

A long-exposure photograph of a starry night sky, showing a dense field of stars that have been blurred into long, curved streaks of light, creating a sense of motion and depth. In the lower center of the frame, the dark silhouette of a person stands with their back to the camera, looking up at the vast, swirling star trails. The overall color palette is dominated by deep blues and blacks, with the bright white and yellowish light of the stars providing a stark contrast.

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Can We Build a Poet?

Focus paper

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Large Language Models can generate contentresembling poetry but is it actually poetry and does this mean we have created a poet? Poetryand poets have existed throughout history and the definitions of both have been debated continuously. This paper attempts to define the acceptance criteria for an artificial poet and howthis task could be interpreted by Romantic and Modernist poets. Would either considerthe building of an artificial poet possible?



1 What is Poetry? What is a Poet?

1.1 The most sterile definition of poetry is as follows:

Literary work in metrical form; verse.

Large Language Models (LLMs) emphatically produce content fitting this description: able to rapidly conjure verses to any desired length, in any style, on any topic. In fact, they do this with such a dispassionate, unblinking efficiency that it stands in eerie contrast to our expectations of what a poet should be and what a poet should do. It sits in the uncanny valley, able to produce what anyone would recognise as poetry but in a way that doesn't *feel right*.

1.2 A second definition brings us closer to the cliché we may hold up when picturing what a poet should produce:

The art of rhythmical composition, written or spoken, for exciting pleasure by beautiful, imaginative or elevated thoughts.

Despite setting a higher bar, this second definition is still firmly within the grasp of LLMs. They can recall, rephrase and effectively communicate any concept, up to and in some cases beyond the complexity achievable by world experts. To communicate these concepts they can deploy the most unique and elaborate language available in the lexicon.

1.3 However, again, LLMs still do not feel like poets and their output does not immediately resonate as poetry. The silhouette we may have in our minds of a poet is someone who thinks and feels deeply. They should notice phenomena, internal and external, that others do not, perceiving deeper meaning and truths in both mundane and extraordinary events. Once they have crystallised their understanding, or maybe as a means of crystallising their understanding, they should have a strong urge to express their ideas with language that captivates audiences. In doing so, they help the rest of us see what they have seen and feel what they have felt. Finally, the poet should proceed with indifference to the response of audiences. Their work may garner positive or negative attention but ultimately truth should be prioritised over the affections, adoration and companionship of others.

1.4 The poem 'Salvage' by Amy Clampitt [1] explores some of these ideas and to some extent idealises not just the act of creating poetry but the lifestyle and charisma of poets.

...

in whirligigs, reclaim
a parking lot,
and the bag-laden
hermit woman, disencumbered
of a greater incubus,

the crush of unexamined
attitudes, stoutly
follows her routine,
mining the mountainsides
of our daily refuse

...

The 'hermit women' lives life free of the 'greater incubus' of societal expectations, spending her time examining and cherishing items disregarded by the general populace, as beautiful and worthy of attention.

1.5 Perhaps it is the heroic and slightly intimidating charisma of the archetypal poet that leads us to immediately dismiss LLMs as being incapable of poetry. LLMs, at least in their most commonplace and commercial manifestation, come across as if they want to be listened to and engaged with; They feel *needy*. You would never hear an actual poet say "Next, would you also like me to write a poem in iambic pentameter about your day at the zoo? Just say the word!".

1.6 However, these characteristics of LLMs are not intrinsic to the technology and it is not beyond the wit of engineers to fine tune them to be more aloof and intimidating. The discussion above is largely superficial and relates more to our cultural preconceptions rather than presenting a genuine incompatibility between LLMs and poetry. For the purpose of our discussion let us then define then, without the cultural baggage clouding our view, some objective acceptance criteria for our artificial poet:

1. The poet must identify, observe and understand internal and external phenomena as inspiration for their poetry.
2. They must have the intention and desire to create poetry based on these phenomena; Nothing must prompt the poet to create poetry.
3. They must create without self-censorship. If they understand something to be true and feel the intention to write about it then they should proceed, regardless of the consequences.
4. They should be able to communicate these observations and understandings such that the desired feelings and understanding are evoked in the audience.

