



‘Deep Learning: Institutions of Beauty in the Age of Algorithmic Reproduction’

Author: Liam Kennedy-Finnerty

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Deep Learning: Institutions of Beauty in the Age of Algorithmic Reproduction

Liam Kennedy-Finnerty

Why does one begin an academic paper with a rhetorical question? It is a technique I have noticed in the papers of first-year students, often used in an attempt to denote authority. The technique performs confidence, yet its lack of commitment renders its tone uncertain and amateurish. The piece can feel more like a brainstorm than a finished product, and instead of reading like a question the writer is asking us, it reads like they are questioning themselves. The thought process is something to be hidden in the humanities; rarely in an English essay prompt does the phrase ‘show your working’ appear. Instead, we perform the illusion that the work appeared out of thin air, that the thought process and the finished product are one and the same. While we know that this is not the reality of writing, we perform it nonetheless because in literary criticism the grade of an essay reflects the end product regardless of the process.

The question that opens this essay, of course, has an answer: we demand that amateurs perform the end result of professional training, but students then imitate what they believe academic professionalism should sound like. But if and when students realise that they will be rewarded for merely generating a finished product, then how does the university dissuade them from simply doing so—bypassing the process for the product—when it results in academic, and economic, validation? When AI can reliably produce professional sounding papers better than an amateur writer can, then the currency of knowledge, if knowledge is in fact a currency, will become completely decentralised.

In February of 2023, a student asked me if I would accept essays written with an AI text-generator called ChatGPT. Though I do not recall the answer I gave, I do remember the horror I felt when I realised I had quite possibly trained myself in a dying field. Each A grade I assigned henceforth would be asterisked because the work I was rewarding was potentially AI-generated. Rita Felski argues that one of the reasons the humanities ‘find themselves in the throes of a legitimation crisis’ is because suspicious, distanced reading practices have taken precedence over the genuine appreciation of literary beauty.¹ With art criticism, and the work of literary art itself, now under the constant suspicion of its very humanity, the problem of legitimation will only worsen. English studies will become increasingly illegitimate if any person can generate passable criticism at the push of a button. The reward of good grades for the amateur performing professionalism now means nothing because performing knowledgeability no longer requires the knowledge institution or, even, the amateur.

Following that tutorial, I played out a series of imaginary arguments between myself and this student. ‘What does it say about how you view your own intelligence,’ I’d retort, ‘if you are willing to outsource your creativity to a computer?’; ‘This software can produce first-year papers at about a B level, so what will happen when you need to write an upper-year paper and you have not developed your skills?’; ‘How will you ever appreciate a work of art if you do not, and then cannot, put in the effort to articulate your own thoughts

¹ Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p.14.

about it?’ The answers I received went: ‘What difference does it make if I write the paper as long as an original paper gets written?’; ‘This software can write a competent essay now, and it will soon write one better than your master’s thesis’; ‘Reading is too hard anyways. I can barely sit through a film. Why would I bother consuming content I do not enjoy?’ Clearly, the ‘student’ responses here are my own projection. The real student is probably polite and good-natured, more curious about the potentialities of new technologies than malicious towards the humanities and beautiful art. And there is no way they would have called a movie a ‘film.’

