 Part One: *Lost in Translation ?* Digital Humanities' French Odyssey

2.1 *Introduction*

Discussed in print for the first time in an article published in 2004[9] (though already present at a 2002 online conference[10]), and analyzed endlessly in meetings and conferences, the label "digital humanities", or DH, has been rapidly associated with academic positions, degrees, centers, laboratories and research projects[11]. However, this popularity does not necessarily indicate another form of Anglophone, linguistic colonialism. Indeed, this chapter aims to demonstrate the importance of drawing attention to the evolution of this new label in other languages.

Section 1 seeks to highlight and retrieve the outdated French word *humanités* by focusing on the translation of the label "digital humanities". Indeed, it is the word *humanités* that is the most significant element of the two different French translations: *humanités numériques* and *humanités digitales*. While the introduction provides clues as to the general debate surrounding the expression, Section 2 summarizes the arguments contained within the French-speaking sphere concerning the words *numérique* and *digital*. Finally, Section

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digital humanities in Israel, with the vision to become a local node in the vast and growing network of the Digital Humanities" (http://workshops.elotroalex.com/beirut_a/neatline/fullscreen/dh-orgs#records/52).

7 See notably with Jones and Nyhan – Flinn, *Computation and the Humanities*; McCarty, *Humanities Computing*; Turner, *Aux sources de l'utopie numérique*.

8 Berra, "Pour une histoire des humanités numériques", p. 621.

9 Kirschenbaum, "What Is Digital Humanities", p. 56.

10 Johnson, "Mapping the Humanities", <https://sydney.edu.au/arts/staff/publications/ian.johnson.pdf>; see for more details footnote 46 on p. 47. Thank you to Amos Bairoch for this reference.

11 See Clivaz, "Common Era", p. 41.

3 presents an etymological inquiry into the outdated French word *humanités*. In 2009, Patrick Svensson discerned a "discursive turn" between "humanities computing" and "digital humanities", and he proposed that the term "digital" had itself become an object of study[12]. Seven years later, in the second volume of *Digital Debates*, Steven Jones put forth the term "eversion" to qualify this turn:

> In one sense, the new digital humanities is humanities computing, everted. [...] The term also reflected a larger change : from implying a separation between the stuff of the humanities – manuscripts, books, documents, maps, works of art of all kinds, other cultural artefacts – and computing, to more of a mixed reality, characterized by two-way interactions between the two realms, physical artefacts and digital media[13].

This notion is perceived somewhat less gently by Bernard Stiegler, who made popular the notion of *disruption* to qualify the digital turn. This is presented in Chapter 2, part 1, in comparison to Jones' *eversion* vocabulary. Whether there is fear or joy when confronted with the meaning of digital humanities – or digital studies for Stiegler – Chapter 2 aims to unearth more layers by examining what occurs to "digital humanities" when it is translated. Indeed, there is *resistance* at the heart of this label, which often remains in English even inside the expressions of different languages, for example at the Austrian DH center (*Austrian Center for Digital Humanities*)[14] or in the French *Manifeste des digital humanities* 2010[15].

2.2 *The French-speaking Odyssey of "Humanités Digitales" versus "Humanités Numériques"*

The French expression *humanités digitales* emerged simultaneously in Bordeaux and Lausanne respectively[16], and coexists with the more common translation *humanités numériques*. *ThatCamp* 2013 in St-Malo[17] saw close discussion focused on *humanités digitales* and how this phrse often relates to the fingers, the hand, and the body in French. This notion has recently been convincingly

12 Svensson, "Humanities Computing", §2.
13 Jones, "The Emergence of the Digital", <http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/52>.
14 ACDH, <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/acdh/>.
15 Dacos, "Manifeste ", <http://tcp.hypotheses.org/318>.
16 See notably Cormerais–Gilbert, *Etudes digitales*, p. 13-15, 215-227 et 251-268 ; Le Deuff, "10 raisons"; Collectif, "Humanités numériques", §1-2; Clivaz, "Common era", p. 52-53.
17 Collectif, "Humanités numériques".

supported by Le Deuff, Cormerais and Gilbert[18], even if, generally speaking, *humanités numériques* is more widely preferred.

2.3 *The Term "Humanités" and Its Forgotten Meanings*

Interestingly, the outmoded French word *humanités* is making a linguistic come back with regard to designating the *sciences humaines,* as in the title of the new French review, *Les Cahiers de l'Agora: revue en humanités*[19]. Having fallen out of common usage over the last few decades, the plural was commonly used in the 19th century to designate Classical training at school, excluding Philosophy[20]. However, during the Middle Ages, this plural term is used with a range of meanings, including the body, or in reference to sexual organs (Adam, in the Garden of Eden, covers *ses humanités*)[21]. An interesting 16th century example can be found in Rabelais' work relating to the body: "Pourquoy plus toust ne transportons nous nos humanitez en belle cuisine de Dieu?"[22].

