

Parrots and Paragrams: AI Language Models and Erasure Poetry

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STOCHASTIC PARROTS

A now infamous essay written by several computer industry insiders, primarily software ethicists and natural language theorists, ridicules inflated claims made for the algorithmically driven large language models we call AI chatbots as no more than “stochastic parrots.”¹ Despite the technical adjective this amusing description appears out of place. Nothing could be less like the live creature, the feathered mimic, than the computers sustaining AI. The essay’s authors reach for the parrot trope, long used as a foil by philosophers to discuss interrelations between reason, mind, language, and intention, because they deflatingly characterize a typical AI system as a copyist, no more than “a system for haphazardly stitching together sequences of linguistic forms it has observed in its vast training data, according to probabilistic information about how they combine, but without any reference to meaning: a stochastic parrot.”² AI, they say, is merely a digital mechanism for selecting words and phrases from a vast collection of internet writings, then copying the most statistically relevant phrases to form answers to user questions. The parrots have no knowledge of what they are doing: “LMs [language models] are not performing natural language understanding

1. Coinage of the phrase is credited to Emily M. Bender, professor of linguistics at the University of Washington, expert in natural language processing—“My research centers on multilingual grammar engineering and so involves working with . . . linguistic puzzles: How does this language express that idea? . . . How can we build computer models that capture what is the same across languages?” (The Linguist List [2012], <https://web.archive.org/web/20131011215525/https://linguistlist.org/studentportal/linguists/bender.cfm>).

2. Emily M. Bender, Timnit Gebru, Angelina McMillan-Major, and Shmargaret Shmitchell, “On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big?,” *FaceT ’21: Proceedings of the 2021 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency*, March 2021, 610–23 (quotation on 617), <https://doi.org/10.1145/3442188.3445922>.

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(NLU), and only have success in tasks that can be approached by manipulating linguistic form.”³ Human users are easily fooled: “The ersatz fluency and coherence of LMs raises several risks, precisely because humans are prepared to interpret strings belonging to languages they speak as meaningful and corresponding to the communicative intent of some individual or group of individuals who have accountability for what is said.”⁴

Linguistic form, meaning, intention, copying, intertextuality, reading, and performativity: these are all issues that poets, novelists, and other creative writers, as well as literary scholars, have long investigated. Indeed, this roundup of topics sums up the preoccupations of a large field of postmodern writing. The parrot may also remind readers of an earlier poetic device, Yeats’s imaginary posthumous poet taking on a nonnatural form such “as Grecian goldsmiths make / Of hammered gold and gold enameling / To keep a drowsy Emperor awake,”⁵ though the material form of ChatGPT-4 and other similar AI language models could never be perched on a tree. These are large warehouses of computer servers running advanced software that communicates with our computers over the cable networks that underpin the internet.⁶

Might there be rewarding dialogue between these apparently different fields, between the poetics of hammered gold and the vector space of digital linguistics running on silicon chips? Katherine Bode argues that if literary studies avoids treating computational processes as ontologically different from literary composition and reception, it can productively engage with the new language models: “As a site of expertise in working within and across past textual technologies and assemblages (such as archives and libraries), the discipline involves textual practices that understand and respond to intelligence as distributed.”⁷ In this essay I unpick the pejorative description of AI as stochastic parrots by tracking the parrot trope’s genealogy, and by investigating similarities between the stochastic selection of words and recent experimental poetic procedures called erasure poetry, which also involve stitching together words from a found text, making it

3. Ibid., 610. See Emily M. Bender and Alexander Koller, “Climbing towards NLU: On Meaning, Form, and Understanding in the Age of Data,” *Proceedings of the 58th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics*, 2020, 5185–5198, <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2020.acl-main.463>.

4. Bender et al., “On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots,” 617.

5. W. B. Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium,” in *The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (London: Macmillan, 1984), 194.

6. Media theorists call for a “further materialization of media,” a reckoning with “the geophysical elements that give us digital culture” (Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015], 139).

7. Katherine Bode, “What’s the Matter with Computational Literary Studies?,” *Critical Inquiry* 49, no. 4 (Summer 2023): 529.

reasonable to describe it as a “type of found poetry.”⁸ I focus on one distinctive work in particular, *Voyager* by Srikanth Reddy.

Erasure poetry is a minor heterogeneous genre of found poetry reliant on generative procedures that vary from poet to poet, procedures that almost always involve lifting out words from the source while retaining the sequential order they have within the source, and inventing a new syntax for these selected words. Mary Ruefle describes it thus: “An erasure is the creation of a new text by disappearing the old text that surrounds it.”⁹ Some erasure texts are primarily visual, and because the process of eliminating this “old text” can be imagined as a mechanical act of erasure, the sticky descriptor “erasure poetry” has gained currency. The Academy of American Poets website, poets.org, defines the genre in strongly visual terms: “Erasure poetry, also known as blackout poetry, is a form of found poetry wherein a poet takes an existing text and erases, blacks out, or otherwise obscures a large portion of the text, creating a wholly new work from what remains.”¹⁰ Andrew King, in one of the most comprehensive accounts, says that over the past century, “erasure has proliferated as a distinct branch of avant-garde approach, and has even gone so far as to normalize itself.” Erasure poetry aims “to confront meanings, traditions, lineages, and propositions not in the secondary battlefields of criticism or responsive work but in the fray of the page itself.”¹¹ Tom Phillips paints over pages from a nineteenth-century novel to create freestanding collages in which a handful of words remain visible to make new brief statements.¹² Jen Bervin reprints a selection of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* in a pale grey typeface on which she superimposes a black typeface to highlight a few words that in sequence create utterances of her own making. She relies on this visual presentation to justify the claim that “When we write poems, the history of poetry is with us, pre-inscribed in the white of the page, when we read or write poems, we do it with or against this palimpsest.”¹³ Reddy selects words from a politician’s

8. Cecily Parks, “On Erasure,” *Kenyon Review* 42, no. 4 (July/August 2020), <https://kenyonreview.org/kr-online-issue/2020-julyaug/selections/cecily-parks-656342/>. She attributes the point to Edward Hirsch.

9. Mary Ruefle, “On Erasure,” <https://ia.eferrit.com/ea/dcf81aca20f61e00.pdf>.

10. <https://poets.org/glossary/erasure>.

11. Andrew David King, “The Weight of What’s Left [Out]: Six Contemporary Erasureists on Their Craft,” *Kenyon Review*, November 6, 2012, <https://kenyonreview.org/2012/11/erasure-collaborative-interview/>. One of a series of King’s informative blogs on erasure poetry for *Kenyon Review*.

12. In 2005 Phillips remarked, “I have so far extracted from it over one thousand texts, and yet to find a situation, statement or thought which its words cannot be adapted to cover,” suggesting that the project has an element of bibliomancy (Tom Phillips, “Notes on *A Humument*,” in *A Humument*, 4th ed. [London: Thames & Hudson, 2005], appendix, n.p.).