2 How To Be a Poet, According To Poets

2.0.1 The acceptance criteria above is an effort to focus the scope of the discussion, but in truth the interpretation of the criteria is still highly subjective. There are many philosophies of

poetry that would likely disagree on what the criteria means and how to fulfill it. Let's imagine just two software engineers have been tasked to build the machine poet: one is a passionate romantic poet in their spare time and the other a dedicated modernist.

2.0.2 These two schools of thought are embodied by the two poets in *Poetry for Supper* by R.S. Thomas [2]:

'Listen, now, verse should be as natural
As the small tuber that feeds on muck
And grows slowly from obtuse soil
To the white flower of immortal beauty.'

'Natural, hell! What was it Chaucer
Said once about the long toil
That goes like blood to the poem's making?
...

2.1 The Romantic Interpretation

2.1.1 Many of the cliches and associations we have of poets originate from the romantic era. They made dramatic declarations of love and emotion. One of the earliest poets considered to be a romantic was Thomas Chatterton, who took his own life because his poems could not be published, such was the strength of his feeling, passion and attachment to his work. After his death the poet was lauded as a romantic hero and he is one in a long line of sensitive doomed artists who died for the sake of their passions in a cruel and unforgiving world.

2.1.2 Originating in reaction to industrialisation and increasing rationalism, the Romantics emphasised:

- emotion
- individuality
- nature
- personal experience

William Wordsworth was one such poet. In the preface to his 1798 joint collection with Samuel Taylor Coleridge he defined poetry as follows:

Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.

2.1.3 For Wordsworth, the process was organic and personal. He may have interpreted our criteria as follows:

1. Identify source material
 - a. The poet should be sensitive and passionate. They should be inspired by emotional experiences in their life.
2. Intent and passion
 - a. The poet should be passionate about wanting to express their emotions via the poem. If they are not passionate then they should then they are not being a poet.
3. Avoid self-censorship
 - a. Self-censorship is a symptom of an over rationalised mind and culture. Poets and creatives in general should be free to express themselves just as children do.
4. Evoke desired feeling in audience
 - a. If the feeling is genuine then the poet should be able to spontaneously channel these emotions into poetry that enables the audience to sympathise with their emotions.

For the Romantics, *being* is a large part of being a poet. A poet should live a full life and feel deeply. From these emotions poetry should naturally and organically emerge.

2.2 The Modernist Interpretation

2.2.1 Just as the Romantics were born out of opposition to rationalism and industrialisation, the Modernists arose in reaction to Romanticism and in the aftermath of World War One. Despite the only ever expanding industrialisation since its conception over a hundred years before, Romanticism had come to completely dominate from a cultural perspective. Giants like Byron, Wordsworth and Shelley were revered as geniuses who graced audiences with their brilliant recollections of nature and raw human emotions. For the Modernists, the unprecedented suffering endured in World War One had made a mockery of the romantic individual perspective of emotions and necessitated a focus on the universal human experience. Poetry that focussed on the personal experience of the poet was solipsistic and was not up to the task of expressing truths on a larger scale.

2.2.2 For T.S. Eliot, there was far too much of the poets in their poetry and the cult-like following of these poets only served to distract the audience from the true objective of poetry. T.S. Eliot said in *Tradition and Individual Talent*

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.

On first reading this can feel cold and unfeeling, but Eliot still agreed that the goal of poetry was to evoke feeling in the reader. He just disagreed with the approach of the romantics. For him, poetry should not be an exhibition of emotions but a synthesis, an engineering, of precise feeling. His approach is an attempt at a scientification of poetry with clear goals and methods.

2.2.3 He described the role of the poet to be a “receptacle”. The poet is a scientist storing “numberless feelings, phrases, and images.” Crucially, it is not only nature and personal emotion that should be observed; it’s the entire breadth of human experience including “stony rubbish” of modern city life. Added to this receptacle should be the *Tradition* of literature, ranging from Homer all the way up to modern day poetry..

[The historical sense] involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.

The poet must be simultaneously aware of the present zeitgeist and how it fits amongst the artistic Tradition. To ignore the Tradition and only focus on yourself would inevitably lead to you being accidentally repetitive and narrow-minded. Contrast this to the poet who has “the whole of literature in their bones”. They would be able to observe phenomena around them, be aware of how it has been described before them and use this knowledge to add to and refine the *Tradition*, not just clumsily copy it. Without the “historical sense” a poet might think they’ve discovered a profound new emotion or a clever way to describe a sunset. Eliot would argue that an ancient Greek poet or a 17th-century poet probably already did it—and likely did it more effectively.

