

Cooperative writing

Description

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Do novelists use AI? I recently heard Kurt Andersen discuss his forthcoming novel, *The Breakup*. He began writing it about a month before ChatGPT appeared and described the AI as subsequently cooperating in his writing process. Can I also write fiction with AI assistance?

My entry #218 Writerâ??s block from 18 October 2014 opened with a fictional narrative set in a medieval monastery â?? inspired by a recent visit to Lindisfarne, and no doubt Umberto Ecoâ??s *The Name of the Rose*. I now want to see if I can continue with the narrative fiction genre to communicate theoretical content about emotion, i.e. substitute dialogue for the rest of the post. I called on ChatGPT for help.

Iâ??m thinking of the extended philosophical instruction in Jostein Gaarderâ??s *Sophieâ??s World*, the philosophically informed comedy created by Michael Schur in *The Good Place*, the parables and encounters of Friedrich Nietzscheâ??s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and, of course, Platoâ??s dialogues. Each, in a different way, dramatises philosophical ideas through fictional situations and conversations.

Hereâ??s *our* attempt at a dialogic expansion of my entry of October 2014, drawing on ChatGPT as collaborator in my writing process.

The Unyielding Page

The monk dipped his quill and positioned it over the parchment again. His fingers were black, and smudges had formed across the unyielding page. A drop of ink found its way to the frayed cuff of his robe.

â??How can I be expected to do this?â?•

â??What task has the Abbot set you now?â?• I readied my notepad.

â??There are six empty lines beneath the homily. He wants them filled.â?•

â??With what?â?•

â??An account of a human frailty,â?• he said softly.

â??Why?â?• I leaned forward. There were other scribes in the next room.

â??For the instruction of the novices, he says.â?•

â??And you doubt him?â?•

â??Yesterday it was for the instruction of the novices.â?• He rolled his eyes. â??Today it is because parchment costs more than patience.â?•

â??Perhaps it is also an exercise in brevity.â?• I was thinking of my own attempts to be concise.

â??The Abbot calls every inconvenience an exercise.â?• This time he did not lower his voice.

â??He wants me to write exactly six lines on a human weakness without naming it.â?•

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â??Write about how it feels to be told that.â?•

â??I have.â?• He pointed to the page. It was blank.

â??That doesnâ??t say anything.â?•

â??It says exactly how I feel.â?•

â??To you, perhaps. Who is the reader?â?•

â??The Abbot is the reader.â?• His jaw stiffened.

â??Then write for the Abbot,â?• I said.

â??Thatâ??s what is causing the difficulty.â?• He dipped the quill again.

Assuming more authority in the matter than the scribes I said, â??An adept writer conveys an emotion without naming every occurrence.â?•

â??An adept writer isnâ??t limited to six lines.â?•

â??What is the subject?â?• I was getting closer to the problem.

â??Frustration.â?• There was a pause as he adjusted the tip of his quill.

â??Youâ??ve just named it.â?•

â??Iâ??m allowed to name it in conversation. Iâ??m not allowed to name it on the parchment.â?•

Taking sides with the abbot, I ventured, â??Perhaps he means you to experience it.â?•

â??Then why waste the parchment?â?•

â??You might describe the tightening of your jaw, the stain on your cuff, the reluctance of the parchmentâ??â?•

â??The parchment is not reluctant. Itâ??s parchment.â?•

â??You called it unyielding.â?•

â??You called it unyielding.â?•

I looked at my notes. He was right.

â??Then the feeling isnâ??t entirely inside you,â?• I said, aware that I was beginning to sound now like the Abbot.

â??Where else would it be?â?•

â??Between you and the parchment.â?•

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He lifted the sheet and looked beneath it.

â??Not literally between you.â?•

â??Then donâ??t say â??between.â??â?• He furrowed his brow.

â??It takes form through your interaction with the world.â?•

â??What world?â?•

I waved my hand over his desk. â??The quill, the ink, the page, the Abbotâ??s instruction, your stained fingers, your expectation of failureâ??â?•

â??My expectation has now been fulfilled.â?• He shrugged.