13. Jen Bervin, *Nets* (New York: Ugly Duckling Press, 2004), n.p.

memoir in the order they occur, words that are usually at a considerable distance from each other, to create three new poetic texts.

Erasure poetry offers promising insights into two interrelated histories of attempts to theorize mechanisms of textual interpretation, one a respectable history of poetic copying of the writings of others, the other a somewhat disreputable history of searches for hidden messages and authorships like that of Ferdinand de Saussure looking for theme words in Latin verse, sensing a “furor of phonic play.”¹⁴ Far more questionable are the findings of the Baconians convinced that Francis Bacon’s life is narrated under the surface of Shakespeare’s plays.¹⁵

Two points need to be made. As a name for this genre, “erasure poetry” risks being a misnomer, directing attention to the activity of making text disappear, rather than to the intricate cognitive processes of repetition and selection, a copying with some similarity to that of the stochastic parrots, with the obvious difference that in place of an algorithm is assumed to be the black box of authorial intention. Although the concept of erasure provides a heuristic visual image of process, it can misdirect our attention away from two defining features of erasure poems, complete reliance on the repetition of the words of others, and the highlighting of what Roman Jakobson calls “subliminal” verbal patterns that transcend horizontal syntax in the text of the source. The second point is that erasure poetry invites often questionable, if intriguing, speculation about whether some or all of the new text elicited by the procedure is somehow latent or even hidden in the original. Jakobson claims that it is not only oral poetry that relies on the transmission across generations of “elaborate correspondences” of sound and verbal structure, written poetry also relies on “complicated phonological and grammatical structures. . . . Such structures, particularly powerful on the subliminal level, can function without any assistance of logical judgment and patent knowledge both in the poet’s creative work and in its perception by the sensitive reader.”¹⁶ In a discussion of this and other essays by

14. Ferdinand de Saussure to Antoine Meillet, January 8, 1908, in Émile Benveniste, “Lettres de Ferdinand de Saussure à Antoine Meillet,” *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure*, no. 21 (1964): 118, quoted in Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Dark Tongues: The Art of Rogues and Riddlers* (New York: Zone Books, 2013), 125.

15. Retired American cryptographers William F. Friedman and Elizebeth S. Friedman, founders of American signals intelligence, wrote a scholarly study refuting diverse claims by Baconians to have discovered procedures including paragrams and erasure to conceal ciphers in Shakespeare’s writings; see their *The Shakespearean Ciphers Examined: An Analysis of Cryptographic Systems Used as Evidence That Some Author Other Than Shakespeare Wrote the Plays Commonly Attributed to Him* (Cambridge University Press, 1957).

16. Roman Jakobson, “Subliminal Verbal Patterning in Poetry,” in *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 261.

Jakobson, Daniel Heller-Roazen argues that Jakobson believed that the linearity of utterances “is far from absolute” and was led to suspect the existence of an “intensely cryptic” current in the poetic tradition, one that motivated Tristan Tzara to search for concealed signatures in the poems of François Villon.¹⁷

Erasure poetry evolved from the recombinatory poetics practiced between the 1960s and the millennium. Listen to how the leading contemporary poet Susan Howe emphasizes the laborious task of the writer in *The Midnight*, a long poem in verse and prose: “Thousands of correlations have to be sliced and spliced.”¹⁸ She reminds us of the intensive labor of many poets over the centuries who have cut and pasted their way through multiple drafts, while more specifically referring to a practice shared by numerous contemporaneous poets, who would compost earlier texts as the basis for new poems, sometimes also obscuring their provenance.¹⁹ Charles Reznikoff sifted through court records of accidents in the late nineteenth century and selected textual material to create unemotional free verse accounts. Michael Davidson describes the process of moving from witness to case report to poem as one of translation, noting that Reznikoff himself thought of the process of composition as editing.²⁰ John Ashbery borrowed text from discarded and forgotten books, *Beryl and the Biplane* and *Three Hundred Things a Bright Boy Can Do*.²¹ On his Z-Site project, Jeff Twitchell-Waas reveals in compelling detail how Louis Zukofsky’s brilliantly creative maceration of found materials in “A”-22 and “A”-23 works. Twitchell-Waas makes clear just how many found quotations Zukofsky might slice and splice to create a single new line of poetry.²² Bruce Andrews wrote *Lip Service* by collecting on small cards idiomatic phrases from popular culture, overheard

17. Heller-Roazen, *Dark Tongues*, 140, 150.

18. Susan Howe, *The Midnight* (New York: New Directions, 2003), 85.

19. Jed Rasula argues that the trope “compost library” would be a truer representation of poetic intertextuality: “In the compost library books have a way of collapsing into each other, not in the improvements of more ‘authoritative’ editions or versions, but by constant recycling” (*This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry* [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002], 17).

20. Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 153.

21. See David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (New York: Random House, 1999), 160, 121. Ashbery’s poem “Europe” was collaged from William Le Queux’s 1917 novel, *Beryl of the Biplane*: “The poem was an attempt to achieve an equivalent in poetry for the sort of erasures that Willem de Kooning had incorporated in his paintings” (Lehman, *Last Avant-Garde*, 160). Most erasure poets choose source texts that readers can readily examine.

22. Jeff Twitchell-Waas, Z-site: A Companion to the Works of Louis Zukovsky, <https://z-site.net>.

conversation, and wide reading, then after a period of several years “editing” them into abstract structures that retain traces of the initial affective intensity, especially some of the ugly feelings, in startling new contexts.²³ Lyn Hejinian composed *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* by taking books off her shelf at random and selecting words and phrases from the margins, also at random.²⁴ These are only a few of many similar generative poetic strategies.

How does the stochastic parrot operate? Recent iterations of these systems, ChatGPT-4 and Bard, are in the news as I write, celebrated in a “hype-cycle” as having godlike powers, capable of outperforming many professions of writing.²⁵ Experts are alarmed by the misleading claims. Ted Chiang deflatingly calls AI “applied statistics.”²⁶ In an article in *Nature* urging caution, David Leslie emphasizes the importance of probability (the stochastic character) for the manner in which these large language models actually work: “LLMs [large language models] generate predictions of the ‘statistically likely continuations of word sequences’ based on brute-force iterative training on massive corpuses of digital text data. As sequence predictors, these models draw on the underlying statistical distribution of previously generated text to stitch together vectorized symbol strings based on the probabilities of their co-occurrence.”²⁷ As his tendentious phrase “brute force” indicates, he is skeptical about the claims to intelligence. It is important to register also that what makes a next word likely to continue a sequence is not language structure in the abstract; it is current communicative activity. Probability is anchored by inferable intentions. The type of language model on which our search engines rely can be thought of as a vast spoil heap of language collected from the internet, over which algorithmically driven software scurries looking for probabilistic matches to the enquiries the system is required to answer. These language

23. “Bruce Andrews and Sally Silvers in Perdu,” interview by Samuel Vriezen, February 2005, <https://sqv.home.xs4all.nl/Andrews.html>.