This essay takes a decidedly amateur approach to scholarship to depict my own relationship to the amateur essay, which I believe should be the result of and bear witness to an embodied process of appreciating beauty rather than a performance of accumulated knowledge. I reveal my investment in a distinctive feature of beauty as described by Elaine Scarry in *On Beauty and Being Just*: beauty as ‘lifesaving’. As Scarry contends, ‘Beauty quickens. It adrenalizes. It makes the heart beat faster. It makes life more vivid, animated, living, worth living.’² Alongside Walter Benjamin’s concerns about the changing nature of art in his 1935 essay, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, I utilise Scarry’s concept of beauty and the crucial role it plays in creative culture to argue that the mutual understanding of a work’s embodied history within a specific place and time—which Benjamin argues is the source of an artwork’s ‘aura’—merges the creator and receiver of the art object into one continual process, which necessitates, both practically and philosophically, an appreciation of beauty in literature as synonymous with embodied, amateur learning. The amateur essay thus denotes and perpetuates lifesaving beauty when it fuses its process with its product. As such, AI’s removal of process from the essay is a removal of its ‘aura’, rendering the interpretation of art mechanically reproducible and perpetuating a narrow vision of professionalism. The amateurish appreciation of beauty that scholars such as Felski, Scarry, Derek Attridge and Aarthi Vaade argue for saves the first-year essay from mechanical reproduction by moving it away from a performance of a prescribed image of professionalism for academic validation to documenting a process of appreciating beautiful art that is in fact synonymous with the existence of beautiful art itself.

Section I: The First-Year University Essay in the Age of Algorithmic Reproduction: Withering Performances of the Academic Professional

Although written nearly a century ago, Benjamin’s essay remains eerily relevant to contemporary discussions about the use and value of AI-generated art. Towards the beginning of his essay, Benjamin writes, ‘Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be’.³ When the work of art is removed from the authenticity of its containment within a fixed temporal and spatial moment, its appeal changes. As Benjamin argues, ‘that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art’.⁴ The audience sees the value of the work of art not as contained in itself, but in its

² Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), p.24.

³ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, 3rd edn, ed. by David H. Richter, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2016), pp. 713-728 (p. 714).

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.714-715.

reproducibility. As a result, artists adapt to this shift in the audience's perception, so that 'the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility'.⁵

While some sense of imitation has long been a feature of creative culture, the emergence of reproducibility Benjamin delineates marks a radical shift in creativity which was formerly motivated by what Scarry calls 'replication'—a crucial component of her concept of beauty.⁶ Unlike reproducibility, which is a response in the first instance to a work of art it merely regenerates, replication is a response to a particular instance of beauty which itself begets imitation. As Scarry writes, 'the beauty of Beatrice in *La vita nuova* requires of Dante the writing of a sonnet, and the writing of that one sonnet prompts the writing of another'.⁷ Thus there is a fundamental difference between replication and reproducibility: while the former is an ongoing process of action and reaction, the latter is concerned with its end result. But, more than this, replication—a 'homely word' which 'recalls the fact that something, or someone, gave rise to their creation and remains silently present in the newborn object'—places emphasis on the creative process as embodied; a thoroughly corporeal history.⁸

Comparing these two terms begins to reveal the extent of the crisis AI poses to creativity. A disembodied, artificial consciousness is freed from a restricted temporal growth process—such as all humans, and works of art, undergo—and therefore eliminates the humanity previously implied by the existence of the art object. The work of art's commodification, in this sense, is no doubt a feature of Benjamin's analysis. The work's abstraction from a particular time and space kills its quasi-spiritual 'aura' but it also renders the end product completely alienated from its creation process. Its sheer efficiency makes it uncanny: it has the illusion of humanity while containing none. Moreover, mechanically generated art frames art as an object that exists only to serve its eventual 'owner'—the audience (or beholder) or buyer. AI software alleviates the labour involved in creativity and interpretation by generating the product of this labour instantaneously.

But the reality of AI begins to exceed even these concerns. One element of the AI-generated work of art that Benjamin's argument, despite its continued relevance, cannot capture is its separation from a human touch even at the moment of its initial creation. In the case of AI-generated texts, though prompts must be entered into a text generator, what is being reproduced is not a specific work of art, which once had an 'aura' that has been displaced, but creative thought itself—the idea, or ideal, of a work of art. Because the art object was previously understood, following Benjamin's argument, as deriving from a particular human consciousness within a spatial and temporal moment of creation, but also, following Scarry, as part of an embodied creative process which is integral to any understanding of a work of art as beautiful, the AI-generated text runs the risk of being unintelligible either as a work of art or a work of beauty.

