THE FUTURE OF POETRY

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By Thomas Wolf

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We cannot be stopped at a given point … that is no satisfaction;
To show us a good thing or a few good things for a space of time –
     that is no satisfaction;
We must have the indestructible breed of the best, regardless of time.

Walt Whitman, 'To Think of Time'

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The government has decided to award the poet a few new medals – medals he has not been previously awarded. One medal is awarded for his work prior to 1956, one for his work from 1956 to the present, and one for his future work.

More or less Donald Barthelme, "The Genius"

I have seen the future of poetry, and it is in the past. 1984, to be exact, when a precocious algorithm named RACTER published its first book, a tidy little affair called *The Policeman's Beard is Half Constructed*. Its weird surrealist illustrations aside, *The Policeman's Beard* was notable for two quirks, first, being written by a robot, and second, despite being written by a robot, reading like poetry by John Ashbery.

Wait …

If we want to be totally rigorous about our futurology, we shouldn't take these similarities with Ashbery lightly. Given the insane rate at which he churns out poems that read like those produced by a robot, it's possible that Ashbery is himself a robot. If Ashbery is in fact a robot, the first clause of the second sentence of this piece would have to be amended to read "1927" (Ashbery's birthday), or better, "circa 1942 – 1946" (when he/it began reading and writing poetry). Suffice to say, if you're looking for the future of poetry, you're somewhere between 23 and 80 years too late.

Perhaps I'm missing the point, you're thinking, puzzling over the exact definition of the term "future" that I've been winging around with such casual abandon.

Hold on, you exclaim: Saying the future of poetry is in the past because a robot poet already exists – and might have even taken human form without anyone knowing the better – is like saying the future of energy happened in 1932 because that's when Cockcroft and Walton first split the atom. While the future of energy might have *begun* then, it certainly didn't *end* then. In other words, you say to me, beginning to mix metaphors, if time is a river, we're not interested in the point where a tiny rivulet parts from that river and begins making its own way toward the ocean. We're concerned with the point where that rivulet becomes a roaring, busy waterway in its own right, you know, with suspension bridges and water fowl and the occasional loss of limbs by fisherman victimized in unfortunate occupational accidents.

Right.

If that's the case, a little more on RACTER would be in order. More or less, RACTER was a computer program that generated poems by combining words from a virtual dictionary according to a set of formal rules. These rules could have included something as basic as "produce a ten-syllable line" or more complicated like "alternate couplets of pentameter and hexameter under an ABABCAC rhyming scheme while building an acrostic that spells out the name of a mammal." The programming is difficult, but it makes the production easy. With the push of a button, RACTER can generate an infinite, or near-infinite, number of poems. And not just poems, but any kind of verbal combinations, like stories, e-mails, and articles about robot poetry.

Some of the possible consequences of RACTER-like programs entering into common use seem relatively straightforward. Without a doubt, language would change. Take a colloquialism well loved by elitists and statisticians. In the age of fully flourishing robopoetics, the saying "Twelve monkeys banging on a typewriter could have written that!" wouldn't just be theoretically plausible, it would be true. My guess is that, as a result, most people would stop saying it. Even if they *did* keep saying it, the whole "twelve" business would seem like needless exaggeration, because one monkey could do the same thing with one button, a whole lot more accurately and economically.

Other consequences are far more wide-reaching. I can foresee at least two possible future scenarios for a world of robot poetry.

The first has been proposed by others. Robopoeticist Christian Bök has suggested that poets,

in the future, will be more like computer programmers than writers. In this version of the post-RACTER future, poets will be lauded not for applying pen to paper, but for creating the conditions under which robots are able to produce the most pleasing/thought-provoking/interesting combinations of words. In that respect, poets won't even be "poets" *per se*. The Death of the Author will be the Birth of the Metapoet.

Metapoetry is foreseeable, but is it possible? Where would this new breed of metapoets – fussing under yew trees with their weighty algorithms, standing amid banks of servers discussing iambs and aleatory, smoking opium on their divans in search of the perfect command line – come from? RACTER seems like a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for metapoetry. We'd also need a major change in our educational system to bring it about. Imagine a new interdisciplinary major, one that would combine computer science, linguistics, and literature, where budding meta-roboto-literati could learn not only to appreciate good poetry, but also to program computers to make more good poetry. The BASc in Robopoetics would be a highly subscribed diploma, if only for its flexibility. Consider a typical term-time course load:

> Computational Linguistics
> Data Structures and Algorithms
> Prosody and Intonation
> Yeats.

