

Artifice and Intelligence: Creative Work in the Age of AI

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There are mornings when words wake before I do—humming quietly in the sub-dermal layers of my consciousness, what I call, in one of my poems, the “space between Memory and Dream”. They rehearse entrances, whispering of syntax and rhythm, asking to be born. On those mornings, I imagine language as a kind of river: winding, glittering, sometimes overrun, sometimes bone-dry. The poet’s task, I have always felt, is not to dam or otherwise control that river but to learn how to listen to it—to let its flows and currents teach us what is possible.

Today, in our age of artificial intelligence (AI), the river has acquired new tributaries. Some are crystalline with promise, others murky and uncertain. Everywhere, the waters of artifice mingle with the tides of intelligence, and we who call ourselves creators—poets, painters, composers, sculptors—find ourselves asking: *What does it mean to make something new, when the act of making itself can be mimicked, even automated—at scales and speeds we can never match?*

Defining Artifice

The title of this essay borrows its first word from *Poetic Artifice*, Veronica Forrest-Thomson’s extraordinary meditation on the mechanics of poetry. For her, *artifice* is not deception but devotion—a recognition that poetry must, in some measure, resist the smooth comfort of everyday language. True poems, she says, “use and abuse” ordinary speech, transforming it through rhythm, metaphor, and form until the familiar becomes strange again. The reader’s task is not to naturalise the poem, not to make it too easy, but to let it *remain difficult*, to let it stretch the mind toward meanings that shimmer just beyond reach.

That idea has always thrilled me that poetry, by its very nature, is both artificial *and* intelligent. To write is to align and realign words, images, sounds: to build scaffolds of sense from the raw materials of speech.

It is, in many ways, an act of engineering—not mechanical but imaginative, not robotic but resonant.

And yet, how curious that the word *artifice*, once the province of poets and painters, now sits so comfortably beside *intelligence*. Both words gesture toward construction, toward something *made*. Both remind us that creativity—human or machine—begins with an impulse to organise and pattern; to discover beauty in structure and constraint.

The Poetic Turing Test

Since 2022, when ChatGPT became pervasive, I have taught a class that explores these questions. Students encounter sets of three poems: one by a poet on a chosen theme, one by a human poet respondent on a similar theme, and one by an AI. The students’ task is to tell which is which.

We begin, as many Singaporean discussions of poetry do, with the Merlion. We read Edwin Thumboo’s solemn invocation, *Ulysses by the Merlion*, and Lee Tzu Pheng’s more ambivalent *The Merlion to Ulysses*. Adjacent to these, we place an AI-generated poem—early versions written by various Open AI models, more recent ones by DeepSeek. The first few times I ran this exercise, my students were unanimous: the AI poem was the one that sounded contrived. It was smooth, but too smooth—the rhymes felt forced, the lines lacked the natural rhythms of human heartbeats, the final stanzas were too obviously aphoristic perorations. The pieces lacked the friction that sparks the human imagination. It had not yet passed what I began to think of as the poetic Turing test.

But in the past two years, something shifted. DeepSeek’s verses startled us. They had rhythm, metaphor, even hesitation—that often human quality. One student, uncertain, said: “It *feels* like a person thinking aloud—and using metaphors in ways that are startling”. The class was split. We argued for an hour, tracing the edges of what we called “machine lyricism.” Was it possible that a

neural network could learn and produce such deliberate artifice—with its craft, its deliberate distortions—that it could fool us into feeling?

I remember leaving the classroom that day exhilarated, and uneasy.

Forrest-Thomson's *Poetic Artifice* had found a strange mirror in modern AI. The machine was using language creatively, artificially—but without living a life, without breath or memory. What, then, distinguished it from us? Was the difference merely one of degree—or of kind?

Artifice Meets Algorithm

Poetry, as Robert Frost argued, begins in the connection between sound and sense. The line break, the metaphor, the unexpected enjambment—each stretches meaning just enough to make us sit up and take notice. In this sense, poetry is a technology of attention. It makes us *see* language as alive, dynamic, material, and co-constructive: as something that can shimmer and refract.

AI, too, attends to language—but differently. Large language models learn from oceans of text, predicting next words, next likely phrases. Their attention is statistical, not aesthetic; probabilistic, not affective. And yet, in their vast pattern-seeking, they sometimes stumble upon beauty.

A DeepSeek stanza might echo a heartbeat, a ChatGPT line might capture loneliness. Perhaps this is not surprising. After all, our own intelligence is also built on pattern—the neural firings that help us learn, remember, connect. We, too, are systems that generate meaning from our personal probabilities and individual intuitions.

So what happens when artifice meets algorithms, when the poetic impulse is joined by a computational partner capable of endless iteration?

I would like to believe that the meeting need not be adversarial.