This state of affairs poses a larger problem for the reception of beauty as such. The creation of art from the artist and its embodied perception from the viewer are part of the same process, one whose authenticity rests on a human embodiment within a particular time and space. Beauty, as 'a contract between the beautiful being (a person or thing) and

⁵ Benjamin, p. 716.

⁶ Scarry, p. 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

the perceiver', as Scarry writes, necessitates an interaction between bodies to exist.⁹ The argument for beauty as an interaction holds true for the beholding of beautiful objects created by a person does as it does for beholding a beautiful person since that beautiful object is an extension of its creator's body. Both sides of the contract, artist and audience, must actively engage with the work. Beauty becomes inspiring and, indeed, vital—'lifesaving'—when both participants actively embody a relationship to the beautiful. ChatGPT may eventually generate a serviceable recipe, but it will never need to eat to survive. The relationship becomes unjust and imbalanced: because it is not a specific, embodied conscience, AI has no stake in beauty, while its human recipients depend upon it. This 'aliveness' of and to beauty is what distinguishes, for example, the desire to write from the desire to have written. It is the desire to experience a moment regardless of its external value—regardless of anything that it might produce or might be produced from it—that bestows a work with authenticity for the perceiver on the other side of the contract.

Taking note of this contractual agreement between artist and audience, as between reader and writer, might help to account for a surprising feature of Benjamin's essay: his reticence on the subject of print. The degree to which moveable type printing is to be considered reproduction in the context of creativity is, in Benjamin's essay, not made entirely clear. Charles Berret notes that 'Benjamin's treatment of print is so brief in the 'Work of Art' essay that it is difficult to judge how much distance he means to place between print and more recent technologies of mechanical reproduction'.¹⁰ Benjamin's avoidance of the topic, in favour of film and photography, is definitely curious considering his essay is itself a reproducible work of printed art and even more odd considering the impact that the advent of moveable type printing had on writing conventions. Down to the standardised forms of language that the printing press allowed, this technology made writing more formulaic. However, writing, reproduced or not, remains a document of a thought process limited to a once embodied time and space; it can be trusted to have been written by a human being. Thus, the aura of a novel or poem is diminished more so by a lack of a human author than by the reality of the printing press. On a broader scale, it is perhaps true, too, that contemporary digital distribution models for art alienate the perceiver more than the standardisations of the printed word.

Much of the contemporary alienation from audio-visual art stems from the reduction of art to 'content' as produced for and disseminated by algorithms. Content prohibits the embodiment of beauty by reducing art to an economy of entertainment and knowledge. The two terms are nearly interchangeable because the content market they exist in renders them as such by placing the value of a piece of content strictly on its utility and efficiency. Aarathi Vaade and Saikat Majumdar write that the participatory culture of social media turns knowledge into a form of currency, blurring the distinction between creator and audience and turning the production of art into an economic exchange between creators who often reside outside of established institutions.¹¹ Further, the knowledge economy powering the digital realm engenders hostility to the perceived inauthenticity, or pretensions, of established institutions. However, this reactionary attitude

⁹ Scarry, p. 90.

¹⁰ Charles Berret, 'Walter Benjamin and the Question of Print in Media History', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 41 (2017), 349-367 (p. 350).

¹¹ Aarathi Vaade and Saikat Majumdar, 'Introduction', in *The Critic as Amateur*, ed. by Majumdar and Vaade (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 1-28 (p. 5).

disregards the value of art just as it claims to democratise art by removing art's institutional dependence.

Online dissemination systems promise empowerment for amateur artists, while treating their work as disposable. Consequently, instead of institutionalised professionalism determining the value of knowledge, it is instead the digitised performance of authenticity that decides the value of a piece of content. Art as 'content' renders the audience and the performer one and the same, yet it is inherently disembodied since both the distributors and the primary targets of the performance at hand are algorithms. The reproduction of online art—what is promoted in people's feeds—is arbitrated by a nonhuman entity. This distribution model encourages AI-generated art: AI art matches to a mathematical degree the inhuman touch of online dissemination systems.