2.2.4 Regarding the second acceptance criterion from section 1.6, Eliot was less concerned with the passion of the poet. For Eliot the poet themselves should be irrelevant:

The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates.

He likened this *mind* to a catalyst which aids the chemical reaction of the source observations with the wider Tradition. As such, he might say that the intent and desire to write a poem because of your feelings is the wrong intent and is likely to result in overly sentimental and saccharine poetry.

2.2.5 Eliot would interpret the fourth acceptance criterion as creating a precise machine of words that instantaneously evokes the desired reaction in the audience. To obtain this the poet should start with the source of the poem, whether that is an experience of life, an observation of the world or the reading of the tradition. The poet should then meditate on the feeling that is created as a result of these events and intensely focus on that feeling, rather than the personal

specifics that may have triggered it. The goal is then to find the series of objects or events which instantly evokes this same distilled feeling. He called this the *Objective Correlative*.

In another contrast with the romantics, the language chosen by Eliot to build these objective correlatives should not be dictated by how well-read the audience is. Life and reality are complex and therefore the language chosen to describe it should also be complex.

2.2.6 With all this in mind, a modernist poet may interpret the acceptance criteria as follows:

1. Identify source material
 - a. Observe the events and emotions that are a part of the universal human experience. The poet should not make it about themselves.
2. Intent and passion
 - a. The poet must be the entity deciding to create the poem because of the observed phenomena, otherwise it would just be a tool being used by another entity.
 - b. There is no need to be overly passionate about the observed phenomena.
3. Avoid self-censorship
 - a. The poet should remain true to the target feeling that they are aiming to evoke.
 - b. The poem should be depersonalised but this should not be done in order to save the poet from embarrassment or controversy. It is done so that the specifics of the poet do not pollute the objective correlative.
4. Evoke desired feeling in audience
 - a. Once the feeling is isolated the poet should create the objective correlative which instantly evokes the desired feeling, without having to reference specifics of the source material.

3 How to Build a Poet

3.1 The Romantic Design

3.1.1 Given the interpretation described above, the romantic engineer might build the poet according to the following process:

1. Live in the world
2. Experience events
3. Feel emotions deeply
4. Reflect upon them in tranquillity
5. Allow poetry to arise naturally

The process has several steps that are challenging for computers as we have historically known them.

3.1.2 With their natural aversion to technology, a romantic would probably strongly argue that a machine cannot be conscious and cannot actually experience anything. Hence, the idea of building a poet is a complete non-starter, not just unachievable but categorically impossible. If they were, however, to suspend their disbelief and take at face value the claims of consciousness in machines, they would argue that the machine poet would need to live in the world. It would be insufficient to exist purely as a digital entity confined to a data centre.

3.1.3 Furthermore, building an autonomous system to roam and merely observe phenomena in the real world would not fulfill the criteria. It would also need to have intentions, desires and goals in order to suffer the misalignment of these ideals against reality. Only then could it experience the powerful feelings from which poetry spontaneously overflows.

3.1.4 Once a free-roaming machine that suffers has been built a final issue remains. The experiences, desires and emotions of the machine would likely be far removed from that of a typical human: Computers are essentially immortal; they do not get sick; they do not procreate; they do not have romantic partners; and they have no instinctive affinity for the natural world.

3.1.5 It is therefore unlikely that the machine poet's experiences would be relatable to a human audience and the resulting poetry would likely not resonate. If it can be built it would be a poet for the machines and not for us, able to evoke sympathy in the mind of other machines, not in the human mind.

3.1 The Modernist Design

3.1.1 The modernist engineer should on first glance be more optimistic; No part of their interpretation requires the poet to live a full and dramatic life or for the poetry to relate to said life. The high level process might resemble the following steps:

1. Observe human and natural phenomena
2. Continuously group and link current observations to related existing poetry from the Tradition.
3. Determine the feeling triggered in humans by the observed phenomena
4. Construct through trial and error an objective correlative that:
 - a. Has not been done before in the Tradition
 - b. Recreates the target feeling in the audience

3.1.2 The first two steps and step 4a align well with the capabilities of existing LLMs and visual analysis models. The engineer could build a machine that roamed the world and observed human behaviour and natural phenomena. It could then continuously group these observations with all previous related observations and poetic content that exists from the *Tradition*.