24. Lyn Hejinian, *The Grand Piano*, pt. 3, *An Experiment in Collective Autobiography: San Francisco, 1975–1980* (Detroit: Mode A, 2007), 61. For a discussion of Hejinian’s textual borrowing, see Craig Dworkin, *Radium of the Word: A Poetics of Materiality* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 198 n. 35.

25. Eri Sugiura and Leo Lewis, “AI Is Giving Insurers Godlike Powers, Says Somplo Chief,” *Financial Times*, November 13, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/a3372e1a-d43c-403e-97e5-449b50d51b87>.

26. Madumita Murgia, “Sci-fi Writer Ted Chiang: ‘The Machines We Have Now Are Not Conscious,’” *Financial Times*, June 2, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/c1f6d948-3dde-405f-924c-09cc0dcf8c84>.

27. Abeba Birhane, Atoosa Kasirzadeh, David Leslie, and Sandra Wachter, “Science in the Age of Large Language Models,” *Nature Reviews Physics* 5 (May 2023): 277–80.

models are increasingly marketed as freestanding generators of accurately responsive text for all manner of commercial and public sector uses.²⁸ Current debate questions the quality of their training data. A preprint essay issued by authors at OpenAI, the builders of ChatGPT-4, outlining their methodologies for building an earlier iteration, explains that they trained the model on the BookCorpus dataset, which “contains over 7,000 unique unpublished books from a variety of genres including Adventure, Fantasy, and Romance.”²⁹ One of the salient issues for erasure poets is similarly the quality of the source: What are the differing implications of turning to Emily Dickinson or to the pedestrian autobiography of a former secretary-general of the United Nations?

In what follows I take the phrase “stochastic parrot” as a template for thinking about the aesthetics and ethics of erasure poetry, first tracing how the process of composition depends on a search for patterns on or beyond the edge of visual and cognitive recognition by readers, and then concentrating on the implications of copying words and phrases with limited authorial addition. The best known of all erasure poems, *Zong!* by M. Nourbese Philip, derives from a single short legal document for a case about insurance payouts, casually recording the murder of kidnapped Africans by the crew of the slave ship *Zong*. The poet slices and splices the case report right down to single letters, all the while with an occult sense that the lost voices are reaching out to her.³⁰ Srikanth Reddy beachcombs words from Kurt Waldheim’s self-serving memoir *In the Eye of the Storm* to create his erasure poem *Voyager*.³¹ In both these cases, the source text all but disappears, becoming part of the susurrus of linguistic activity, oral and written, out of which we draw our individual capacity to communicate.

28. On the inbuilt biases of BERT, a predecessor to ChatGPT, see Cade Metz, “We Teach A.I. Systems Everything, including Our Biases,” *New York Times*, November 11, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/11/technology/artificial-intelligence-bias.html>.

29. Alec Radford, Karthik Narasimhan, Tim Salimans, and Ilya Sutskever, “Improving Language Understanding by Generative Pre-training,” preprint (2018). The essay no longer appears to be available from OpenAI. It is archived at various sites. See <https://paperswithcode.com/paper/improving-language-understanding-by>. Further information available in a “working paper” from Jack Bandy and Nicholas Vincent, “Addressing ‘Documentation Debt’ in Machine Learning Research: A Retrospective Datasheet for BookCorpus,” <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2105.05241.pdf>.

30. “*Zong!* is hauntological; it is a work of haunting, a wake of sorts, where the spectres of the dead make themselves present” (M. Nourbese Philip, *Zong! As Told to the Author by Setaey Adamu Boateng* [Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008], 201).

31. Srikanth Reddy, *Voyager* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), and “Notes on Composition,” <https://www.srikanthreddypoet.com/books#voyager>. *Voyager* is cited parenthetically by page number hereafter.

COPYISTS

In her essay collection *The Birth-Mark*, Howe, the self-described “library cormorant,” startles us by admitting to a writer’s cardinal sin: “To feed these essays I have dived through other people’s thoughts with footnotes for compasses and categories for quadrants. I have plagiarized sermons, memorial introductions, epitaphs, anagrams, epigrams, dictionaries here and elsewhere. In the acquisitive spirit I have borrowed back earlier brimstone sermons.”³² Borrowed, plagiarized: researchers have lost their jobs for such practices. When Susan Howe mentions plagiarism in relation to her essays she is not speaking metaphorically, nor only referring to her prose; her long poems sometimes include phrases from a wide range of historical and contemporary sources whose actual authorship is not acknowledged in the text, a practice that might not be acceptable in other forms of discourse. Peter Nicholls has written extensively on Howe’s use of allusion and citation. The implications of unacknowledged borrowing are not easy to assimilate, as he comments in an essay on Howe’s long poem, *Pierce-Arrow*, where he traces the implications of her extensive unacknowledged citation from Joseph Koerner’s study of Caspar David Friedrich, and especially her pivotal use of a key phrase coined by Koerner, “the pastness of landscape.”³³

Howe is not alone. Poets in this modernist lineage repeatedly experimented with grafts of verbatim material from historical documents, scientific essays, contemporary news, letters, diaries, and other apparently non-poetic material. Contemporary writers in the self-styled fields of conceptual poetry and erasure poetry go a step further: they compose texts in which the verse rootstock is barely visible, and authorial lineage fractured. “The language of citation . . . has found a new lease on life in our own information age,” writes Marjorie Perloff in her aptly titled *Unoriginal Genius*.³⁴ The instability of this elusive cultural matrix shows in the contradictory alibis used to justify textual borrowing: it has been described variously as modernist collage, spiritual dictation, telepathy, ideology critique, flarf, a new phase of conceptual art, and a backlash to information overload.

The poetics of erasure poetry challenges existing critical terminology. Consider Cecily Parks’s useful summary of the poetics of erasure: “The act of erasure rejects the permanence and authority of a source text in favor

32. Susan Howe, *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 1993), 37.

33. Peter Nicholls, “‘The Pastness of Landscape’: Susan Howe’s *Pierce-Arrow*,” *Contemporary Literature* 43, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 441–60.

34. Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 4.

of fragmentation, re-appropriation, and, some might say, vandalism.” She identifies a “revitalizing potential of the poetics as well as the poet’s prerogative to make language new.”³⁵ This discourse appears to want to demolish critical orthodoxy, civic order, and existing unities, as much as it wants to analyze a compositional procedure. In his study of poetic quotation in modernist poetry, Leonard Diepeveen reminds us of the disruptive effect of inserting strips of text from elsewhere, saying they “duplicate the content and texture of another work and consequently heighten the disruption that more general borrowings bring into a text.”³⁶ The erasure poem heightens this disruption, is both constructive and catabolic, passive and transgressive. Commentators on Reddy’s poem have pointed out that his erasure process can be interpreted as an allegorical simulation of Waldheim’s wartime crimes of signing death warrants for partisans, Jews, and prisoners, the erasure of people, as if erasure poetry were engaged in, to borrow a well-known phrase from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, what we might call “Furie des Verschwindens,” the fury of disappearance.³⁷ Lest Hegel seem entirely too grand for this apparently minor genre, it is worth noting that Parks herself treats erasure poetry as having world historical significance, saying, “Literary history is brimming with women writers who have not only disappeared but also made disappearance transitive.”³⁸ Travis Macdonald locates erasure poetry at the beginnings of Western literature, at least as they exist today: “If you have ever read the words of Sappho or Aeschylus then are already intimately familiar with the foundation of erasure poetics.”³⁹ And Langdon Hammer, in an article on Srikanth Reddy, calls it “a period-defining technique.”⁴⁰

35. Parks, “On Erasure.”

36. See Peter Middleton, “Strips: Scientific Language in Poetry,” *Textual Practice* 23, no. 6 (2009): 947–58.

37. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford University Press, 1977), 359. Miller paraphrases *Verschwindens* as destruction; other translators stick with the more accurate “disappearance.” Interpretation of this passage is disputed. Philip Schauss suggests that the issue is more the capacity of a state, a human collective, to make people disappear in legal terms by denying their citizenship. Reddy’s interest in erasure procedure is similarly driven by Waldheim’s wartime willingness to erase the personhood of opponents of the Nazi regime. See Philip Schauss, “What Remains of the Person: Civil Death and Disappearance in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*,” *Critical Horizons* 22, no. 3 (August 2021): 325.

38. Parks, “On Erasure.”

39. Travis Macdonald, “A Brief History of Erasure Poetics,” *Jacket* 38 (2009), <http://jacketmagazine.com/38/macdonald-erasure.shtml>.

40. Langdon Hammer, “Voice and Erasure in Srikanth Reddy’s *Voyager*,” in *The Fate of Difficulty in the Poetry of Our Time*, ed. Charles Altieri and Nicholas D. Nace (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018), 34. In his discussion of Reddy’s project, Hammer captures the ambiguity of Reddy’s style as “a curious lyricism whereby self-expression is routed elaborately through a text that voices the muted, inaccessible feelings of another man” (43).

Erasure poetry shares aesthetic principles with conceptual poetry that make comparison helpful: both rely on extensive copying of source materials, both abandon simulations of expressive speech, and both turn away from the heterogeneous open field models of the Pound and Olson tradition, to compose poems solely from the lexical resources of a specified document, though they differ in the procedures of construction. Conceptual poems retain their source's structure and lexicon, allowing exact quotation to take over almost the entirety of the host poem, leaving the act of reframing to be the primary trace of new authorship, and therefore depending extensively on reliable readerly interest in the text's presentation of form as a puzzle to resolve.⁴¹ Craig Dworkin goes so far as to claim that however pure the parroting, the result will be innovative: "The most uncreative repetition ultimately disproves the possibility of a truly uncreative repetition."⁴² Instead of providing information, conceptual poems subtly allegorize social and ethical conditions of public writing. By contrast, although erasure poems can similarly allegorize social textuality, they retain only traces of the broad structure of the source text.

Unlike Tom Phillips's iconic erasure texts, most erasure poems are not primarily visual, although they usually maintain a fixed relation to specific pages of a printed source text by omitting words, as Ronald Johnson does in *Radi Os* (1977), a visionary book-length treatment of the first four books of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (hence the title, paRADiise lOSt). He links syntactically unconnected words in the source, an old edition of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, by blanking out most of the intervening text. Johnson's treatment of book 3, for instance, starts with Milton's first word, "Hail," sidesteps Christian signifiers such as heaven, eternal, and God, before adding Milton's extravagant phrase, "Bright effluence of bright essence," and then proceeding to choose a tiny number of words from the first forty lines, creating this sequence: "Through / the Orphean / descent, and up / To find / the more / Clear / song; / Nightly I visit: / Blind / thoughts that voluntary move / Harmonious numbers."⁴³ The pages do visually approximate word distances in the printed copy of Milton, and retain original capital letters. As Ross Hair describes it: "These collage processes contract and confine Milton's syntax . . . enabling Johnson to write his own poem made from Milton's words but

41. Implicit paradoxes in conceptualist copying practices are explored in Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms* (Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Press, 2009), 22–23.

42. Craig Dworkin, "The Fate of Echo," in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, ed. Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), xxxvii.

43. Ronald Johnson, *Radi Os* (1977; Chicago: Flood Editions, 2005), 49–50.

telling its own story. . . . Milton's text is "Sublimed."⁴⁴ Milton is still present, when Johnson echoes Miltonic vocabulary and in phrases such as "Bright effluence of bright essence." The act of copying Milton's words leaves an identifiable remainder, signs of the cumulative small acts of repetition.

In the twenty-first century, erasure projects have diversified to encompass a variety of host texts. Janet Holmes, a former computer typesetter, applies erasure procedures to Emily Dickinson's poems from the Civil War era, placing emphasis on the apparent capacity of erasure poetry to elicit semantic resonances between Dickinson's time and her own. Holmes creates one page of her text from the sequence of 1862 poems numbered 413 to 417 by Ralph Franklin, using at least one word from each poem, and never a whole line, to sketch the compliant voter from both periods of history: "To Him / 'tis/ solemn! / the Press / Imagery / Parades— / Flags, a brave sight— / triumphant— / He went / Lit with / A Power / just adequate / —an Ampler Zero— / Citizen / Who / Ignores the News / The ends / of / lives / put away— / By / His / power."⁴⁵ She thinks of the process of facture as "changing her voice," merging with Dickinson. Holmes's pages are only sparingly marked by text: "I appreciated the airy look of the page—almost Olsonian. And I liked the sense that the text behind the erasure had become ghostly."⁴⁶ Ghosts and voices frequent the discourse of erasure poetry.

Imitation, allusion, intertextuality, and other verbal resonances—what Robert Duncan calls the "derivative"—are foundational for poetry.⁴⁷ To achieve the compression that can confer intensity and temporal durability on a poem, poets have always employed intertextual strategies, including oral formulae, iconic tropes, familiar prosody, sanctified poetic diction, and genealogies of allusion. Classical fragments turn up everywhere in poems by Milton, Pope, or Tennyson, like salvaged Roman masonry in Renaissance architecture; nineteenth-century poets attempted the same with medieval motifs. Every recent era of poetry has had its fashionable poetic diction, making it easily parodied by later writers, who laugh at phrases such

44. Ross Hair, *Ronald Johnson's Modernist Collage Poetry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2010), 139.