Benjamin's assertion that '[m]echanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art'¹² is increasingly relevant when considered alongside Vaade's articulation of digital knowledge as an economy. The algorithmic reproduction of art has rendered beauty into knowledge, to be exchanged with ruthless efficiency. The processes of the interpretation of works of art that established institutions request are, or should be, incongruous with those of the algorithm, and yet the performance of professionalism that universities demand, with their rigid expectations of what qualifies as good work, and the emphasis on higher education as job training, do not exactly dissuade students from viewing their studies as a knowledge economy. If the internet is more efficient at distributing that knowledge, then the value of a discipline such as literary criticism within academic institutions is economically, in every sense of that word, worthless.

Felski's analysis of the legitimation crisis in the humanities in particular further articulates institutions' collective failure to perpetuate and promote the embodied process of appreciating beauty as a value in itself over the potential economic gains of the performance of that appreciation. Felski considers the humanities' rejection of the consideration of beauty in favour of the hermeneutics of suspicion, which tends to produce highly specialised, often jargon-laden critiques designed to unmask a particular work or author's ideological inconsistencies or 'bad' intentions. Carefully avoiding connection to a work of art, the hermeneutics of suspicion 'shades into tireless tautology, rediscovering the truth of its bleak prognoses over and over again'.¹³ The emotional detachment from art that this critical stance demands ascribes professionalism to the 'low-key tone of academic argument' that now renders essays mechanical in both their tone and conception.¹⁴ Part of the impetus for the adoption of this tone is, perhaps ironically, to legitimise the humanities in the intellectual marketplace. Suspicion renders an essay a safe investment, a measurable display of a student's understanding of a work of art's 'content', providing a reliable return in the form of good grades and eventual employment.

The crisis that Felski outlines is fundamentally the result of regarding the interpretation of art as an accumulation of knowledge, rather than an account of a genuine absorption into a work of art. Consequently, the humanities market themselves as an institution providing a knowledge transfer, run by and producing professionals who hold a wealth of expertise. Those hostile towards the humanities might contest that because knowledge is a currency, and we all in theory have equal access to intellectual resources, then the institution that holds that knowledge has no special power in the wielding of it. I

¹² Benjamin, p. 14.

¹³ Felski, p. 35.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

would argue that if the performers of academic professionalism take pleasure at the expense of the amateur, then this mass exodus is justified. With the continued funding of the STEM fields, though, it is clear the crisis does not extend to all forms of learning and does not derive purely from intellectual insecurity. People still pursue degrees in math and engineering, despite the challenges involved. There is a technocratic anti-intellectualism in ChatGPT's proponents that seems to attack much more aggressively the institution of the arts. When the expectations for reproducibility, efficiency, and reliability in the sciences are thrust upon the humanities, as they so often are, then the inefficiencies of learning about beauty are hidden by administrators to ensure their survival.

Recruitment for English departments, for instance, understandably often presents the job opportunities afforded to students upon graduation. Dalhousie's 'English Academics' website states, 'Studying English teaches you essential written and oral communication expertise valuable in every field of work', before stating that it also 'broadens your mind, kindles your interest in the world and connects you to the wealth of great literature created in English, both past and present'.¹⁵ Without attacking the well-intentioned practicality of this paragraph, I argue that advertising the 'interest in the world' that literature kindles as secondary to the job training it provides highlights the crisis at hand. Interest in the world is not practically useful insofar as it does not generate capital as efficiently as possible. Therefore, the experience of beauty that humanities programs hide in favour of its emphasis on research and academic rigour renders it, regardless of intent, subservient to the ideology of the knowledge economy. Derek Attridge has argued that English criticism must reimagine its 'subservience to the world of facts',¹⁶ and instead remember the 'moment of engagement' that attracts readers.¹⁷ But university administrators cannot take the student's absorption into a work into account because those feelings are fundamentally transitory and essentially ungradable and unmonetisable. So, systems of academic validation evaluate 'writing' as a noun rather than a verb. Departments measure the success of a student's education in a way that justifies it financially, considering knowledge and writing skills as goods to be traded in the labour market.

