10/6/23: STYLE IN THE HARD LIGHT OF ALGORITHM

The mathematization of what we have until now called by the vague honorific "creativity" is becoming more attended to every day, in nearly every social domain, almost everywhere in the world. Inevitably, each writer is having thoughts about ways their personal artistic signature and their overall approach to authorial status will need to respond to AI. Share yours.

1. **SHI Yifeng (People's Republic of China)**

I've written some novels about technology. Not too long ago, these stories might have seemed like science fiction, but now they're getting closer to reality. For instance, one of my novels is about global surveillance using the Internet and cameras. It follows a Chinese programmer surveilling a warehouse for his American boss. Another story is about video games and virtual reality. It's about a group of people who aren't doing well in the real world, so they invent a new world in gaming where they can achieve fairness, justice, and respect.

Lately, I've been working on a novel that explores the relationship between humans and computers. It begins in the 1990s with a boy seeing a computer for the first time and getting his first email address. It might end with an email from the first completely independent artificial intelligence that isn't controlled by humans.

In literary discussions, we might call such writing a "new reality." Reality keeps evolving, and literature reflects these changes. This isn't a new aspect of literature; even classical writers like Tolstoy drew inspiration from technology and real-life events, like a Russian woman's death in a train-carriage accident, and in Anna Karenina, he had the protagonist die under a train, which was a brand new mode of transport for Moscow in his time.

However, when we talk about artificial intelligence, things get interesting. It's not just about a new technology; it also makes us confront a philosophical question: what it means to be "human." Writers often say that "literature is the study of humanity." Here, "humanity" implies people who have independent value and free will, not controlled by a higher power. As we know, in the Western context, the concept of "human" in this sense came into being after the Renaissance.

The issue is that computer-generated literature follows human patterns, and we expect it to keep on doing so. To take the examples of ChatGPT and Microsoft's Xiaobing/Xiaoice, computers have the ability to grasp the complexities of human language, mastering structure, rhetoric and so on. At a literary discussion in China, I had an opportunity to hear the views of the poetry community on Xiaoice's poems, and on the basis of the language alone, many people can no longer tell whether the poems were written by humans or computers. So, if we say writing is a human skill, what makes human writing special? Maybe it's "originality": a uniquely human view of the world. This is why AI can write Hollywood film scripts, but may not be able to write profound novels or poems. Originality becomes crucial for writers, while repetitive works make writing seem mechanical. In a sense, originality may be the last bastion of human writing.

But here's a question: if a computer can understand human thoughts, emotions, and even the sense of self in the form of an algorithm (which it can—just as computers have reproduced the intuition of top go players), can it write something that goes beyond what the human author can create? Future computers might surpass us in calculations and thinking ability, making writers feel like they can't measure up.

We can emphasize "empathy" here. Sharing one person's feelings with another person matters. In the future, computers might create great work, but we might still regard them disparagingly as machines, while valorizing relatively poorly written pieces by humans, somewhat like preferring delicately handmade jewelry to expensive "perfection." It's funny how our pride in "empathy" might just be our species' arrogance.

Perhaps, in the end, we must acknowledge the value of other intelligent beings, just as we once recognized our worth before a higher power. We'll have to learn to live alongside these new intelligent beings. It's not a bad thing; they might even be more "human" than we are. Finally, let's go back to that famous joke in history. Plato gave the definition of human: a hairless animal with two legs. So his students grilled a chicken naked and said, "That's what Plato meant by human." Like Plato, we still need to learn what it means to be human.