Despite their innovative new degrees, young metapoets would face the same choices as all contemporary graduates: sell out and work for corporate Europe or live in their parents' basements. While the poet in each would melancholically whisper "basement," the programmer in each would break that poet's limp wrists, strangle him with his cravat, and scream "TECH FIRM!" And so, each year, hundreds of newly minted BAScs would trudge off to any number of gargantuan robot-poetry corporations. Firms with simultaneously cutting-edge and old-timey names like "Dactyl!" or "TrocheeTronics" or "cummings," where they'd build poetry robots with sleek Scandinavian styling for home use. Every morning, the millions of poetry robot owners could enjoy new, custom-made poems with their breakfast.

In what might be the weirdest potential offshoot of the metapoetry scenario, poets would come to seem less like men of letters and more like manual laborers. Why? Poetry robots for home use also seem to imply poetry robot repairmen. Like all machines, the robots would occasionally be subject to malfunctions, like failing to power-on, shooting off sparks, or printing out poems with questionable off-rhymes. After placing a call to the poetry robot helpline, who else would show up to your doorstep with a tool box, jump drive, and polycotton smoking jacket but your friendly neighborhood metapoet? He would be tech-savvy, incredibly well-versed, and would fix your problem in a jiffy, all while grinning and saying mildly flirty, but generally inoffensive, things to your wife. At the end of the day, he'd retire to the neighborhood pub, where he and his fellow blue-collar metapoets would drink absinthe, watch the Premiership, and argue about the proper uses of enjambment.

This is all imaginable, but hopefully we can now see how tricky the game of futurology is: to assume that poetry machines will be as ubiquitous and loved as ovens and microwaves is to assume that poetry will once again matter as much to people as roast beef and frozen meat pies. A highly unlikely occurrence. Should this poetic renaissance occur, however, society would seem a lot like, say, 1953, when "Lionel Trilling" and "Randall Jarrell" meant something to people. That is to say, if poetry machines became popular household appliances, our future would look a lot like our past.

The place of poetry in that past-looking future would be tenuous. Even if poetry robots succeeded in mainstreaming poetry, they'd only do so by transforming it into a faddish commodity. And, like all faddish commodities, it would disappear as quickly as a new fad emerged to take its place, like giant robot dogs with silicon slobber, smell-enhanced television, or a fifth dimension. Reduced to a simple machine output, poetry would be less like a form of human communication (assuming it ever were so), and more like a birdsong: something we find pleasant as it lilts along in the background, but nothing anyone not seeking tenure in zoology or animal musicology would parse and mull over their morning Muesli.

A less probable, but more uplifting and significantly less snarky, future for a post-RACTER world is conceivable, one where poetry is redeemed through its demotion, rather than demoted through its redemption. Arriving at this alternative future scenario requires teasing out some of the consequences of RACTER for poetry studies.

Conceivably, in an era when most poetry is produced by robots, scholars could incorporate robot poets into the canon as writers in their own right. Meanwhile, metapoets could be subject to study, resulting in a new poetics that looks something like a cross between code-analysis and intellectual biography.

Or, scholars could close the canon and simply analyze and reanalyze the same unchanging

body of pre-robotic poems according to whatever new theory or theories would inevitably arise every twenty years or so. Canon-closing, however, seems unlikely for two reasons. First, as broad and diverse as the body of pre-robotic poetry is, poetics as a loosely defined branch of scholarly pursuit probably couldn't withstand more than a few theoretical rakings-over before cynicism and apathy would set in among exegetes. Second, and more importantly, closing the canon would seem to be an admission to the fundamental importance of notions of authorship and intentionality to understanding poetry. Why else would scholars close the canon, except to say that poetry ended with the Death of the Author? The theory wars of the past half-century or so wouldn't allow it. Legions of Derrideans, poststructuralists, and intertextualists would probably want to keep the canon open to robots, either out of sincere methodological interest or spite.