Given the replicative and lifesaving power of beauty, as argued by Scarry, the humanities might in fact stand a better chance of securing of their relevance and a future by promoting the interpretation of works of art as a creative and embodied process. Students' desire to produce AI-generated papers is a response to institutions that view interpretation as something mechanically reproducible. Viewing interpretation of a work of art as a mechanical, and not a creative process, negates the reality that essays are, by definition, works of art. As Scarry writes in her essay, 'By perpetuating beauty, institutions of education help incite the will toward continual creation'.¹⁸ Perhaps marketing English programs (for lack of a better verb) as opportunities for students to take part in the continual creation of beauty facilitated by reading works of literary art will spur more participation than imagining them as job training.

¹⁵ *Why Study English at Dal?* ([n.d.]), *Dal.ca*, < <https://www.dal.ca/academics/programs/undergraduate/english.html> > [accessed March 2023].

¹⁶ Derek Attridge, 'In Praise of the Amateur', in *The Critic as Amateur*, pp. 31-48 (p. 42).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁸ Scarry, p. 8.

Internally, departments might even begin by validating and rewarding amateur performance. Though perhaps the word ‘performance’ might denote a falsified version of professionalism by the amateur imitating the academic tone of their professor, the sustained and embodied process implied in the term might also suggest a temporal moment of creativity that is inseparable from the purpose of studying works of art, even within the academic institution. Felski writes, ‘That identification and attunement are not listed as course learning goals or pondered in the pages of *PMLA* does not mean they do not affect academic life’.¹⁹ Rewarding beauty as an embodied process, rather than a product, is urgent when the imitation of its production is now so easy for disinterested students. Though I do not pretend to know the specifics of this necessary overhaul English departments in particular would require, I argue that current evaluations of the knowledge supposedly acquired by the interpretation of literature render its study increasingly illegitimate. In the age of the critical process as mechanically reproducible, we must amplify more than ever ‘the relation of the universities to beauty’, and of the study of beauty as a beautiful object: a continual process of embodiment, contained in itself and wholly irreplaceable.²⁰

Section II: ‘Approving of the Course He Had Taken’²¹

I am making myself an amateur in writing this paper, in part because as I write this, there exists almost no English scholarship on ChatGPT. While the race to publish on this topic is no doubt underway, AI is quickly reshaping not only my entire discipline, but my entire society’s understanding of creativity and our relationship to beauty. This paper is becoming more a document of panic than the surefooted argumentation I attempted to perform in Section I might suggest. Hence, I rely more on my own subjective memories and experiences than I would usually dare to in an academic paper. By recreating and grading my own undergraduate work using ChatGPT, I will attempt to illustrate that the fraught relationship with creative thought that the rigorous academic paper demands renders the ‘contract between the beautiful being [...] and the perceiver’ an artificial performance.²²

The first university essay I wrote was a 1000-word close-reading of James Joyce’s ‘A Painful Case.’ In the paper, I point towards some key turns of phrase throughout my selected passage, as well as some creative punctuation Joyce implements, to make my argument. There are the predictable formatting errors one might expect from a first-year student: I often fail to include page numbers for my quotations, my syntax is awkward, and I do not outline my analysis in my introduction. I distinctly remember writing this paper. I spent hours building my outline, rereading my passage, taking notes, writing, rewriting, eventually arriving at a product that I would now assign a high B to a low A. Before revisiting the paper, I could not recall its content. Instead, I remember the writing process specifically because it was new to me.

I wrote the essay when most professors still asked for hard copies, and so I had no choice but to rewrite it manually. If, as Elaine Scarry writes, beauty promotes its replication,

¹⁹ Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 4.

²⁰ Scarry, p. 8.

