

Say a Body Where None: The Blood Sport Between AI, Authorship, and Humanities on the Cusp of Revolution

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the revolutionary impact of AI-generated literature within the field of humanities. This new model of non-authorship and texts reception considers a democratic approach, thus a reduced and compressed alternative to experience literature. Generative AI can generate ‘unpublished’ or ‘posthumous’ contents in the style of deceased authors and conversational supports to virtually speak to undead avatars of authors. However, a rather popular opinion is that AI-generated literature represents a degradation of literary contents, especially in the transformation of texts into reader-user-consumer products of entertainment, increasing pathological socio-phenomena such as Necromanticism and Foreverism.

INTRODUCTION

According to theorists of literary reception, the efficacy of texts is defined by their adequate actualisations, thus interactions between authors, texts and public (Jauss 1970) which results in a convergence of original texts and reinterpretations of them (Iser 1985). This is experienced especially within the AI era, where two different – if not opposite – dynamics regarding the reception of literary texts can be recognised, that is a *traditional* and a *new* one, yet both trying to keep literary contents *alive*. Thus, a common goal is shared. However, methods implied are different. The traditional – *authorial* – one implies authors’ original corpora gaining immortal legacy by virtue of a well-defined authorship related to an identity which is perpetuated together with texts associated to it. Within the new – *performative* – one instead, conveyed through generative AI tools, the stress is on literary performance, thus texts alone, totally detached from notions of historical authenticity, since associated to ‘digital ghosts’ of authorship – or ‘non-authorship’, such as AI avatars, chatbots and thanabots. Therefore, immortal legacy is here gained by virtue of texts themselves and their potentially never-ending influence on the community of readers. Nevertheless, traditional literary legacy has been dominating throughout history until the advent of AI within the literary field, such an impressive phenomenon which completely changed the literary

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paradigm in its rules, definitions and tools. The two are gradually levelling out, making real the fear of scholars and doomsayers towards a possible overrun of the traditional literary paradigm.

Speaking of which, during the 20th century an important philosophical debate dealt with differences and contradictions between “first” and “second technology” (Benjamin 1936, p. 107), that is painting and photography. Walter Benjamin claims that the authority of artistic works lies in their “aura” (p. 103) which guarantees their status and legacy as unique manifestations of a distance, namely the “sign of history” (p. 105). On the other hand, when works are technologically reproduced, they detach from their original context of production and their uniqueness gets infinitely repeated within mass consumption. Reproduction is then a continuous process of actualisation which potentiates the legacy of authorial works by converting them into useful objects for any present receiving context (Benjamin 1936). On the contrary, Carl Einstein claims that the legacy of authorial works is a-historical, thus related to a material and sentimental immortality which is “in contradiction to every historical process”¹.

Recent debates on AI and literature could mirror the disruptive Benjamin-Einstein debate on first and second technology, highlighting how these two legacy models carry on the ambivalence of a past socio-cultural phenomenon which is lately reoccurring in terms of controversy. AI generated literature promises a “software-based” (Lagerkvist 2014, p. 5) post mortality which has to do with both the perpetuation of the self – in order to avoid death and oblivion – and the “artistic appropriation” (Schröter 2019, p. 307), conveyed by *stealing* or *borrowing* authorial contents so as to generate new ones on users’ demands.

AUTHORIAL IMMORTALITY: A NEVER-ENDING DIALOGUE WITH THE DEAD

Benjamin (1936) argues that the source of power of an artwork lies in its “authority” (Haxthausen 2004, p. 50), thus its *aura*. According to the German philosopher, the potential uniqueness of art resides in its “shell” (Benjamin 1936, p. 103) or superficial “veil” which ensures its status as a “unique manifestation of a distance” (p. 104). Benjamin further highlights the intrusive presence of the sign of history as a dimension basically ‘enveloping’ the artwork, and inevitably subjecting it. As soon as an artwork is consistently placed within its context of origin and production, it cannot escape the process of historicization, whereby artistic objects are defined in “the here and now” (p. 103) – a form of pursuit enduring even when material, functional, and property changes occur. This eventually confers upon the artwork a potential identification with immortality, grounded in its “uniqueness and duration” (Haxthausen 2004, p. 52) as “the original image” (p. 50) engaged in a never-ending dialogue with its past.

To this end, associations can be drawn with the traditional *topos* of the intrinsic incompleteness of art itself. The American art historian Paul Barolsky (2015), analysing incompleteness as a symptom of infinity in Renaissance artistic forms, mentions Pablo Picasso’s idea of ‘never finished’ art – totally aligning with the painter’s well-known artistic theory according to which great artists *steal* rather than *copy*, thereby creating an infinite circuit of intertextual references. Barolsky then focuses on a graphic peculiarity of Italian Renaissance artworks: artists used to sign their works with the Latin imperfect *faciebat* instead of the perfect *fecit*, suggesting an ongoing or incomplete work. Following this path, reception theories developed during the 20th century by critics like Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss directly relate to this discussion. In the 1960s, at the University of Konstanz, the so-called reception theorists emerged. Jauss’s (1967)² research on literary studies proposed shifting the perspective focusing on reception rather than production of texts, understanding the history of literature not as a mere chronological list of works and authors, but rather as a network where

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