Finally, scholars could begin to build a parallel "counter-canon." If our metapoets were sufficiently adept, they could conceivably write algorithms that could create the types of poems that Plath, Murasaki, or Mayakovsky might have written had each been more productive during his or her lifetime. All it would require is fitting the appropriate program onto the appropriate historical dictionaries, pressing a button, and voila: a *Bell Jar Plus*, *The Tale of Genji Redux*, or *A Cloud in Trousers 2.0*. Counterpoetics would particularly be a boon for lovers and scholars of those poets who left reams of unfinished work behind, our Pessoas, or those who ended their own lives before reaching the height of their powers, our Celans.

Perhaps more excitingly, Akhmatova or Spenser algorithms could be linked to contemporary dictionaries, allowing us to create poems that would combine the technical aspects and moods of the all-time greats with contemporary images and issues. It would be like having a "Whitman filter" for our world. Just imagine a counter-*Leaves of Grass*, where words like "digicam" and "guerilla shock troops" would be organized in much the same way that Whitman organized "daguerreotype" and "man'o'warsmen". What a way to make poetry relevant for new generations, boosters of counter-poetics would proclaim. Poetry would once again matter for Generation iPod.

All this assumes, however, that a counter-*Leaves of Grass* would have the same sort of allure as its historical forebear, that it would be "as good" or "better" (by whatever measure) than the original – or even marginally readable. All of this neglects to question whether it wasn't Whitman's choice to use "daguerreotype" and "man'o'warsmen" and not "digicam" and "guerilla shock troops" that made Whitman worth reading, or that the world of daguerreotypes and man'o'warsmen is what made Whitman capable of writing something worth reading. Or, more radically, that someone who was more or less Whitman – with the sorts of sensitivities and concerns we have come to associate with "Whitman" – living in a world of digicams and guerilla shock troops wouldn't have become a software designer, or an accountant, or… just pitched himself bodily into the East River, in which cases, he wouldn't have been the author of *Leaves of Grass* or the counter-*Leaves of Grass*, but rather, a metapoet, or Wallace Stevens, or Celan, respectively, depending on which of the three possible ends for our future Whitman was, in the future, historical, and not counterhistorical like the others.

Taken to its most absurd extreme – Alexandrian libraries filled with counter-alexandrines – robot poetics might take us through one end of the rabbit hole and out the other. What scholars might discover, in their attempts to produce and process these libraries of counter-texts, is that what makes a writer *the* writer – a unique voice, one worth reading – is not just what he has written, but what he hasn't written. Or, more precisely, *that* he hasn't written what he hasn't written. A positive identity revealed through the looking-glass of counter-identity.

This would be a radical change in human understanding brought about through poetry, one that wouldn't just make us reconsider the beauty of a wounded bird or the intriguing expressiveness of empty brackets [   ], but would compel us to renovate our very notion of the individual. A proposition: We tend to look at individual identity as the sum of a set of accomplishments; a life and its live-r as a CV. Our attraction to accomplishment might be the perverse effect of the economy. Or the basic economy of speech, the way we as time-pressed social beings speak; rather than list what someone *is not* (not-blue-eyed, not-hazel-eyed), we just say what he is (brown-eyed)… it's just simpler that way. Or, reaching more deeply, our language might be reflective of an underlying existentialist bent in our culture: We are nothing before we act, and the "true," "authentic," and "worthy" individual is one who endlessly creates, re-creates, and conquers. In a philosophy where a lack of action is synonymous with bad faith, to suggest that what we are – as cherished individuals, picked-out, studied, and honored – is what we haven't done would be heresy.

Perhaps this would change in the world of robot counterpoetics *absurdum*. I'm not a gambling man, but I would wager most of the counterpoetry produced by RACTER's descendants would be

"bad," by any number of different measurements. And in seeing our alterna-Audens, bizarro-Bishops, and counter-Coleridges fail where their historical counterparts triumphed, we might receive a material demonstration of the basic travesty at the core of robot counterpoetics: the attempt to transform an individual voice into algorithm, to stretch it, bend it, and morph it, to make it speak more (volumes) where it has otherwise been silent, as if the silence wasn't as important to the poet and the poetry as the speaking. In the counterpoetic future, where only robots can lead us, we might finally be able to embrace the individual, however limited, mortal, and time-bound, not as a bundle of actions, a word generator, or an idea machine, but. as a voice, actor, and world complete unto him or herself, however limited.

A world of robot poets? Here's hoping.

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