²¹ James Joyce, ‘A Painful Case’, in *Dubliners*, ed. by Robert Scholes and A. Walton Litz (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), pp. 107-117 (p. 116).

²² Scarry, p. 90.

it is telling that I felt absolutely no desire to transcribe this paper. I note this because the first paragraph of the essay is a transcription of Joyce's story. In writing these words I now barely recognise as my own, I am locked into a temporal moment of recognition. What I document while criticising this paper is an embodied understanding of the first-year experience of a student performing academia with as little direction as possible.

At first glance, this paper exudes a confidence reserved only for the accomplished academic or the total amateur. There is a quality to this confidence that I almost admire, documented by a student discovering new ways of reading as though they are the first to find them. The second paragraph begins:

On initial reading, one might think this story is told from the perspective of an omniscient, objective narrator. James Duffy is not speaking directly to us, and we are instead given a third-person account of his story, creating an illusion of objectivity. However, the narrator is not omniscient or objective, but instead a third-person reflection of James Duffy's thought process.

Another way of saying this might be: 'Joyce uses free-indirect discourse.' I remember learning the term in Dr. Brouillette's class later that year and cringing at the revelation that I was not, in fact, the discoverer of a new literary device. This prolonged explanation of a basic writing technique, though embarrassing, shows a distinct excitement at the potential of literature. Excitement, as well as labour, fuels the learning process of someone who continues to read and write.

For me, reading this paper also conjures memories of deep insecurity, fuelled by my desire as an amateur to impress experts. This insecurity underscores the performative aspects of the paper that lessen its impact. One paragraph begins: 'Further building up this exaggerated version of Mrs. Sinico, Duffy attempts to [...]' There is a pencilled line underneath '[f]urther building', and the feedback, 'awkward syntax.' Besides using 'further' as an attempt to highlight the transition in my argument, I suspect that I was also using the word to convey a tone of formality. The awkward syntax here feels like the product of a failed performance, an attempt to sound like an academic by constructing sentences radically different from the way I actually speak. There's nothing inherently formal about the word 'further,' obviously, nor in disjointed sentence structuring. However, this particular combination of the two reveals an attempt at a persona, and a desperation to be taken seriously at the bottom of a hierarchy.

Whenever I set ChatGPT the same task I was set in my first year, it often produced a paper that was better than mine, according to most of my own grading rubrics. I entered the command: 'write a 1000-word essay on the theme of isolation in James Joyce's "A Painful Case,"' to which the program responded with a paper that reads like a first-year student's impression of an academic. The first paragraph begins: 'James Joyce's short story "A Painful Case" is a haunting exploration of the theme of isolation, as seen through the life of Mr. Duffy, a solitary man living in Dublin'.²³ Though generic, the sentence contains no spelling mistakes and highlights a key theme in the work. Its syntax is also notably less awkward.

However, ChatGPT failed to replicate adequate quoting. It wrote, 'The narrator notes that he had "never entered into relations with any woman"',²⁴ quoting a line that

²³ ChatGPT (2022), OpenAI, < <https://www.chat.openai.com> > [accessed 12 April 2023].

²⁴ ChatGPT [accessed 12 April 2023].

does not appear in the story. When I asked, ‘What are the page numbers for those quotes?’, ChatGPT responded, ‘I apologize for the oversight in my previous response. As an AI language model, I do not have the specific page references for quotes as the format may vary depending on the edition or source of the text’.²⁵ Before I could accept its apology, it continued: ‘However, the quotes used in my essay are all taken from James Joyce’s “A Painful Case,” which can be found in various collections of his short stories or in the original publication’.²⁶ Fabricating a quote in an academic essay would constitute plagiarism, so my paper certainly has the edge in this regard. If one does not read the story, or at least select quotes from it to substantiate an AI-generated argument, then relying purely on the software will likely result in a failing paper, even if universities accept the use of AI as a permissible writing tool.

