Rhymes and Reasons and Zeroes and Ones: Situating 'AI Poetry'

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of artificial intelligence and poetry, tracing its historicity and exploring its implications for the future. Beginning with the question, "Can AI write poetry?" the aim is not to provide an answer but to situate the query within the historical evolution of poetics. Traditionally, poetry was perceived as divinely inspired, rooted in ethics and communal values. However, with technological advancements—from the advent of writing and printing to the rise of digital media—poetry has undergone significant transformations. Today, poetry is shaped by algorithms, thriving on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, where its aesthetic aligns with shareability and instant consumption rather than ethical or divine poetics.

The digital age has further individualized poetry, severing it from its social and material contexts. Yet, this paper argues that such transformations align with poetry's essence: to evolve through its encounters. By exploring AI as a poetic medium, akin to experimental traditions like Oulipo, this study highlights AI's potential to redefine poetic expression. Far from signaling the end of human creativity, AI offers new horizons for multimodal, interactive, and individualized poetics. Ultimately, the paper contends that questioning AI's role in poetry reflects our historical moment and invites a reimagining of poetic possibilities in the digital age.

Keywords: AI Poetry, Algorithmic Poetics, Digital Reproduction, Technological Evolution, Multimodal Creativity

In the beginning is a word and the word is a prompt which AI makes into a Jackson Pollock, a Shakespearean Sonnet or a conversation between world leaders while playing minecraft. Our technological prowess has increased exponentially in a matter of years and there is no reason to believe that it will ever decelerate. In this digital frenzy, a moment of respite to theorize and understand the present is hard to afford, but the past can always be engaged with to make claims about the future. To that end, this paper focuses its attention on AI poetry. The starting point of this paper is the question "Can AI write poetry?" The aim is not to answer the question but to understand its historicity and to explore what it can mean. Once its historicity is established, the future of AI poetry can be imagined.

To a 21st Century reader, the question whether AI can write a poem would not seem unnatural. However, a most noteworthy contrast with our conception of poetry is with the very roots of literature. Many centuries ago, the epic poets asked the Gods or Muses to inspire them to write poems; they were the "transmitter of a divine spark" (Griswold). This divinity in poetry is not a symptom of the "pagan" tendency to attribute a deity to natural phenomenon. In fact, as late as 731 AD, Venerable Bede, wrote that Caedmon learned the art of poetry by the grace of God. This conception is in jarring contrast with one that can expect a piece of technology to write poetry.

The place of literature has changed. Here is another point of contrast: in the Middle Ages, there was no such category as "Literature." What we call poems now, "under the definitions of Medieval critics…. [were] not literature but ethics" (Allen xiii). This poetic ethic, J B Allen shows, has a "sense of social hierarchy and an *answering sense* of hierarchy of styles" (21; emphasis added). Therefore, poetics of Medieval Literature always had a social component. This "answering sense" has been present across the history of poetry. In the poetics of the age of social media, the social component ironically does not really exist. The social context, what Walter Benjamin called the "cult of beauty" (Benjamin 224), within which a work of art gained its authenticity and value is lost. In our time, poetry has come to platforms like instagram and prominent poets have millions of followers. The style of much of the poetry that is on instagram answers to the "Algorithm". It is not ethical poetics but algorithmic poetics - often accompanied by a doodle and background music. Poets who do not write on Instagram primarily, Ocean Vuong and even Kafka for example, are still a part of this cult of algorithm as their work is reproduced as particular "aesthetic" and "relatable" quotes which circulate online on platforms like Tumblr, Instagram and Twitter endlessly, each getting hundreds of thousands of likes. This is art disembodied not only from social contexts but from itself. Each work of art is itself raw material for however many posts one can generate from it. This is a step further from *l'art pour l'art,* it is art for social media points' sake. Under the current cultural order, poetry is far from ethics and from divinity. The poetics of this age then becomes the poetics of Tiktok: easy to comprehend sharable poems meant for quick consumption. In this age of digital reproduction, it is easier to imagine an utterance like "Can AI write poetry?" A classical or medieval understanding of poetry simply does not produce such a question.

How did this change come about? It can be traced in many ways and to do so exhaustively would be beyond the scope of this paper. However, this change can broadly be understood through poetry's relationship with technology.

The advancements in technology have been integral to our understanding of poetry. This starts not with the advent of computers but of writing, specifically with poetry becoming a written form of art. Oral literature was less complex and analytical (Ong and Hartley 38) than what we know as literature today. It was closer to "lifeworld" (Ong and Hartley 41) and lacked abstract thinking and representation. Writing creates distance and ambiguity and is not as participatory. There is immediacy and "homeostasis" (Ong and Hartley 46) in oral poetry which is lost to language since the rise in literacy. Ostensibly simple poems like Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" would be as foreign to an oral culture as "Paradise Lost." With time, writing became more prevalent and came the rise in manuscripts. As such, the manuscript was an artifact which was owned and produced by the community. The act of reading itself was a rite of initiation into the "cult of ethics." The adoption of printing made books more widely available and therefore the shared marginal space was lost. In our time, the margin still is a space for interpretation but it has shifted from a social context to an individualistic one. A second hand book with marginal scribblings is now more valuable simply because the current owner now has access to the individualistic interpretation of the previous owner. The aesthetic value of the commodity increases. In fact, there are some books that come with printed marginalia from the characters from the book . This makes the book an aesthetic object to be owned, instead of a shared artifact. In other words, our relationship to the materiality of literature itself has become highly individualized.