The faint memory of such meanings can be found sporadically at later stages, for example during the 19th century in the "counter-Academy dictionnary" by Louis Barré: the *Complément du dictionnaire de l'Académie* (1842)[23]. A contemporary example can be found in the title of an article written by the psychiatrist Marie-Rose Moro: "L'infinie matière des humanités. Corps, espace, temps, au féminin pluriel"[24]. It is of course particularly interesting to observe the French exhuming an outmoded word to express something of the digital novelty and a term that brings in itself an old memory of the body, of the flesh. The French language is helpful in assisting one to overcome the uncomfortable feeling provoked by the "immaterial material documents", as expressed by Olender in Chapter 1[25].

The word *humanités* could become even more significant if at a certain point we begin to speak about the digitized humanities, or simply about humanities again, instead of digital humanities. Such an evolution might occur, if one looks at the evolution of the expression "digital computer" which was in common usage during the fifties, but it has been now been replaced by the

18 Cormerais – Gilbert, "Introduction"; Le Deuff, *Les humanités digitales*.

19 *Les Cahiers d'Agora, revue en humanités*, <https://www.u-cergy.fr/fr/laboratoires/agora/cahiers-d-agora.html>.

20 Société des grammairiens, "Humanité", p. 705.

21 Godefroy, "Humanité", vol. IV, p. 526.

22 Rabelais, *Le Quart livre des faitcs et dicts héroïques*, p. 306.

23 Barré, "Humanité", "Humaniste", p. 586.

24 Moro, "L'infinie matière des humanités. Corps, espace, temps, au féminin pluriel".

25 Olender, *Un fantôme*, p. 28.

single latter word "computer"[26]. When humanities finally becomes almost entirely digitized, perhaps it is safe to bet that we will once again speak simply about "humanities" in English or about *humanités* in French, thus making this outmoded word again meaningful through the process of cultural digitization.

3 Part Two: Reading Alan Turing and Considering the Role of the Mind-Spirit in Digital Humanities

3.1 *Introduction*

As mentioned in the preamble, Section 2 uses Alan Turing's 1950 article "Computing Machinery" as a starting point to scrutinize the notion of mind-spirit. Published in the journal *Mind*, reputed for philosophy, this article has been regularly defended against the criticism that it is overly epistemological and philosophical, and not mathematical enough[27]. Turing first examines how a machine might really *think*, for example by adding a random element to the computing process[28]. He then wrestles with a range of arguments that oppose the idea of a computer being able to think. Central to Turing's argument here is Ada Lovelace's objection. He writes, "Our most detailed information of Babbage's Analytical Engine comes from a memoir by Lady Lovelace (1842). In it she states, "The Analytical Engine has no pretensions to *originate* anything. It can do whatever we know how to order it to perform' (her italics). This statement is quoted by Hartree (1949)"[29]. Section 2 looks at past research by Lovelace and Menabrea into the topic of the mind. Section 3 presents the dual English meanings of mind-spirit, in contrast to the French which has just one word, *esprit*; given these differences, the concept of "unthought" needs to be considered alongside these different meanings. These considerations contribute to a deeper understanding regarding what is at stake between DH and the concept of mind-spirit.

3.2 *(Re)reading Ada Lovelace in 1950 and Today*

The exact impact and role of Ada Lovelace remains disputed, even if she is at the very least recognized as the author of the "first algorithm conceived for a computing machine" by a rather reticent scholar such as Thomas Misa[30].

26 Williams, *Computing with Electricity*, p. 310.
27 Abramson, "Turing's Responses to Two Objections".
28 Turing, "Computing Machinery", p. 438.
29 Turing, "Computing Machinery", p. 447.
30 Misa, "Charles Babbage", p. 12.

Given this context, it is all the more important to read Lovelace's text itself. However, neither Valeria Aurora, co-founder of the *Ada Initiative*[31], nor Alan Turing seem to have done exactly this, as Section 2 demonstrates. By reading Lovelace's text, one is able to sense that her status as a woman imposed limitations and even self-censure, since she presents herself on the cover as an anonymous figure, "the translator", with just her three initials given in some places in the notes[32].

If Turing had read Lovelace's text, he would have seen that she reaches the very same point that he does: it is impossible to predict now whether a machine would be able to create something or not – we would have to wait for future discoveries. This is Turing's exact conclusion[33]. In Lovelace's terms: "in considering any new subject, there is frequently a tendency, first, to *overrate* what we find to be already interesting or remarkable; and, secondly, by a sort of natural reaction, to *undervalue* the true state of the case, when we do discover that our notions have surpassed those that were really tenable"[34]. She is even more prudent than Menabrea, who clearly divides machine and human capacities, by keeping the faculty of reasoning for the human mind[35].