45. Janet Holmes, "1862.41 (413–417)," in *The Ms of My Kin* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2009), 122–23 (spacing only a rough approximation).

46. Janet Holmes, as quoted in King, "Weight of What's Left [Out]."

47. Robert Duncan, "Pages from a Notebook," in *Collected Essays and Other Prose*, ed. James Maynard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 37. See also Ross Hair, "Derivation or Stealth? Quotation in the Poetry of Robert Duncan and Ronald Johnson," in *Reading Duncan Reading: Robert Duncan and the Poetics of Derivation*, ed. Stephen Collis and Graham Lyons (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 129–50.

as “dim lands of peace.”⁴⁸ When William Wordsworth tells readers of *Lyrical Ballads* that he has “abstained from the use of many expressions, in themselves proper and beautiful, but which have been foolishly repeated by bad Poets, till such feelings of disgust are connected with them as it is scarcely possible by any art of association to overpower,” he gestures at a feature of poetic copying that we should look out for, its capacity to arouse strong affects associated with the source.⁴⁹ We could interpret Ronald Johnson’s Miltonic erasure technique as a subtle form of Wordsworthian abstention. Earlier forms of borrowing include troubadour quotation of lines from other poets in a tradition traced by Sarah Kay in her appropriately titled *Parrots and Nightingales*, and the much older minor genre of the cento, a technique openly wholly reliant on direct borrowing.⁵⁰ When asked to write an epithalamium for the wedding of Emperor Valentinian out of Virgil, the fourth-century Latin poet Ausonius juxtaposed phrases about love with phrases describing battles, commenting that it was “a task for memory only, which has to gather up scattered tags and fit these mangled scraps together into a whole.”⁵¹ The effect is comic, yet disturbing, as if he has elicited ugly feelings from a dark textual unconscious in his source.

SRIKANTH REDDY’S VOYAGER

Reddy performs a search for traces of a silenced ethical and expressive spirit in Waldheim’s writing; whether he finds it remains deliberately undecidable.⁵² Is his search for signs of a guilty subjectivity or revealing unconscious paraproxes deluded, or does his text point us to aspects of reading that are usually out of sight? His poem fascinates me because it raises questions about the conditions of possibility poetry today, about what constitutes its

48. Ezra Pound, “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste,” *Poetry*, March 1913, 201, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/58900/a-few-donts-by-an-imagiste>.

49. William Wordsworth, “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*,” in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, 2nd ed., ed. Ernest de Selincourt, vol. 2 (Oxford University Press, 1952), 390.

50. Sarah Kay, *Parrots and Nightingales: Troubadour Quotations and the Development of European Poetry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

51. Ausonius aims “to make pieces arbitrarily connected seem naturally related, to let foreign elements show no chink of light between” (Ausonius, “A Nuptial Cento,” in *Ausonius*, vol. 1, *Books 1–17*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn White, Loeb Classical Library 96 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961], 371). Erasure poets, however, also retain the source text word order. For discussion of the effects Ausonius creates, see Sigrid Schottenius Cullhed, “In Bed with Virgil: Ausonius’ Wedding Canto and Its Reception,” *Greece and Rome* 63, no. 2 (October 2016): 237–50.

52. “One is not even fully sure how to read *Voyager*. . . . Reddy disrupts a clear sense of hierarchical relations between the two sets of text” (Brian C. Cooney, “Nothing Is Left Out’: Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Sports* and Erasure Poetry,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 37, no. 4 [Summer 2014]: 32).

aesthetic credibility, the doubts that cluster around claims to originality, and endemic uncertainties of genre. More than most poetic projects, *Voyager* exposes to view the raw material, the undergirding connections between usually well-concealed constituents of our contemporary moment: digital culture's recycling of texts, developments in contemporary longer poems, new theories of the aesthetic, autistic activism in defense of echolalia, unease about the continual expansion of copyright term limits and their suppression of creatively inventive copying, and the changing digital mechanics of textual reproduction.

This widely praised poem relies on repetition and reconstitution, a process with sufficient affinities to the work of the AI parrots to help us think differently about questions around intentionality, repetition, and Jakobsonian (or perhaps also algorithmic) subliminal reading of latent textual patterns, questions that also surface in the stochastic parrots debate. *Voyager* was generated from three passes through Waldheim's memoir, creating three different modes of poetry, each of them widespread today: aphoristic, confessional, and quest narrative. Waldheim's account of his life was written to help his campaign for the presidency of Austria by presenting himself as a leading international diplomat with rich experience from his years as secretary-general of the United Nations, a man whose wartime Nazi record should be considered insignificant. Reddy employs a virtuoso procedural constraint: the compositional lexicon would be solely words taken from the memoir, selected at intervals in the very same order they occur in Waldheim's text, with no alterations or interpolations, and in each of the three sections, the lyric modality should be consistent. Waldheim's lexicon, and the stochastic probabilities that any given stretch of this English-language text would provide a useful word for the active part of the poem, limit the poet's reach. *Voyager's* first section consists of aphoristic single sentences set out as individual lines of verse; the second set of prose poems is written in the default mode of contemporary personal lyric; the third and most ambitious, employs the tercets of William Carlos Williams's late poetry to narrate a phantasmagoric descent into the underworld. Echoes of Dante, Eliot, and Cocteau appear: "Lost in the middle of life / we continued. / It seemed essential // to build a house"; "I could not accept // that there were so many / and was overcome / on the banks of the canal" (52). These and other allusions to canonical poems disturbingly imply that their authors might somehow have helped enable Waldheim's discourse.

Reddy's poem is titled *Voyager* in recognition of an incident that occurred during Waldheim's tenure at the UN. NASA arranged to send two Voyager spacecraft out beyond the solar system carrying news of human civilization in the form of "a gold-coated copper phonograph record as a message to possible extraterrestrial civilizations that might encounter the spacecraft

in some distant space and time.”⁵³ Among recorded greetings in many languages, and samples of music from many parts of the world, those putative aliens would be able to hear (whatever alien listening might consist of) Waldheim speak on behalf of the whole of humanity: “I send greetings on behalf of the people of our planet. We step out of our solar system into the universe seeking only peace and friendship, to teach if we are called upon, to be taught if we are fortunate.”⁵⁴ The irony of this former Nazi who ordered the execution of many people in the Balkans, talking of peace, provoked Reddy into embarking on the poem.

