*In Spring of 2024, I was asked to judge the 1ˢᵗ annual AI Poetry Competition held in conjunction with the International Writers' Workshop in Hong Kong. I agreed on the condition that I would be given access not only to the submitted poems, but to documentation of the writers' processes. In the vast majority of cases this took the form of the transcript of a dialog between the writer and one of the large languages models available online. While I had planned to come up with a metric for weighting the two submission elements (the poem and the process document), they were so closely linked that, in the end, I evaluated them together. The remarks below were read aloud at the conclusion of the festival and the awards were distributed to the three winners. Two other writers were selected for honourable mention.*

*- Daniel C Howe*

## Growing an Ampersand Is Not A Natural Process
**Reflections on the 2024 International Writers' Workshop AI Poetry Competition**

As an MFA student in creative writing, my professor, Forrest Gander, referred to one of my poems as a "spectacular failure", a phrase that returned to me as I read the dialog between these poets and their AI assistants. The failure in this case was not, as one might expect, that these young writers were unready to collaborate with powerfully-intelligent AIs, but rather that the AIs were so clearly unready for poetry. It is spectacular in light of the grandiose claims of their makers and the truly vast resources, material, human, environmental, that we've expended as a society to bring these systems online.

Perhaps this should not be surprising. The current generation of AIs have been trained on vast quantities of dubiously sourced Internet text, from the literary canon to the darkest corners of 4chan, trained to recognize a sort of lowest-common denominator of human experience as "truth". And while capable of impressive feats of mimicry and pattern recognition, we do well to remember that they have no bodies or sensory organs, no experience of time or space, not even memory in any commonly understood sense. And I am not a luddite or technophobe - I am trained in computer science and write code as frequently as I write natural language, often with the assistance of an AI "co-pilot" that I admit to finding marginally useful.

Yet the extent to which patterns extracted from dematerialized language can act as proxy for lived experience is a pressing question, one hinted at in 'A Brief History of Our Existence (According to Language)', one of today's selected poems, as it works through the long evolution of the English language, from Old to Middle to modern English via AI-assisted translation.

But the task of writing quality poetry is an especially thorny one. So thorny that Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Howard Nemerov once described it as "logically impossible. To make an object recognizable as an individual of the class p for poem, but make it in such a way that it resembles no other individual of that class."

And so, the best entries in the contest were from the writers most skeptical of the machine, whether explicitly, as in 'An Interview Record with Ms. Assistania', in which the AI's vanilla welcome message is transformed into a conceptual poem; or thematically, as in 'To grow an Ampersand', where the writer leverages their frustrations with a pedantic AI to examine our fraught relations with technology: "It's important to note", this particular AI reminded the author, "that ampersands are typographical symbols and cannot be grown like plants." However, the machine continued, "its wonderful that you have an interest in gardening and creativity."

In 'Deep Diver' some of the poems most interesting lines: "[A]ddicted to MDMA and Nicotine / I will be buried in the sea and return to Tiananmen with Batman / ... Kissing a strange man, singing Chinese rock music, having sex and sexual abuse in his rental house / I am Foucault's Dog, Mao Zedong's underwear, and I am ejaculated by them...", were excised in order, one imagines, to create a more palatable result, complete with regular meter and ABAB rhyming.

In "Recipe for Sinigang", our first-prize poem, the author deftly describes the process of creating a traditional Filipino family dinner with ingredients ranging from tamarind and bitter melon to salty tears

and sliced dreams. "This is not your normal sour soup," she warns, specifying that one should "cry directly into the pot" for best effect. Yet somehow these tasty lines did not sit well with her AI, who actually refused to assist with the piece. "[The] poem focuses on bitterness, resentment and family dysfunction" it said, "which can be triggering or upsetting for some readers...". [ How might Tolstoy have responded to such advice when seeking help with that tricky opening to Anna Karenina? ]

"I'd be happy to help you reframe the poem to focus on the positive aspects of family and Filipino culture" the AI continued, "Here are some specific suggestions: Shift the focus from negativity to the warmth and comfort of family... Replace the bitter ingredients with metaphors for positive emotions or experiences... Turn the cooking process into a metaphor for healing and growth."

For Hong Kongers this sentiment may bring to mind recent calls from the government for journalists and writers to "tell good stories", stories about "Hong Kong's special advantages", rather than spreading "illusions" about ideas like self-determination. Is it surprising to find such sentiments within neoliberal technologies of the West? Perhaps… or perhaps not, given the economics that drive the adoption of such systems. Regardless, it is a testament to the tenacity of these poets, whether writing with or against the various machines, that they have resisted the compression of their thought toward some more palatable mean, and have instead held to the unique fabric of their lived experience.


Daniel C Howe, March 2024