Lovelace's famous objection, as described by Turing, should rather be referred to as Menabrea's objection[36]. Clearly, Turing goes one step further by adding the brain to the discussion, bestowing upon it "Computing machinery" and the impression of reducing the mind to the brain[37]. In a subsequent 1951 radio lecture he makes the issue all the more complex:

> I certainly hope and believe that no great efforts will be put into making machines with the most distinctively human, but non-intellectual characteristics; such as the shape of a human body; for it appears to me to be quite futile to make such attempts and their results would have something like the unpleasant quality of artificial flowers. Attempts to produce a thinking machine seem to me to be in a different category. The whole thinking process is still rather mysterious to us, but I believe that the attempt to make a thinking machine will help us greatly in finding out how we think ourselves[38].

31 Aurora, "Rebooting", p. 236.
32 Lovelace, *Notes on Menabrea's Sketch of the Analytical Engine*.
33 Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence", p. 455.
34 Lovelace, *Notes on Menabrea's Sketch*, p. 722.
35 Menabrea, "Notions sur la Machine Analytique", p. 352.
36 Menabrea, "Notions sur la Machine Analytique", p. 375.
37 Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence", p. 454-455.
38 Turing, "Can Digital Computers Think?", p. 8.

Turing's point of view – to propose a thinking machine to better understand our own complexity – does not seem to have been really heard, especially when one looks for example at the robot Erica, the Japanese robot news presenter that has been designed to look like a human[39].

3.3 *Mind, Brain, Spirit, Unthought: in Quest of the "Esprit" Labels*

The complete absence of the "spirit" register in Turing's reflections is all the more striking considering Vannevar Bush, who just before mentions the spirit in his milestone article "As we may think" (1945). Bush maintains a distinction between mind and brain but admits that artificial intelligence could beat the mind at certain points: "The human mind operates by association. […] Selection by association, rather than indexing, may yet be mechanized. One cannot hope thus to equal the speed and flexibility with which the mind follows an associative trail, but it should be possible to beat the mind decisively in regard to the permanence and clarity of the items resurrected from storage"[40]. The spirit receives a specific role in Bush's conception: "presumably man's spirit should be elevated if he can better review his shady past and analyze more completely and objectively his present problems"[41].

Section 3 attempts to understand the absence of "spirit" in Turing's thought by examining his particular contribution along with this one of Ada Lovelace. By revisiting the emergence of DH through Turing's 1950 article, Milad Doueihi was perhaps not expecting to highlight the duality of Turing and Lovelace. However, this is the happy byproduct of academic inquiry: in "Computing Machinery", Turing has perhaps his fiercest debate with a woman and both figures are meaningful in terms of social oppression related to the gender issues prevalent in both of their respective periods. To reconsider the emergence of DH from the perspectives of the Lovelace-Turing pair endows one with a new view of the DH landscape.

By facing the mystery and complexity of the mind-spirit in its relationship to the brain, it is useful to consider Wordsworth's long poem of 1805 (a verse of which, interestingly, is quoted in the very first Apple slogan): "Newton… a mind forever voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone"[42]. The poem evokes not only the spirit but unthought, that which we cannot or do not have to think

39 See <http://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1082408/robot-humanoide-erica-japon-journal-television-intelligence-artificielle>.

40 Bush, "As we May Think", p. 6.

41 Bush, "As we May Think", p. 12.

42 Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, <http://www.bartleby.com/145/ww289.html>; Kindle edition, l. 62-63.

about[43]. Here, poetics acts fundamentally in articulating diverse dimensions that are very dissimilar. Nowadays, unthought can for example be described as "nonconscious cognition(s)". This stands at the core of Katherine Hayles' *Unthought*: "'Unthought' may also be taken to refer to recent discoveries in neuroscience confirming the existence of nonconscious cognitive processes inaccessible to conscious introspection but nevertheless essential for consciousness to function"[44].

Whenever we use a poetic or a neuroscientific approach, we need to be flexible in the conception of the relationship between mind, spirit, brain and unthought. Profound changes of paradigms and conceptions of the human are on the horizon; indeed, when one looks to the notable work of the biologist Scott Gilbert, the notion of the individual person is itself questioned[45]. From a literary perspective, Section 3 underlines to what degree Nathalie Sarraute was a precursor in her perceptions regarding the concept of unthought, specifically in reference to her *Tropismes* (1939) and *L'Ere du soupçon* (1956), texts which describe how much we are affected by unconscious movements and emotions[46]. All these observations are further explored in Chapter 3 to decipher the conditions of the authorial "I" in digital culture, reliant on the *for intérieur*, the inner shelf.

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43 Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, <http://www.bartleby.com/145/ww289.html>; Kindle edition, l. 18 and 138-140.

44 Hayles, *Unthought*, p. 1.

45 Gilbert et al., "Symbiosis as a Source of Selectable Epignetic Variation".

46 Sarraute, *L'Ere du soupçon*, p. 59.