Reddy’s selection procedure works across gaps between serviceable words in Waldheim’s text that are mostly much longer than those in Holmes, and too long for the process to be illustrated here. His metatextual vigilance, however, does afford one example in the text itself, in part 2 of *Voyager*, where in a rare exception to the polished verbal surface we usually see, Reddy reproduces his crossings out, exposing the prose debris from which he has lifted dark edges of Waldheim’s text: “to cross out a figure such as ~~to carry out programs they approve the various regional economic commissions and inter-governmental bodies~~ sometimes increases the implications” (31). The first seven unitalicized words in this quotation do not appear in this linear sequence in Waldheim’s memoir; they have been selected at intervals to produce this new phrase, whereas the italicized portion is an exact citation of fourteen words in the order they appear in the text, and the final four words are from subsequent dispersed intervals. “Carry out bodies” is presented as a ghost text hiding in Waldheim’s memoir, a reminder of Waldheim’s wartime contribution to genocide.

In most cases Reddy’s selected words are not so close together as to be immediately perceptible to the reading eye. In the ninth prose poem in book 2, the first half of this sentence—“Now I consider the light of morning in a major university, reflecting on the failure of reason in *Alice in Wonderland*”—is constructed from words found between pages 134 and 158 of the memoir, while the second half is composed entirely of words on page 159, a passage on the Iranian hostage crisis. Even these more closely proximal words span almost the entire page, making them hard to spot at first, although once seen they remain mentally highlighted as forming a latent assertion. In the quotations that follow I have underlined words that Reddy selects. Waldheim’s page begins with an ongoing sentence, “McHenry of the US, and sent a letter to Ghotbzadeh on 11 January reflecting their attitudes,” then proceeds to discuss the complex political situation in Teheran,

53. Carl Sagan et al., preface to *Murmurs of Earth: The Voyager Interstellar Record* (New York: Random House, 1978), n.p.

54. Kurt Waldheim, quoted in Sagan et al., *Murmurs of Earth*, 26. For a discussion of how aliens might audition human music, see Daniel K. L. Chua and Alexander Rehding, *Alien Listening: Voyager’s Golden Record and Music from Earth* (New York: Zone Books, 2021), 97.

before considering the American position: “Curiously, the failure of the American campaign to impose sanctions did not increase Iranian intransigence. The reason for this became a little clearer on 29 January when Secretary of State Vance again visited me at my residence in New York.” Finally, the discussion turns again to Iranian proposals to free the hostages during face-saving government activities about which Waldheim is dismissive: “This all seemed to me to have a distinct Alice in Wonderland quality.” From this example it is evident that while Reddy does not want readers to think that the patterns, the new phrasings, he elicits are easily discerned, just waiting to be lifted out, he does want the reader to imagine that with diligence and heightened awareness a reader could be aware of their potential for combination, and might be subliminally influencing the reader’s interpretation.⁵⁵

PARAGRAMS

Although a typical erasure process may look like serendipitous elimination of words from the pages of the source text, drawing out new meanings and ghostlier demarcations, in the hands of poets such as Holmes it is a version of a much older practice of reading by selective choice of letters or words according to a key or code. There is no standard name for such adventitious reading. To describe it I have borrowed the term “paragram,” even though Holmes, Reddy, and most other erasure poets work not with single letters but with words. In its simplest form, a paragram is a hidden configuration of letters awaiting recognition. The *OED*’s etymology for the paragram traces it to various classical Greek and Hellenistic attempts to identify verbal play based on the reorganization of letters forming a word, particularly by Aristotle and Cicero, and emphasizes its affinity to the anagram, reminding us that the hiding of patterns in texts, and the search for possible secret messages, have a long history.

Attempts to locate and describe paragrams hidden in canonical texts of Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare were made throughout the past hundred and fifty years, but they almost all amount to a search for the letters to make a keyword, usually a proper name. In 1966 in *Tel Quel* Julia Kristeva published “Pour une sémiologie des paragrammes,” a bold, syncretic essay extending the tenets of semiology by expanding the existing remit of the paragram, “a formalism that corresponds isomorphically to literary productivity’s thinking itself.”⁵⁶ She aims to avoid the error of treating the extravagances of poetic language as irrelevant to linguistic analysis, and would

55. Reddy provides extensive context for readers on his website, material that could be interpreted as integral to the work itself; see his “Notes on Composition.”

56. Julia Kristeva, “Towards a Semiology of Paragrams,” in *The Tel Quel Reader*, ed. Patrick Ffrench and Roland-François Lack (London: Routledge, 1998), 25; hereafter cited parenthetically by page number. A revised version of the original 1966 essay was published in Julia

probably endorse Craig Dworkin's condemnation of those who dismiss "as meaningless or illegible in their textual opacities" the "minute particulars of linguistic ecologies" by applying "the metabolizing abstractions of semantics."⁵⁷ Her influential early essay is remarkable; it extends the concept of the paragram, hitherto usually confined to letters or phonemes, to include words and their meanings, and in doing so allows for a variety of reconfigured textual forms beyond the level of the letter or syllable, configurations that perform semantic bypasses of syntax determined by linear, consecutive words and sentences. Her essay had a considerable impact on a French intellectual culture that was wrestling with contradictions and potentials internal to semiology, though its impact on the Anglophone world was muted by belated translation.

Before looking in more detail at Kristeva's paragram, it will help to know that a key influence on Kristeva in 1966 was a recent essay by Jean Starobinski. In 1964 he announced that, after studying the notebooks in the Saussure archive, he had discovered that for several years between 1905 and 1909, while Saussure was delivering the lectures that would become *Course in General Linguistics*, he was also tracking hidden verbal patterns across the breadth of the history of poetry, a project that was abruptly abandoned after about four years.⁵⁸ At the height of his investigations, Saussure was half convinced that poets since classical times had maintained a secret method of creating disguised patterns of phonetic elements, often based around a proper name. Daniel Heller-Roazen's recent history of secret argot, embedded hidden messages, and theories about them, *Dark Tongues*, traces the genealogy and consequences of Saussure's speculations. Were these anagrams, paragrams, and other complex arrangements of letters and sounds intentional or simply the product of chance? At times Saussure discerned patterns everywhere: "The whole text of Homer is nothing but a vast and continuous anagram."⁵⁹ Throughout these years he also doubted himself. Was the "furor of phonic play" authentic, or was it due to chance?⁶⁰ He became convinced he needed to expand the conceptual vocabulary

Kristeva, *Séméiotikè: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1969), but an English translation of the 1969 version has, as far as I know, never been published.

57. Dworkin, *Radium of the Word*, 187.

58. Starobinski concludes skeptically, "Ferdinand de Saussure interprète la poésie classique comme un art combinatoire. . . . Seulement il se trouve que tout langage est combinaison, sans même qu'intervienne. . . . Les déchiffreurs, qu'ils soient cabalistes ou phonéticiens, ont le champ libre" (Ferdinand de Saussure interprets classical poetry as a combinatorial art. . . . Only it turns out that all language employs combination, needing no intervention. . . . The decipherers, be they cabalists or phoneticians, have free rein) (Jean Starobinski, "Les anagrammes de Ferdinand de Saussure," *Mercur de France*, no. 1204 [February 1964]: 262; my translation).