â??None of those things alone is the feeling. It emerges from your concernful involvement with them.â?•

That prompted a pause. â??Concernful?â?•

â??It means they matter to you.â?•

â??Why not say that?â?•

â??A philosopher called Heidegger will explain it more precisely.â?•

â??When?â?•

â??In about thirteen centuries.â?•

â??I can wait.â?•

â??No, you canâ??t. Thatâ??s part of the problem. Youâ??re projecting forward towards a completed manuscript. You exist in a condition of â??not yet.â??â?•

â??I exist in a condition of â??nearly afternoon devotions,â?? by which time the Abbot expects this to be finished.â?•

â??That illustrates the point.â?•

â??Everything illustrates your point.â?•

â??You also have an enduring orientation towards the Abbot.â?•

â??I avoid him whenever possible.â?•

â??An orientation can be an aversion. You donâ??t experience the feeling continuously. It appears when you think of him, or when an ink stain reminds you of his instruction. The orientation persists even when the feeling itself recedes.â?•

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â??It hasnâ??t receded.â?•

â??It will.â?•

â??When?â?•

â??A future instrument called an EEG will allow scholars to detect rapid changes in the activity they associate with feeling.â?•

â??Can it tell them what the copyist feels?â?•

â??Not by itself.â?•

â??Then perhaps they should ask a copyist.â?•

He resumed writing. The light had begun to withdraw from the narrow window. The monk tilted the parchment towards it, bringing his face so close that his breath disturbed the wet ink.

â??Now your shadow is across the page,â?• he said.

I moved.

â??Not there.â?•

â??Still,â?• I said, â??your disposition towards the task has momentum. It is evident in your habits, gestures and actions.â?•

â??My action is writing.â?•

â??And complaining.â?•

â??I complain because I feel as I do.â?•

â??Or perhaps the way you speak helps sustain the feeling.â?•

He gazed towards the window.

â??Are you saying I would no longer feel it if I stopped complaining?â?•

â??Not exactly. Language doesnâ??t make the feeling in isolation. But it participates in how you identify, experience and prolong it.â?•

â??So now this is my fault?â?•

â??I didnâ??t say that.â?•

â??You implied it.â?•

My own confidence was growing. â??Your state is authentic. Iâ??m suggesting that your emotion isnâ??t a private substance sealed inside you. It takes shape between a person and a world that matters to him.â?•

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â??Thereâ??s â??betweenâ?? again.â?•

â??Think of language as the house of Being.â?•

â??I live in the dormitory.â?•

â??Itâ??s a metaphor.â?•

â??Itâ??s a large metaphor.â?•

â??Heidegger becomes fond of those.â?•

â??Perhaps he isnâ??t limited to six lines.â?•

The monk turned to a fresh part of the parchment.

â??If what you say is true, the Abbot, the ink, the quill and this conversation all belong to the condition Iâ??m forbidden to name.â?•

â??Yes.â?•

â??And my complaints help it persist.â?•

â??Yes.â?•

He looked at me. â??Then you are part of it.â?•

He began to write again, speaking each word aloud:

â??This condition is not sealed inside the sufferer. It takes shape between hand, quill, stubborn parchment and an absent Abbot, then persists through the words by which the sufferer complains of it

to anyone nearby, repeatedly.â?•

He counted the lines.

â??Six.â?•

â??And you havenâ??t named it.â?•

â??No.â?•

He looked at the ink on his fingers, then at the ink on his cuff.

â??Though Iâ??ve made anyone who reads this parchment experience it.â?•

We considered the sentence in silence. Or I did. The monk began murmuring it from the beginning.

â??Must you read aloud?â?• I asked.

â??Without speaking, how else would I know what I had written?â?•

My own notes suddenly seemed very quiet.

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Bibliography

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Note

- Featured image is the ribbed ceiling at Chateau dâ??Arques, France.

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