

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. Yasuhiro YOTSUMOTO (Japan)

Traditional Japanese poetry has fixed forms. In the case of tanka, it has to follow the pattern of 5, 7, 5, 7, 7 syllables. In the case of haiku, it is just 5, 7, 5, like in this famous poem by Kobayashi Issa: Yareutuna (5) Haegatewoutsu (7) Ashiwosuru (5). English translation: Don't hit me, a fly begs, putting his hands together like in a prayer.

These forms function as a template, providing both restriction and assistance at the same time. While you cannot write as freely as you wish, you don't have to think of a style for your poem. You just focus on the selection of words and phrases to fit in the given template. There are also some rules that you need to follow. For example, a haiku must have one season word out of the authorized vocabulary list called Saijiki (Season Book). Haiku beginners always carry this book around to make sure her selection of season word is a correct one. If you choose one season, which often uses up 3 to 5 syllables, there will only be a dozen syllables left with which you can 'compose' the poem on your own. Your writing becomes almost a mere selection and arrangements of words. I am tempted to call this combination of template and rule an “algorithm.”

Once you internalize this 'algorithm,' you can mass-produce haiku automatically without too much thinking. You become a human haiku generator. Case in point: March 1677, Osaka, Japan. Ihara Saikaku, who later becomes the best-selling novelist, made a performance out of improvising 1600 Haiku in one day in front of a huge audience. He charged an entry fee and made a fortune, which set off a race among the haiku poets competing to compose ever more haiku, ever more quickly. In the end, Ihara Saikaku achieved 23,500 haiku in 24 hours, according to the official record, although some question remains as to how you can even count 16.3 haiku per minute, or 3.7 haiku per second, not to mention compose and recite them.

Fast forward to 21st century Japan. There are a number of automatic haiku/tanka generators in cyberspace. For each part of 5/7/5/7/7, a computer shows its suggestion, and you keep hitting the 'next' button until you get the right words in the right place of the template. Although all you do is just hit a button, I have to confess I felt some pleasure and even a proud sense of achievement when I finally got “my haiku” on my PC display.

But what about free-style poetry? Unlike haiku or tanka, you have to come up with a form, or template, each time you write a new poem. And it is much longer than 17 or 31 letters. On top of that, there are such elements as 'style' and 'structure'. It is infinitely more complicated, far beyond the ability of any artificial intelligence!

International Writing Program Panel Discussion Series (Fridays 12-1 pm) Iowa City Public Library

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Yasuhiro Yotsumoto (Japan), Soonest Nathaniel (Nigeria),
Shi Yifeng (PRC), Enah Johnscott (Cameroon)

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That was what I told Abol Froushan, an Iranian poet living in London, some five years ago when we were in a bar in Rotterdam during a poetry festival. To my surprise, he disagreed. He insisted that AI would sooner or later develop the ability to build a form, style, and structure. After all, they are essentially templates as well. Once you get the template, the rest is simply generating the text to go with it. I felt somewhat betrayed by my fellow free-style poet. What I did not know then was that he was an IT consultant, orchestrating multinational IT projects, as well as a poet.

Before this discussion escalated into a bar brawl, someone suggested that we get in touch with Eran Hadas, a computer scientist in Tel Aviv. Eran is also a “digital poet,” whose works are a series of computer algorithms instead of books. Once he develops an algorithm, his computer will generate infinite numbers of poems on its own. He then curates and presents them. One of his works is a collection of approximately 5000 haiku composed entirely out of words found in the Old Testament.

Later that year (2018), the three of us published a series of essays on AI poetry (*1) and organized a symposium in London (*2). In 2020, I took part in an online Renga session, composing a series of tanka with several poets. One of the poets was Asshi, which was the name of the world’s first Renga algorithm developed by Eran Hadas. Some of Asshi’s poems sucked, while others might have easily passed as human work, while one of them was amazing.

So what did I learn from those experiences? What is my position about the AI’s capacity to create free-form poetry? AI, even though incredibly smart, is essentially *intelligence* and not *consciousness*. It may know everything about an apple, but it cannot taste it. It does not know what philosophers call the ‘qualia’ of consciousness, or what I call simply the ‘ah-ness’ of sensation. But poetry is all about it. Can AI eventually become AC, artificial consciousness, and utter a sensuous sigh of ‘ah!’ as it drinks cold water in the summer?

I don’t know. Maybe, or maybe not. But one thing I am sure is this. Regardless who wrote it, we as humans cannot help but feel something when reading a text. Our intelligence is destined, or even cursed, with poetic imagination. Written words are like an empty cup. The sake wine is filled from the heart and mind of a reader: a human. Computers may eventually write beautiful poems, but it is only we the humans who can pour poetry into the cup and sip it. Get drunk, sing, and dance.

(*1) “*Poetry and Artificial Intelligence*” etc. (Poetry International Web, Rotterdam, 2108)
https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/article/104-29447_Can-computers-write-free-verse

(*2) “*Advent of Poetry Robots: Are They Welcome?*” (Asian House, London, 2018)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERbaHeeGhE4>

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