59. Ferdinand de Saussure, quoted in Heller-Roazen, *Dark Tongues*, 116.

60. *Ibid.*, 125.

for the phenomena he was unearthing, and introduced the “anaphone,” a mirror phoneme, while trying out various versions of the Greek root *gramma*: *anagramme*, *hypogramme*, and *paragramme*. Although Starobinski later consolidated his investigations in *Les mots sous les mots* (1971), it was this first essay that caught the attention of French intellectuals. Derrida cited a passage in *De la grammatologie* (1967), Roman Jakobson devoted an approving essay to it, and soon after she arrived in Paris at the end of 1965, Kristeva wrote her essay concluding that the concept of the paragram would transform semiology by combining scientific method with paragrammatic method to make possible “a dynamic and revolutionary politics” (47).

Kristeva takes on the paragram with gusto, excited at the possibility that the concept might open up semiology. “Paragrammatic writing is a continuous reflection, a written contestation of the code, of the law and of itself,” she continues, extrapolating Saussure’s emphasis on anaphones to words and even phrases. This writing can be analogically conceived as nonlinear mathematical networks, “a structure of paragrammatic networks” (40, 32). A literary text itself is “a system of multiple *connections* that could be described as a structure of paragrammatic networks” (32). In effect the literary text is itself a paragram. She visualizes a poem as a mathematical set. Hence, she can say: “Poetic language is the only infinity of code” (26). Poetic writing can manifest the potentially infinite extent of possible meanings, intimations, reasonings, the expressive visual and sonic impacts of language. Here as elsewhere in the essay, her aim is to go beyond the perceived rigidity of Saussure’s own concept of the sign by assuming that his paragram researches show that he himself had aspired to this: “The set of poetic language [*l’ensemble du langage poétique*] is formed by sequences in relation; it is a spatialization and a putting into relation of sequences, distinct thereby from the sign, which implies a linear division between signifier and signified” (31). The paragram is a capacious concept, ranging from designation of the interwoven allusiveness of Lautréamont’s prose to “social history seen as a space [that] structures itself paragrammatically at each of its levels” (26). Kristeva is helped by other ambiguities too, notably the French word *ensemble*, which can mean either a group or a mathematical set, to treat the paragram both as an analyzable verbal unit and as an impression made by linkages of words not linked by syntax. Because she retains features of the Saussurean modeling of the sign—assuming that meaning inheres in unitary words, even in the paragrammatic networks—it makes sense to talk of a “semantics that can be mathematized” (43).⁶¹ The tacit assumption that there are *grammes* (fundamental units), or as we would say in English, atoms of meaning, enables her to tie the paragram to the linguistics of *semes*: “the

61. On limitations of Saussurean linguistics, see Jan Mieszkowski, *Crises of the Sentence* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 21–33.

poetic image is constituted in the correlation of semic components by means of a correlational interpretation within the message itself, by a transcoding internal to the system.” She hastens to add that conventional semantics will not help: “The equivalence that is established between semes in the network of poetic language is radically different from the equivalence of simple semantic systems” (35). Kristeva leaves us with a tacit question: Do all texts function this way, or only those exceptional ones where intense connections between words not linked directly by syntax linger as a tonal underpainting to the more salient significations? And when she asserts that the “paragram is the destruction of another writing” (38) because the paragrammatic verbal structure both supervenes directly over the plain linear text, at the same time as adding an intertextual dimension, she could be anticipating some claims made for erasure poetry.

Erasure poetry revisits the questioning of the dominance of linear syntax in poetry that underlies Kristeva’s speculations, opening up the possibility of better interpretative keys to our emergent communication culture of digital AI, by intimating two tacit questions to the reader. When poets create patterns from syntactically unlinked words and phrases, are they activating for readers sublayers of the semantic fields likely to be present in all texts, or is this idea of a transfer from occulted corners of the source text a fantasy? The stochastic parrots tell us what we want to hear by generating pastiches of their sources. Are their stochastic selection processes extending aspects of reading that erasure poetry delves into?

PARROTS

It is time to listen more closely to the parrot that the AI ethics researchers believe sits at the heart of AI large language models. Bruce Boehrer’s survey of what he calls “parrot culture” shows “how deeply parrots are involved in the story of western society, and of human culture in general,” in literature, painting, and even philosophy.⁶² Their presence has long worried philosophers concerned to defend the mindedness of language against false pretenders to intelligence, leading to a consensus around the trope of the pejorative parrot. The parrot has no personhood, is another instance of that disappearance that Hegel and others draw attention to. Samuel Beckett captures such persistent concern in *Malone Dies*, with the ability of these avian imitators to vocalize language, a capability long treated as an exclusive sign of human reason. Malone remembers a man called Jackson: “all he had to offer in the way of dumb companions was a pink

62. Bruce Thomas Boehrer, *Parrot Culture: Our 2500-Year-Long Fascination with the World’s Most Talkative Bird* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 179. See also John Kinsella, “Parrotology: On the Necessity of Parrots in Poetry,” *Australian Book Review*, no. 275 (October 2005): 51–56.

and grey parrot. He used to try and teach it to say, Nihil in intellectu etc. These first three words the bird managed well enough, but the celebrated restriction was too much for it, all you heard was a series of squawks."⁶³ Malone's joke is that by not being able to finish the whole aphorism, the Latin words "nisi prius in sensu" (nothing in the intellect unless first in the senses), the parrot reverses the meaning of the aphorism, supposedly revealing its own cognitive vacuity. Beckett hints that the joke may be on Malone, since the parrot might be choosing to omit the restriction in order to make a comment on its owner.

The parrot is a powerfully symbolic animal both because of the extraordinary ability of certain species long kept as pets, notably the African Grey, to use a flexible syrinx to mimic individual human speakers with disarming accuracy, and to a lesser extent because of its dissonant presentation. European philosophers have been intrigued by parrots since Alexander the Great brought them from India to the West: parrots provide cruxes in arguments about mind, language, and reason in the works of many writers, including Descartes, Defoe, Locke, and recently Jacques Derrida and Robert Brandom. Poet Jennifer Moxley, in her collection of essays on bird culture, comments on the affect of the parrot: "Parrots with their clown coloring, croaky ironic voices, head bobs, and mimicry, seem inherently comical."⁶⁴ As two parrot experts assert, "Many caged parrots become known for personalities customarily identified only with people: they can be bashful, ornery, foul-mouthed, droll, or violently jealous."⁶⁵ I mention this point because it reminds us that actual parrots are more complex creatures than their stochastic or philosophical counterparts, and that hypothetical philosophical parrots may lack the ability to mimic nonverbal features of communication that include pragmatics, gesture, tone, and other material features of utterances. Comic, cranky, and challenging, the parrot's apparent ability to master what has always been understood to confirm humanity, the ability to speak, makes it a rebuff to philosophical certainties that the ability to use language is sufficient to prove the presence of reason.

