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Review: De Camps on Henrickson and Meroño-Peñuela: 62-63

Leah Henrickson and Albert Meroño-Peñuela "The Hermeneutics of Computer-Generated Texts." *Configurations*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2022), pp. 115-39.

The fact that many computer-generated texts are "indistinguishable from human-written texts" scares some readers, who fear that natural language generation (NLG) systems will mechanise current labour practices and undermine the work of narrative scholars (126-27). In the article "The Hermeneutics of Computer-Generated Texts", Leah Henrickson and Albert Meroño-Peñuela show that, at least concerning scholarly work, this fear is unwarranted: computer-generated texts, such as those produced by the OpenAI's GPT-2 software and analysed by the authors, pose thought-provoking questions that enrich the field of literary studies, especially concerning authorial intention and reader responses.

Writing for a wide scholarly audience, the authors first contextualise their analysis of GPT-2 software within a broad history of hermeneutics. They highlight that "what constitutes a 'good', 'correct', or 'true' hermeneutics" (117) remains a debated matter that is beyond the scope of their article and instead offer a survey of prominent hermeneutic positions. Henrickson and Meroño-Peñuela justify the inclusion of a survey because, they argue, readers "may wish to delve deeper into the realm(s) of understanding but [might be] unsure of where to begin the journey" (117). More importantly, such sketches clear the ground for their approach to computer-generated texts, and the authors highlight key themes about authorship and reader responses to texts that have been widely discussed in the hermeneutic tradition.

To begin with, Henrickson and Meroño-Peñuela explain that hermeneutics is a theologically charged discipline which was originally concerned with understanding sacred texts. The authors point out that this theological perspective "serves as a metaphor for truth-seeking in communicative processes" (118). While the writer has been traditionally thought of as God, "omniscient and omnipotent", the reader has been thought of as human, "flawed but seeking transcendence" (118). Via Roland Barthes and Michael Foucault, Henrickson and Meroño-Peñuela challenge this traditional interpretation of the relationship between writer and reader: they remind their readers that the concept of authorship "detract[s] attention from the complex social networks related to its production, dissemination, and reception, all of which are contained within the reader" (122).

But Henrickson and Meroño-Peñuela do not reject authorship completely: building from genetic criticism, the authors emphasise the interpretative benefits from considering "preparatory material (e.g. manuscripts and letters) informing a text's final form" (121). This is because the practice of genetic criticism understands authorship not in fixed or divine terms, but rather as an "ever-developing" process that shapes the text and is embedded within set cultural contexts. The aim of the authors is to demystify authorial intention and, in so doing, emphasise the complex relationship between authorial and reception processes that are involved in the construction of meaning.

After the survey, Henrickson and Meroño-Peñuela offer an analysis of the hermeneutics of computer-generated texts. These texts pose difficult questions to the interpreter: "Who—or what—do readers anticipate as the author of the computer-generated text? How do readers make meaning of these texts?" (126). The authors further complicate the issue by explaining that computer-generated texts often pass the

Turin test, which means that readers are incapable of identifying these texts as computer-generated (126). All these issues reaffirm the authors' view that authorial intention should be rethought and that that the focus should instead be put on "the social contexts related to text production" and the cultural and literary assumptions that inform acts of meaning-making (137).

Henrickson and Meroño-Peñuela save the most thought-provoking section of their article for the ending. They demonstrate that computer-generated texts constitute a rich field of research through the significant case study of four texts generated by an AI GPT-2 system which has been trained with 32 relevant and popular works on hermeneutics. This represents a significant contribution to the scholarship, since both authors give voice to the trained GPT-2, which reflects on difficult matters related to its own authorship and reader responses. These texts produced by GPT-2 not only embody a challenge to traditional and prevalent ideas about authorship, but also "encourages reflection on … the implicit biases that may be perpetuated through the patterns learned by the algorithm and its programming (136). All in all, Henrickson and Meroño-Peñuela perform well the hermeneutic circle: they convincingly show the value of hermeneutics for the study of computer-generated texts as well as the value of computer-generated texts for the study of hermeneutics.

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