

Imam Baksh

The World Poetry Champion

It is the afternoon of October 15th, 2021. At a podium almost as tall as she is, Diana del Angel is describing a mass murder and its subsequent coverup and exposure. Her quiet, clipped voice lends inescapable credibility to her narrative. Shambaugh House, home of the International Writing Program, is silent as it listens to factual horrors that are simply wrenching to anyone with a soul.

No literary imagination came up with these cruelties, but the tale ignites emotion, because of the writer's art in telling it. Diana skillfully chooses which parts of the dreadful narrative to share with us. Moments like one victim's wife finding out about his death when she sees his mutilated face on social media.

The right details make a story coil and grow in the base of the reader's skull. But how would a writer know what those details are?

Stanislaw Lem, whose 100th birthday we are celebrating in Iowa City this year, once wrote in his book *Cyberiad* of the great constructor Trurl creating a machine that could write poetry. In tackling the challenge, the engineer had an epiphany, which was:

The program found in the head of an average poet...was written by the poet's civilization, and that civilization was in turn programmed by the civilization that preceded it, and so on to...the primordial chaos of the cosmic deep. Hence in order to program a poetry machine, one would first have to repeat the entire Universe from the beginning—or at least a good piece of it.

A human author crafts provocative images by harnessing specific personal and localized experiences. John D MacDonald, for instance, once evocatively described the stain under a broken air-conditioner as being shaped like the lower half of Texas. Can a robot mind know that a stain would never be shaped like the rectangular state of Kansas? Not in today's world.

Those of you who have read *Cyberiad* doubtless see the flaw in my argument, however. Because in Lem's satire, Trurl and his entire society, which includes poets, are themselves robots. Human preferences *can* be reduced to data points and as much as we consider human experience to be infinite, our literary preferences can indeed be mapped. One day, an A.I. will be able to use those charts to sail the most scenic routes between our emotions.

Let's shift back a bit. It is the evening of May 11th, 1997. Deep Blue, a computer, is attempting to defeat a world chess champion for the first time. That champion, a human named Gary Kasparov, chooses to play a defense that has a known weakness. But Kasparov is banking on the computer not being willing to make an immediate sacrifice for future gain. But, by coincidence, the programmers feeding data to Deep Blue had taught it the path to that reward just that morning. For the first time in history, the inventiveness of the human champion loses to the power of computation.

Nowadays, of course, only computers play chess and humans don't bother since they can't compete.

Right?

ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, November 7, 2021

Candace Chong (Hong Kong); Imam Baksh (Guyana); Salha Obaid (UAE/Sharjah)

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Actually, chess.com is among the 300 most relevant websites in the world, according to the Alexa ranking service. Why are humans still playing a game that computers can do better? Chess is one of the biggest draws on the streaming service, Twitch. Why do *audiences* still care?

Players train with computers now, to sharpen their skills, but then play against each other with their phones turned off. What the audience wants is the story of *human* striving and for many readers, only a human author will do, especially in literature, which thrives more than any other medium in the sense of directly plugging into the creator's mind. No doubt, a market for computer-generated stories will exist. And many authors will use AI as assistants to help them craft epic tales or to bridge some skill gap. But just as we will always have a demand for organic food in the face of factory farming, we will see some books proudly proclaiming their *organic* authorship, because that is what sells to a significant portion of the audience.

Let's jump ahead. It is just before midnight on November 5th, 2121. An AI has just developed the ability to train its successor more efficiently than humans ever could, creating an accelerating chain of intelligence that will take machines beyond human limits. Futurist novelists like Vernor Vinge call this the *Singularity*, a moment where every conception we have of human history ends because we are surpassed by our digital children.

It will take a singularity to make a poet out of a machine. And if we fall past that horizon then literature will be the least of the things we'll be struggling to define. This will be a world where a machine can cook better than a human, remove cancers better than a human and even rock your baby to sleep with more care and devotion than you. What even is the point of human existence in such a world?

Maybe a writer will be able to tell us.

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