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Editorial

Staying away from ‘nice’: writing in the face of AI

In February this year, we were in the midst of ‘Discovery Days’ at the University of Wollongong – a week when high school students descend on the campus in boisterous, excited groups to sample subjects and get a sense of whether University might be an engaging option for them.

I was in charge of Monday’s session on Creative Writing. Inspired by an online international panel with *New Writing*’s Graeme Harper on the weekend, I was thinking about an experiment Professor Paul Hetherington conducted where he asked ChatGPT to write poetry. In this vein, I asked ChatGPT to compose a prose poem in the style of Shady Cosgrove. I then took an original prose poem of mine, and the ChatGPT one into the ‘Discovery Days’ session to talk about AI and literature.

My questions seemed straight-forward: what is literature? Can AI generate engaging literature? If so, do we need to write? And regardless, *why* do we feel compelled to write? I went into this discussion considering literature to be (often) text-based creative work engaged with the human condition and a poetics of language. That is, it’s a place where we write about and reckon with what it means to be human and we think about the words we use as we communicate. I had assumed this dialogue with highschoolers would prove affirming for the writer, while providing enough entertainment to keep us all engaged.

I didn’t expect twenty-three out of twenty-five students would vote the ChatGPT poem to be the one written by a human.

When asked why they thought this, most said the poem I’d written was ‘too clear’: they could understand it. Because of this simplicity, they’d assumed it was written by AI. They’d assumed the garbled, flowery-nothing language of ChatGPT must be real literature because capital-L Literature is something that has to be analysed and deconstructed in order to be understood. This assumption is a hefty one that bears unpacking, but perhaps at another time.

There was mixed discussion about which poem students liked more, which was more meaningful to them, and yet they agreed: the AI poem wasn't clear. But, I would argue, the AI poem followed genre conventions enough that it could stand in as a representation of a poem. And, as AI improves, I have little doubt that artificial literature will become harder and harder to discern from human-authored literature, even for practicing writers who have dedicated their lives to matters of craft. And certainly the 2023 Writers Guild of America strike demonstrates that creative industries are taking AI seriously.

In the face of that, what then do writers bring to literature? I would argue we bring our lived experiences. We bring our perception of detail. We bring our individual, complicated understandings of the human condition, and we bring a capacity for empathy. While I'm wary of upholding the liberal subject as creative saviour, it is true that every time we push ourselves to find more interesting and specific ways of describing what it means to exist and be alive, we assert the importance of our words on the page. Is this too romantic in the face of post-humanism – perhaps.

In *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, Alain de Botton says "...we see the pyramids at Giza and go, 'That's nice.' This (comment) is asked to account for an experience, but (its) poverty prevents either ourselves or our interlocutors from really understanding what we have lived through. We stay on the outside of our impressions, as if staring at them through a frosted window, superficially related to them, yet estranged from whatever has eluded causal definition" (p. 87). Our work is to stay away from 'nice'.

But American writer Tom Sullivan thinks I'm overly cautious. He asked ChatGPT to rewrite famous short stories, using key plot prompts, and publishing the creations as *The Literary Extrusions of Chat GPT*. The stories are coherent and readable but they aren't well-written, either on the level of story or line. 'It was horrible at humor and irony. It was prone to moralizing and summation, and seemed almost addicted to superlatives,' he said. What about as it improves, though? Sullivan isn't worried. 'Because ultimately generative AI is creating text without any interest in its meaning. To me it's the antithesis of literature.'

Industry insider Data and Digital Transformation Executive Rob Hooton underscores this: 'AI can't see or feel, it can't interpret the world.' Which means, if my fears are warranted (or even partially warranted), the genres that stand the best chance of surviving are those that give readers new and convincing ways of understanding the world and the human/post-human condition.

Millicent Weber, an academic at the Australian National University, posits that readers like to connect with story and through that, with authors—best-sellers are often successful because of the large and complex promotional machines that deliver book to reader. But this makes me wonder: is the human author just another convincing paratext? Or will the commodified author prove a way to advocate for human/post-human authors more generally? Or, just maybe, could it be the pressure is on to keep training engaged readers (a difficult task in the face of screen

dominance), and our writing has to matter to those readers as we all grapple with what it means to be human, or even, post-human?

– Shady Cosgrove

In this issue

This issue of *TEXT* offers a number of thoughtful articles, including Jenny Hedley’s ‘Digital poesis impulse: A methodology of creative coding with GPT as co-pilot’ that explores why an author might use AI and how it can be used with the creative process. Hedley investigates questions of poetry and desire, artificial intelligence and authorship, and the tools that facilitate her digital writing practice.

Jessica White’s contribution to this edition is an extended adaptation of her keynote address, presented at the 27th Annual AAWP conference at the UniSC Sunshine Coast in 2022. In ‘Burning questions: Traversing genres, disciplines and institutions as a disabled writer and scholar’, White provides a thoughtful account of becoming a deaf academic and writer, contrasting the strictures of the neoliberal university with the creativity that comes from deafness, and challenging the reader to inhabit the deaf body/mind via a provocative second-person account.

Examining how language operates as a tool of control and violence, co-authors Katerina Byrant, Linda Fisk, Hayley Brown, Suzie Anderson, Michele Jarldorn and Susannah Emery contribute ‘The language of women’s prisons: Reflecting on violence and desistance.’ Their article explores “prison poetics”, incorporating personal reflection and a valuable review of the literature on writing in, of and about the prison industrial complex. “Perhaps more so than other genres,” they argue, “prison poetics is a gift for readers and should be treated as such – without expectation or obligation, but with care and movement from emotion to praxis” (p. 13)

In ‘Writing in the wake of movement: Deleuze, dance and life writing’, Stefanie Markidis (Deakin University) considers methods of movement within dance practice as a way of theorising embodied interventions in eating disorder life writing. Through experimentation, “a mode of memoiristic writing is found that combats challenges of eating disorder life writing with a shift toward recovering” (p. 1).

In ‘To what does it answer? Verbatim and site-specific playwriting’ debut contributor Julia Jarel (University of Western Australian) presents research provocations on the interplay of site-specific playwriting and its “fluid, collective and reflexive processes” (p. 1). The article describes the palimpsestic reading of *Barbara York Main: In Her Own Words* in the G20 Lecture Theatre at UWA, a site of significance as York, a renowned Zoologist, had previously studied and later presented research within the same space. The article explicates the performance process and synthesises the resultant learnings, teasing out notions of serendipity, intuition and hauntings in the creation and performance of play scripts.

Diana Marietta Papas investigates ekphrasis theory, proposing an understanding of ekphrasis that takes into account the mental time travel creative writers do to help us to stimulate our imagination and simulate past or future events in order to write about them evocatively. Her discussion of Jessica Au's use of ekphrastic technique in *Cold Enough for Snow* helps us to see that reading ekphrastic prose engages us in similar processes.

Through her inaugural scholarly contribution to TEXT, creative writing doctoral candidate Sarai Mannolini-Winwood (Deakin University) explores how auto-ethnographic processes have contributed to her place-based research. Her article, 'Stepping outside my perspective: An autoethnographic review of Indigenous literature in Walyalup/Fremantle, Western Australia' makes a cogent argument for the value of auto-ethnographic process for creative practitioners.

– Julienne van Loon, Ross Watkins, Shady Cosgrove

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– Julienne van Loon

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