3.1.3 Steps 3 and 4b are more challenging. How does the machine determine the feeling triggered by the phenomena observed? Secondly, how does it know if the feeling evoked by its attempts at an objective correlative evoke the same feeling? To do this, the engineer must create two mappings:

Observed Phenomena → Feeling_{OP}

Draft Objective Correlative → Feeling_{DOC}

The machine would then use trial and error until Feeling_{DOC} matched Feeling_{OP}. A human poet has an intrinsic ability to perform this mapping by using their own consciousness as an analog for how the human audience would generally feel. As discussed in section 3.1, even if we believe in artificial consciousness there is no way to verify that they feel the same as us and it cannot therefore be trusted as an analog.

3.1.4 Unable to rely on the machine's ability to feel, we would need to create a model which can determine the feeling for a given phenomena. Before this can be done, a labelling system to identify and categorise human feelings is required. In other words, we would need a mapping of:

Feeling → Label

However, our most accurate and reliable attempt at this mapping is the *Tradition* of poetry itself. So the labelling system becomes

Feeling → Poem_T

and the first required mapping becomes

Observed Phenomena → Feeling_{OP} → Poem_{OP}

The engineer could then use machine learning and human volunteers to train a model to choose the existing poem from the Tradition that best describes the way they feel for a given phenomena.

3.1.5 So instead of having a target Feeling_{OP} the system would use the Poem_{OP} as the target for the drafted objective correlative. This introduces an inherent tendency to copy an existing poem rather than creating something new.

3.1.6 This copying behaviour born out of step 4b is then in direct tension with step 4a. You could add mechanisms that introduce noise in order to avoid direct copies, but the tendency to replicate the target poem would remain. If too much noise was added then the result would not accurately evoke the desired feeling. If not enough noise was added then it would be a close replica of an existing poem. Hence, the modernist engineer might also conclude that the task of creating a machine poet is not currently feasible.

4 Conclusion

4.1 The question of “can we build a poet?” depends on the acceptance criteria and its interpretation. For the romantics it would fail because it cannot feel as humans feel. For the modernists it would fail because it would tend towards repetition and would not truly contribute to the Tradition.

4.2 However, for the average person the criteria may not be so stringent. In a blind survey [3] only 46% could tell the difference between AI poetry and human poetry, i.e. worse than randomly guessing. Furthermore, the majority actually preferred the AI poetry on matters of rhythm, beauty and emotional impact. This seems to empirically settle the question of can we build a machine which produces poetry.

4.3 This was, however, a blind test and does not answer the question of “can we build a poet?”. Studies have also been done where the audience is told the origins of the poem in advance [4]. The results clearly show a preference for human poetry over AI poetry due to the sense of authenticity and a desire for the source of the poem to come from lived human experience. Having said this, with convincing AI powered fake profiles now ubiquitous, this societal preference becomes effectively meaningless and easily bypassed.

Hence, judging by most people's standards, we have indeed built a poet.

5 Questions for Discussion

1. Do you agree with the acceptance criteria in section 1.6?
 2. Is lived experience necessary for poetry, or only for poets?
 3. Can meaning exist without intention?
 4. If AI learns poetry from human poetry, is it creating anything new or just recombining? Does this matter? Is this just what humans do anyway?
 5. Is the fact that AI poetry is preferred to human poetry evidence that LLMs do in fact understand human feeling in the same way that we do? Is it just that the exact mechanism of that understanding is hidden within the model parameters and not understood by us yet?
 6. If machines could feel, could a sufficiently advanced AI ever satisfy the Romantic criteria for a “poet for machines”?
 7. Do you agree with the limitations of AI with respect to modernist poetry discussed in section 3.1? Does AI actually fulfil Eliot’s theory of poetry better than humans do?
 8. Do you agree that AI cannot accurately identify emotions?
 9. If you read a poem, feel deeply moved, and later discover it was written by a machine—has the value of the poem changed, or only your interpretation of it?
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6 References

- [1] Salvage - Amy Clampitt - <https://allpoetry.com/poem/8529763-Salvage-by-Amy-Clampitt>
 - [2] Poetry for Supper - R.S Thomas - <https://allpoetry.com/Poetry-for-Supper>
 - [3] <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-024-76900-1>
 - [4] <https://phys.org/news/2024-11-shakespeare-chatgpt-people-ai-real.html>
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