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The Art of Poetry Machines

By Peter Gendolla

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Lecture

The Art of Poetry Machines

Abstract

The history of machine-aided poetry from Swift to Roussel, Bense, the Oulipo-group and David Link's *Poetry Machine 1.0** represents the idea of aesthetic creativity as an interplay between 'poetic' algorithms and 'human' control of the poetry-generator, with more or less interesting results. By examining Christopher Strachey's *Love Letter Generator* and confronting it with traditional poetry, the talk attempts to ascertain whether in this way it is possible to isolate or retrieve the literary process.

Following the proposal of Noah Wardrip-Fruin that in reading digital literature we must read processes, data and interactions between man and machine I would like to add only one single further question: what is it that characterizes or better what *might* it be that characterizes the specific *artistic* element, the *literaricity* of these data performed in processes and interactions? What is or what could it be that specifically differentiates the experience of these projects from other ones; what could be their *aesthetic* difference?

Characterizing literature as one of "the arts that call our attention to language, present us with characters, tell us stories, and make us reflect on the structures and common practices of such activities..."(Wardrip-Fruin) seems to be insufficient. Even though it is a first necessary turn of texts towards themselves it is decisive to ask *in what way* the text appears in the text, and also in what way the medium appears in the medium. *Both* subject, story, characters and the forms of their presentation have to be reflected upon in a very specific way.

A prominent model to illustrate this was created 1604 by Cervantes with his *Don Quixote*: a knight/hero – who through reading too many romances and trying to change these fictions into reality surpasses the boundaries of normal perception,

inevitably fails, and becomes 'insane'. This model is mirrored in the individual episodes via ever-new and quite intricate techniques and finally the whole first book is mirrored in the second one. Times and again the previously read literary texts are absurdly materialized, first imaginarily and then quite practically, so that literature is allowed its own crazy or paradoxical 'life' by recounting itself as unlivable. In a similar way Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is reflecting the previous revenge tragedies, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* previous love stories, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* the long tradition of conspiracy novels. Good crime-novels are always aware of their forerunners and good love-poetry has read love-poetry. Literature is always reading previous literature by confronting the experiences, ideas, proposals how to live or love, feel or think, act or behave with its own experiences, ideas, proposals... creating a specific distance to the stored ones.

Even the third quality of digital literature mentioned above, that of interactions between readers or viewers with the literary processes already can be found in the literatures of so-called modern times. The reader of *Don Quixote*, for example, is in just the same situation as its hero – he himself is a reader who is supposed to take a story for real in which someone becomes lunatic through reading. Accordingly, the reader would have to throw away the book; he would have to distance himself *physically* from the text in order not to succumb to the fate of its hero. Times and again great literature puts its recipients into this paradoxical situation: They are drawn into the scenes of the literary text and at the same time are distanced from it – they are tensely hooked onto the medium from two sides. To bring John Lennon's "Your inside is out your outside is in" to mind: Readers *'inhabit'* literary texts without being able to really be in them; they start an intense – quite physically real – interaction with the fictitious events.

That paradoxical *'inhabiting'* brings us to the newest literary forms that are not only permanently crossing the borders between prose, drama and poetry but are also constantly moving into a different realm altogether. If, with Umberto Eco, we conceive a book as a machine to trigger fantasies or imaginations in our mind, then the latest computer-aided and networked 'literature' is crossing the borders between mind, body and machine, between neuronal, physical and electronic processes – but only if it uses all the possibilities of interaction a programmable medium like the computer facilitates. And if we follow Italo Calvino's statement that literature only exists as a never ending interplay between the generation and reception of texts, then the step taken by digitalizing the poetic cannot only have been made with the unquestionable calculability of symbolic processes. This step then rather should be a step that turns our attention to the 'ghostlike' dimension of symbolic processes that break open even there again and again, creating new forms of an aesthetic perception of *non-predictability* – aesthetic in the ancient sense as 'perception of perception', *aesthetic difference*. Aesthetic or literary demands are only fulfilled through a double reflection: by opening up both intertextual and

intermedial realms of allusion by simultaneously combining imaginary and physical-medial elements of man and machine.

In a pioneering example we can observe the poetry generated by a program Christopher Strachey, "the first digital artist"(Wardrip-Fruin), wrote in 1952, which can be visited on <http://alpha60.de/research/muc/>.

Darling Sweetheart
You are my avid fellow feeling. My affection curiously clings to
your passionate wish. My liking yearns for your heart. You are my wistful sympathy:
my tender liking. Yours beautifully
M. U. C.

Indeed, this text – like the millions of others we can generate with the program – is playing with the language of 'love' – but it really presents only the most quotidian and pedestrian way of combining words. Here language is at first nothing but the combination of empty elements into – more or less – meaningful ones. This and all the other examples neither present references to other love-poems nor does this poetry refer to itself as machine-generated, nor is it especially reflective.

To experience more, we always need a dialogue about the possible meanings of these word-combinations, a dialogue about the 'intentions' we have projected onto the machine but that are non-existent. The nonexistent cognitive autonomy of the artificial intelligence can create difficulties for us regarding the creation of meaning if in the interactions between man and machine something more is happening than just presenting us with a stream of associations like the majority of the so-called poetry-machines are doing (Martin Auer's for example http://www.martinauer.net/poetryma/_startpm.htm). A possible blueprint of a different kind of relationship can be experienced in Camille Utterback's installation *Text Rain*. Here, if in the reception process we leave behind our mere playful body-motion, namely the unconscious performance or dance with the falling words, now by suspecting or realizing that these falling words could be bound together into meaningful compositions by moving our hands, our arms, or our whole body to catch more than one of them and form a whole line...then, here we start reading the poem with our body – or could/should we say: we start communicating with the AI? As also does the poor soldier in Kafka's *Penal Colony*, deciphering the words 'written' in his skin.

The difference to Kafka's text as a difference between the well-known 'traditional' literature and its digital inheritor (even though we might be 'reading' *Text Rain* with more joy because it is not the same painful script we are interacting with) might be that at the end of the story the soldier identifies the sense of the words pierced in his skin and dies. Kafka's narration is complete, and we as readers are in search for its possible meaning. In *Text Rain*, contrary to *Penal Colony*, there is no end to our reading: even though we are moving we will never get the whole; the poem will never be completed – unless we leave the installation to read the 'database' behind it.

In digital environments the paradoxical *'inhabiting'* of literature by readers mentioned above is changing: It is transformed from a situation in which body and an *existent* medium (book, screen...) are fixed and under control to a state of bewildering the mind: An oscillating interplay begins between medium, body and mind, between sense and senses with a nonexistent center of control, awareness, or intentionality. The installation leaves us with the troubling question: are we reading a poem...or is the poem reading us?