The effect of printing needs to be understood in a bit more detail. It was accompanied with ideological changes. The adoption of printing changed the world in many dimensions. "Reformation would have been impossible or would have had little chance of popular acceptance without the rapid spread of typography" (Cole 327). It is through the Protestant Reformation that the "the older religion of ends and otherworldly gives way to a new rationalization of the inner worldly means" (Jameson 73). As such, Protestantism was the "vanishing mediator" between the old and new values. Rather concomitantly, "Classical antiquity [was] brought to the notice of all who [could] read as a result of the development of the press" (Febvre and Martin 273). In other words, printing, in the flux of history, played an essential role in the rising Humanism, individualism and the values that, in time, gave rise to Capitalism. The readership grew more inclusive in the Victorian Era with reprinting of novels in a single volume because of the "growing cultural democratization and the celebration of "useful knowledge"" (Flint 24). The cheaper serially published works, like those of Dickens, provided "a ready vehicle for advertising, which knitted the novel itself more tightly to a burgeoning commodity culture" (Flint 186). Affordable printing and related technological advancements created a whole new and prominent place for books in the economy. Readership, thereby, was democratized by printing. At the time, writing itself, however, still enjoyed a degree of exclusivity and worldliness. It was an "ideological and material institution composed of educational, critical, and journalistic relays" which reached its peak during Modernism (O'Hara 184). After modernism, with Death of the Author and poststructuralism, the idea of a genius mind behind the text was largely dismantled. However, one more advancement was needed before Literature became what it is today.

On 19th November 2007, the launch of Kindle heralded a surge of eBooks. The materiality of the book is now becoming an "object we are starting to miss, even before it is gone" (Burnham 174). Amazon also concurrently launched its eBook publishing platform which made it possible for anyone to send their writings into the market. Since the 2000s, social media has been growing rapidly as well. As mentioned earlier, it is easier to find an audience now than ever before. Literature is thoroughly democratized. As a result of this historical development, the study of literature today "is expected to produce job-ready, accredited graduates, rather than to disseminate ideas. It must prove its financial worth" (O'Hara 184). The institution of literature is thoroughly colored by the market.

As literature breaks its ties with Authors, Cults of Beauty or Ethics and gets involved with the market and grows democratic, the divinity of poetry gives way to the Algorithm and makes it possible to wonder whether AI could write it. This technological history shows that this question does not concern AI or poetry but is a symptom of our historical situation. However, to be dismayed by this would be to misunderstand the lesson of this history. The simple lesson here is: Poetry *becomes* through its encounters.

When it meets the tongue, when it meets the parchment, when it meets the press, and even the digital. Poetry changes. To bring stasis to Poetry would be to deny its essence. If we accept that it is in the nature of poetry to change, we can have a more positive outlook. A better question to ask would be: "what can poetry do through its encounters with AI?" One of the major reasons behind the dismissal of things that AI writes is the lack of sentiment and passion behind the work. This makes Plato the greatest defender of poetry as he linked it inextricably to passions. However, AI can bring quite a lot to poetry.

As of now, AI systems like ChatGPT follow an algorithm when they generating poetry, here is an excerpt of a poem that ChatGPT generated when asked to write a poem that does not rhyme:

Using an algorithm to write poetry is not something unheard of. As Milman Parry argues "Homer (or the Homeric poet) was entirely dependent on the tradition and that he added little or nothing of his own to the stock of epic formulae" (Parry xliv). Parry's use of "formula" is rooted in tradition. It is a set of rules which the bards followed to produce the epic. Likewise, ChatGPT's poetics is also rooted in the poetic tradition of the Digital Age, the tiktok poetics, with its simple pretty sounding and instantly comprehensible lines. Clearly, just asking an AI to write poems would not do much, one could follow Plato and ask how many times is such a poem removed from reality. Instead, AI could be used as a medium of doing poetry.

The digital space has done more to poetry than Algorithmising it. It has made language "completely fluid; it's lifted off the page and therefore able to be poured into so many different forms and take so many different shapes and really be molded and sculpted in a way that wasn't possible before" (Paris 190). The computer has "a distinct ability "to model, experiment, manipulate, juxtapose, interconnect, and synthesize the dimensions of experience"" (Shackelford 100). Following this, poets like Mencía have explored this multimodal, immersive and interactive poetics all the way back in the late 90s. Since then, these powers of the computer have only grown stronger and the Internet has become the dominant cultural substrate. The Internet is, as Burnham shows, our unconscious. "It knows us, and knows what we know, and even knows what we don't know we know (which is to say, again, our unconscious)" (Burnham 21). Its access to our subjectivity gives it more power than just efficient advertising. It can, with help of an AI, create poems tailored for a particular individual, as opposed to wealthy patrons and distant Beatrices. This hyper individualistic poetics may as well be the next step in the evolution and disembodiment of poetry.

AI can also be used experimentally, the movements like Concrete poetry and Oulipo and Concrete poetry do not convey their effect by the text primarily but use the text to experiment. In a similar vein, AI can be used as a highly capable medium by the poets to create new poetry. That would be the true art of the digital age. This claim of such a poetics to humanness is not much different from Tristian Tzara's poetics of chaotic reassembling of randomly cut out words from newspapers. They are both appropriate to their time.

To reiterate, the history of poetry has taught us that poetry changes significantly when it encounters technological advancements. To ask if it can be written by an AI is not only a symptom of our individualistic and commodified understanding of literature but it also ignores poetry's historicity. It's a question which denies poetry its very essence. Instead, we should wonder what new poetic horizons are now open to us.

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