

On the writings of robots

Artificial intelligence has been getting high praise for its writing. I make my living with words, so maybe I have extra-high standards, but really?

A long time ago, a shepherd named David wrote this: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil...”

Later on, Emily Dickinson wrote this: “Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul.”

Maya Angelou wrote this: “I know why the caged bird sings.”

And Paul Simon wrote this: “Why am I soft in the middle? The rest of my life is so hard.”

That’s writing, and I can’t see a robot doing it—because real writers, real people, have something AI lacks: call it consciousness, awareness, feelings, heart, soul, whatever, it’s what clicks in when we learn that an earthquake has trapped fifty thousand of our brothers and sisters under rubble. We don’t have to lie there with them to feel what it must be like. And write about it.

Which brings me to the second thing AI lacks: courage. A real writer is willing to look the beast in the eye, wrestle her to the ground, and stick a dagger in her neck if that’s what it takes to get the words right. If the day ever comes when a robot fully grasps reality, really feels it—the poignancy of life, the inevitability of death—I predict the creature will reflect for less than a zeptosecond before commencing to weep, then laugh, then weep again for the rest of eternity. And never write another word.

I think AI is a great place to start if you’re stuck. I’m fine with AI producing my refrigerator manual. I’ll even chat online with a robot if it can figure out what happened to that \$47.81 the IRS claims to have sent me. But let’s not call it writing.

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