If poetry is the art of artifice—of making things strange to discover in them the familiar—then AI can be the art of making *more*—more versions, more perspectives, more provocations. Together, they might form a new kind of collaboration: one in which the poet's voice is not surrendered but amplified.

AI as Companion and Catalyst

There are moments, even now, when I feel the deep plausibility of obsolescence. When I read an AI-generated poem that feels almost good enough, I wonder whether the world will still need poets like me. But then I remember that every technological shift—from the printing press to photography to film—has sparked similar fears.

And each time, art has adapted, expanding its vocabulary rather than shrinking it.

AI can refine, extend, or provoke. It can help us overcome writer's block by offering scaffolds—rudimentary, sometimes clumsy, but often useful. It can show us the bones of a draft, the understructure of rhythm, the unexpected synonym we might have missed.

I have used AI myself to test what one might call the tensile strength of a poem: to ask, “What happens if I change the voice? The metre? The metaphor?” The responses are not replacements but mirrors—distortions that illuminate the original. I can still choose how my pieces evolve, if at all, in response to what I discover.

There is also a deeper kinship between human creativity and machine intelligence. Both are forms of play. Both depend on pattern recognition, recombination, and surprise. To create is to ask “What if?” and to follow the question where it leads. In that sense, prompting an AI is not unlike beginning a poem: both are acts of invocation. Both depend on curiosity—that oldest of human instincts.

The Proempt: A New Genre?

I have begun to experiment with a new kind of poem that lives in this intersection—what I am calling *proempts*, at least in my personal explorations. A proempt is a poem written as a prompt: it asks, rather than answers; it alludes, rather than concludes. In an age when machines are trained to *complete*, the proempt insists on *exploring*, *developing*, *continuing*. It is the antithesis of closure.

A proempt might begin like this:

*Write of the Merlion as if it were tired of sentinel duty.
Write of the rain as if it were learning to fall again.
Write of the city's silence after the drones have
gone to sleep.*

Each of these lines could be a seed, an invitation. An AI might take them and generate verses; a human poet might take them and feel the shiver of inspiration. In both cases, the prompt becomes the meeting point of minds, both human and digital.

Perhaps the future of creativity lies not in distinction but in dialogue. The artist of tomorrow may be part poet, part programmer—fluent in both metaphor and code, able to dance between the logic of algorithms and the intuition of art.

Against Despair

It is tempting, in moments of fatigue, to see AI as a usurper—a machine capable of doing in seconds what once took us months. I believe that such despair misses the point.

The purpose of art has never been efficiency. Its value lies not in speed or scale but in depth—in the capacity to remind us of our shared humanity. No model, however vast, can replicate the lived texture of being; the grief that

lingers in a mother's touch, the thrill of recognition when a stranger's eyes meet ours across a crowded train. These are the data of the soul, not the API.

And yet, we can let machines' mimicry teach us something too. When AI approximates a sonnet, it reminds us how much structure matters. When it stumbles over metaphor, it reveals how meaning is not mere mapping but lived resonance—and might help us sharpen our own images. In its failures, we rediscover our own strengths.

To be human, after all, is to be fallible—to make mistakes that sometimes turn into miracles. The poet's misstep can become the poem's turning point; the artist's error, the masterpiece's hinge. In that sense, art and AI both thrive on iteration.

The difference is that we, unlike the machine, learn to *feel* through our iterations.

Toward a Shared Future

As Singapore continues its journey as a city of imagination—not only of finance or technology—we have the opportunity to reimagine creativity itself. In this partnership, the poet's role goes beyond generating a piece. The poet becomes curator, conductor, conscience. We can use AI as a lens through which to highlight and interrogate our own impulses more clearly—to test our empathy, to stretch our syntax, to extend our linguistic reach. We can let it provoke us into new forms, just as earlier poets were provoked by new instruments or technologies.

And perhaps this is what Forrest-Thomson meant, after all, by *Poetic Artifice*: not denying reality, but reimagining it. To live poetically in the age of AI is to keep faith with that reimagining to recognise that intelligence, whether human or artificial, is always a kind of artifice, a way of shaping the world into meaning.

Coda: The Human Pulse

When my students ask whether AI can ever *truly* be creative, I tell them this: Creativity is not a product but a pulse. It arises from the friction between knowing and not knowing, from the ache of wanting to say something that has yet to be said. Machines may simulate that friction, but they do not feel it.

And yet, they can help us feel more—by reflecting our words back to us, by showing us what language can do when it runs wild(er) across circuits and servers.

In that sense, artifice and intelligence are not opposites, but allies. Both are forms of care: care for language, for meaning, for the fragile miracle of expression.

To create, even now, especially now, is to believe that words still matter—that somewhere in the vast dialogue between human and machine, there will always remain a space for wonder.

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