Can AI be a poet?

The paper titled "AI-generated poetry is indistinguishable from human-written poetry and is rated more favourably" observed that AI poetry performed better than human poetry based on qualitative factors such as rhythm, beauty, etc.[1]. The paper also found that AI-written poetry was considered simpler to read and less original than human poetry, while human poetry was seen as more confusing and complex. In this essay, I try to explain these observations and, through that, build a case against the claim that AI poetry can be original. I also take from the paper "Climbing towards NLU: On Meaning, Form, and Understanding in the Age of Data", the following idea: LLMs have a limited understanding of language and operate by predicting responses based on pattern recognition[2]. My central argument here is this: AI uses popular trends (these could be rhythm, imagery, etc.) followed in various genres of poetry and incorporates these trends of a genre while writing poetry of the same genre, which is why it is difficult for the layperson to distinguish AI-written poetry from human-written poetry. Additionally, AI doesn't understand the meaning of words that represent real-life objects; it cannot **refer** to objects in the same way we humans do. Thus, AI ends up mimicking the work of other poets and cannot be said to write original poetry.

Porter and Machery write that participants "were more likely to guess that AI-generated poems were written by humans than they were for actual human-written poems ($\chi2(2$, N=16340)=247.04, w=0.123, p<0.0001). The five poems with the lowest rates of "human" ratings were all written by actual human poets; four of the five poems with the highest rates of "human" ratings were generated by AI"[3]. They also observe "that experience with poetry did not improve discrimination performance unless that experience allowed them to recognise the

[1] Brian Porter & Edouard Machery, 2024
[2] Emily M. Bender & Alexander Koller, 2020
[3] Brian Porter & Edouard Machery, 2024

specific poems used in the study"[4]. Now the authors suggest that the reason for this "more-human-than-human" problem is that non-expert poetry readers "expect to like human-authored poems more than they like AI-generated poems. But in fact, they find the AI-generated poems easier to interpret; they can more easily understand images, themes, and emotions in the AI-generated poetry than they can in the more complex poetry of human poets"[5].

I argue that this apparent lucidity is exactly what prevents AI-written poetry from being original. Bender and Koller, in their paper, design the Octopus test[6] and conclude that merely recognising patterns and predicting responses is not paramount to actually **understanding** what words mean. They draw a distinction between form and meaning, defining form as the "observable realisation of language" and meaning as the "relation between linguistic form and communicative intent"[7]. The Octopus test brings forth the idea that the said Octopus in the test, the representative of LLMs, recognises only the form. However, it can't deduce meaning. In contrast to that, humans learn language in a completely different way, the paper also suggests. According to the paper, we humans learn language by locating it in social contexts and by grounding it in the external world. So, when I look at the rising sun, feel certain emotions, and pen them down in the form of a poem, I'm doing something completely different from what AI does. What AI does in this scenario is that it refers to a huge data set containing poems that people have written about the rising sun, instead of referring to the actual rising sun, simply because it doesn't know what the words "rising sun" mean! It carefully analyses what most people conceive of when looking at/thinking about the rising sun, determines its physical features, etc., and finally comes up with a coherent poem.

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[4] Brian Porter & Edouard Machery, 2024
[5] Brian Porter & Edouard Machery, 2024
[6] Emily M. Bender & Alexander Koller, 2020
[7] Emily M. Bender & Alexander Koller, 2020

Now, what makes human-written poetry more difficult to understand is the same thing that makes it original, and AI-written poetry lacks it because it doesn't understand "meaning". When we say AI-written poetry doesn't understand meaning, we mean that it cannot locate language in social contexts or that it cannot ground form in the external world. However, this is not the only reason it can't write original poetry. I contend that we write poetry from some kind of "experience" because even though circumstances can be similar for several people, no two people can ever have the same "experience". To illustrate this with the help of an example: when I look at the rising sun along with several other people, all of us are indeed looking at the same thing; maybe all of us are mentally admiring it using the same words and expressions, and when we narrate how this felt to others, we might end up using similar descriptions. However, the development of the perception of the shared object, the sun, happens independently: everyone needs a pair of eyes, nerve cells, etc., biological entities for a complete perception of the object, or the act of seeing in this case. Each of our experiences, then, is unique; I might describe how I felt looking at the rising sun, but I can't convey the identical experience I had to someone, and I can't plausibly expect them to reproduce in them the very identical experience that I had. Not just that, if I look at the rising sun at two different points in time, and even though everything about the circumstances is similar, I will still have two different experiences, regardless of my saying similar things when describing these two different experiences. Experience isn't transitive.

Now, let us think about originality; what makes a piece of art original? My argument is that because all experiences are unique, art that stems from these unique experiences could be called original. Now, why are all experiences unique? Even though I and the other people who saw the sunrise on a particular day saw the same thing and said the same things about it, just because our experiences are different, we can be said to be original in our descriptions of the rising sun. It doesn't matter whether our descriptions are banal or exquisite; it also doesn't

matter if we all end up using the same similes and metaphors or if all of us end up meditating on the beauty of the redness of the dawn, which is a specific property. This is because when we base our descriptions/poetry on unique experiences, we all produce something original. However, AI can neither make art based on the individual unique experience (it doesn't have any) nor can it base its art on other people's experiences (as argued earlier, it is impossible to transmit experience successfully), all it has are descriptions of other people's experiences. Because it has an extensive data set, it produces good poems that sound easy to understand, dangerously similar to human writing and rhythmically perfect.

Thus, we can conclude that AI-written poetry cannot be called original for two broad reasons: primarily because it cannot refer to real-world objects, and even though it can come up with banal descriptions, it has no understanding whatsoever of what any word it has written means. This is because, unlike humans, it doesn't learn language; it just recognises a pattern in the forms it encounters and predicts a response based on this pattern recognition. Thus, it can be said that it simply mimics the tone, etc., of other poets writing poetry. It closely resembles a parrot in a way; just as a parrot spits out meaningful expressions, AI cannot be said to **know** language. Similarly, although it ends up producing excellent expressions, AI cannot be said to write original poetry. The second reason why we cannot say AI-written poetry is original is that it can never write poetry that stems from experience because it doesn't experience the real world in the way humans do. **Originality** is not a superficial difference between works of art; **it is the act of drawing from underlying, unique experiences that the artist has while creating ar**t. Similarly, even though people don't end up producing completely novel expressions while writing poetry and instead produce banal descriptions, their poetry can still be called original because the experiences were unique. Thus, the banality of poetry doesn't make it unoriginal; this unoriginality comes from the lack of experience to draw poetry from. Thus, even if a person attempts to compile two different poems written by others and create a

new one, it will still be considered unoriginal. Now, writing a poem after experiencing the work

of other people is a completely different scenario because the writer, in that case, will end up

drawing from their unique experience of the poem.

References

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