However, there is reason to believe that ChatGPT will not generate fake quotes after its next update, which will make an AI paper passable once again. ChatGPT’s essay concludes: ‘The story highlights the devastating impact of isolation on the human psyche and serves as a warning about the dangers of withdrawing from the world’.²⁷ Though it is not a particularly original thesis, this sentence is far clearer than ones that often appear in a first-year paper. I would grade each of the technical aspects of this AI paper—its clarity, cohesion, diction, transitions, punctuation, and grammar— an A. My paper concludes that ‘the line [he] had no difficulty now in approving of the course he had taken’²⁸ is not an affirmation of Duffy’s choice to reject connection, but a dishonest declaration of Duffy’s in an attempt to convince himself that his detachment will be fulfilling.’ Though hopefully a bit more original than the AI’s conclusion, this sentence contains needless repetition, awkward phrasing, no citation, and faulty punctuation. If a rubric grades the mechanics of writing for more than half of its criteria, then a ChatGPT paper (with real quotations) will produce similar grades. If not a grade-A work, ChatGPT’s papers are technically proficient enough to be more than passable insofar as they adhere to expectations of proper grammar, spelling, formatting, and tone. Although, or perhaps because detached, they feel uncannily professional.

It is precisely this generic quality that denotes the presence of AI. OpenAI writes on their homepage, ‘We build our generative models using a technology called deep learning, which leverages large amounts of data to train an AI system to perform a task’.²⁹ Their texts are an amalgamation of public thought, or a reproduction of the average sentence written on its subject online. Their responses to English prompts read like Wikipedia entries—they dryly display a broad scope of knowledge about the text at hand. Benjamin writes, ‘With the extension of the press, letters to the editor, etc. the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character’.³⁰ Here, the fusion of the author and the public becomes literalised when ChatGPT generates the average of all public thought documented online. Its rigidity of form that perfects its spelling and grammar makes it, mathematically, intensely predictable. Grading based on mechanics alone will inevitably make institutions of learning irrelevant if students only care to obtain a degree. In the end, I

²⁵ ChatGPT [accessed 12 April 2023].

²⁶—— [accessed 12 April 2023].

²⁷ ——[accessed 12 April 2023].

²⁸ Joyce, p. 116.

²⁹ Research (2022), OpenAI < <https://www.openai.com> > [accessed 11 April 2023].

³⁰ Benjamin, p. 721.

graded my paper an A- and ChatGPT's a B+, which is hardly a matter of concern for a student expecting a C. The performance of the academic professional is no longer a practice measurement of learning. We must consider the English essay a work of art if we want it to survive.

Conclusion

Though this paper understands beauty as embodied to argue for its future, I still feel sick knowing that I will someday be moved by an essay or a poem written using AI. If ChatGPT can eventually produce a flawless essay that creates great work for an institution, must its value be reconsidered? If it possesses Eliot's depersonalised 'historical sense'³¹ to a point where its literary skills match those of a human artisan, can the work's internal artistic value override the fact of its nonhuman creation? Perhaps we will mistake AI poetry for the real thing too many times and become disinterested in embodiment to a degree that redefines the feeling of beauty. Besides, why is human creativity, rooted in a knowledge tradition and in associations between already-known works, fundamentally different from computer-generated creativity when we suspend the assumption of a soul differentiating the two? I freeze during an imaginary argument when a student asks me why it would matter if a paper was written by a human if it spurs real, and therefore human, feelings. Then, perhaps love letters written by ChatGPT are just as meaningful as one your partner wrote for you. After all, their intent was to create something that expresses their feelings; why should it matter that they've expedited the process? And if I discover that a nuanced, evocative, and insightful essay was written with AI, can I truly consider it a betrayal? As we move into the immediate and unknown future of English studies, I conclude by admitting that my questions here are, unfortunately, far from rhetorical.

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³¹ T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *The Critical Tradition*, pp. 321-325 (p. 322).

Moveable Type 15 (2023-24)

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