Descartes argued that a parrot's words lack meaning because there is no mind behind them. Locke found this explanation lacking. How do we know there is no mind inside that small feathered head? Locke insisted that we know that the parrot's language does not mean the same as human language because the words come from a beak not a mouth, the speaker is not a biped of flesh and blood, and it is only such beings who have minds. Brandom, whose ambitious philosophy combines elements of Hegel, Frege,

63. Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*, in *Three Novels* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 211–12.

64. Jennifer Moxley, *For the Good of All, Do Not Destroy the Birds* (Chicago: Flood Editions, 2021), 63.

65. Jane Stern and Michael Stern, "A Reporter at Large: Parrots," *New Yorker*, July 30, 1990, 55.

Deweyian pragmatism, and ordinary language philosophy, has returned several times to the parrot exemplar in order to quash this longstanding search for a mind behind the avian words. The lack of a human body indicating a mind within it is not the problem; indeed, the supposed lack of a mind itself is not the problem either. Instead, he argues that the parrot cannot provide reasons for its utterances or assertions, nor reflect verbally on the consequences of its statements. It cannot do pragmatics, is more like a thermostat than a person, unable to give reasons for its responses.⁶⁶

A similar line of reasoning that the parrot is an automaton, a thermostat, a responsive machine that simply repeats what it is given, has led some psychiatrists to identify “the delayed or immediate parroting of heard words” as a symptom of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and therefore to deny rhetorical agency to autistic people.⁶⁷ One source of this pervasive image of autism may be Francesca Happé. In a study of autobiographical writings by autistic people, she analyzes passages that sound likely to be repeated from adults in their circle, and comments, “The possibility of parroting must, therefore, cause doubt on the significance of apparently insightful remarks.”⁶⁸ This doubting of the legitimacy of utterances is just what the ethicists complain of in the stochastic parroting allegedly evident in AI, and similar to what has sometimes been said about avant-garde poems. By repeating the phrases of others, you empty out those phrases of any insights or significance they might contain when uttered by their actual author. Anna Stenning points out that such devaluing of autistic expression implies that when an autistic person such as Greta Thunberg makes moral judgments they can be dismissed as mere parroting of others.⁶⁹ Melanie Yergeau promisingly argues that much autistic communication can be reconceptualized as “demi-rhetoricity,” resistance to suppressive medical regimes, and “a means of communing and recognizing, of crippling and queering spaces and relations, and seeing and acknowledging kindred spirits.”⁷⁰ She explores the “inventional possibilities” of echoing, especially the time

66. Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 162.

67. “Autism Spectrum Disorder,” in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 54.

68. Francesca G. E. Happé, “The Autobiographical Writings of Three Asperger Syndrome Adults: Problems of Interpretation and Implications for Theory,” in *Autism and Asperger Syndrome*, ed. Uta Frith (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 207–42.

69. Anna Stenning, “Understanding Empathy through a Study of Autistic Life Writing: On the Importance of Neurodivergent Morality,” in *Neurodiversity Studies: A New Critical Paradigm*, ed. Hannah Bertilsdottir Rosqvist, Nick Chown, and Anna Stenning (London: Routledge, 2020), 108–24.

70. Melanie Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 192.

lapse between source and echo, as well as the value of echoing as “placeholder for multiple meanings.”⁷¹

Erasure poetry appears to rely on a special, curated form of parroting. In a discussion with other poets who have also practiced erasure techniques, Srikanth Reddy says that *Voyager* was in part a Borgesian conceit: “I wanted my reader to slowly discover that he or she was reading an erasure as they made their way through the book.”⁷² Confessions like the following appear to be Reddy’s own: “I labored, often tempted to throw up my hands in frustration, on this form” (24). The sentiment sounds genuinely Reddy’s own, expressing his authentic feelings about the *Voyager* project, though the very words and their ordering are only his by appropriation from Waldheim, constrained by their source passage in Waldheim’s memories of the 1979–81 Iran hostage crisis.⁷³ Also in the first person section of *Voyager*, Reddy says: “In November last year, I became interested in the fate of a machine which had been launched into creation and disappeared from sight during my boyhood. . . . Every morning, I would visit the library to dig out information for my dissertation on the principles of writing, and in the night, overhead, sought refuge in the parallel journey” (19). Is this a fiction? We don’t know, and one result is a metapoetic reflection on the deceptive appearance of truthfulness in first person lyric.⁷⁴ Parroting Waldheim does not simply neutralize Reddy’s subjectivity: “I did find that as I erased Waldheim’s book, with its ghastly bureaucratic language, I kept finding ‘my’ voice within it . . . one’s selfhood resurfaces at those very moments when one is most trying to elude it.”⁷⁵ Did this discovery that Waldheim’s text mirrored Reddy also indicate some shared historical complicity, or simply that both of them were implicated by the inescapable intersubjectivity of language? The dilemma has affinities with the worries about AI language models, that the text they generate may be contaminated by unwanted ideology from the source data.

71. *Ibid.*, 196, 198.

72. Srikanth Reddy, quoted in King, “Weight of What’s Left [Out].”

73. Kurt Waldheim, *In the Eye of the Storm: A Memoir* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1985), chap. 11. The memoir’s purpose, to defend Waldheim against his critics, is particularly evident in this chapter. He even corrects a passage in President Carter’s own memoirs where Waldheim is described as having tears in his eyes when discussing the Iranian hostages. Waldheim’s retort is unconsciously apt: “That is poetic licence. It is not easy for me to cry, although I doubtless became emotional” (157). This resistance to remorse troubles Reddy.

74. Writers of autobiographical poetry reflect on these issues in Kate Sontag and David Graham, eds., *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2001); see, e.g., Ted Kooser, “Lying for the Sake of Making Poems” (158–61), and Andrew Hudgins, “The Glass Anvil: ‘The Lies of an Autobiographer’” (182–96).

75. Reddy, quoted in King, “Weight of What’s Left [Out].”

The critics of AI say that respondents to its statements are inclined to treat them as intentionally meaningful. Now consider poems that rely on citation, appropriation, textual collaging and erasure. *Voyager* invites reflection on whether its readers, like the humans who project intelligence onto the answers from AI language systems, also interpret the fluency and coherence of Reddy's recycled text as meaningful, as corresponding to a communicative intent. Metaphorically, are poets who derive their texts from prior existing texts also parrots, and how accountable are they for what they say? Or might the trope itself be problematic, might parrots not always be parrots?

CONCLUSION

In conclusion I must mention two underlying assumptions here. With Kathryn Bode I believe that exchange between the sciences and poetry is not only possible; it is necessary.⁷⁶ My other guiding principle is that although literary studies should continue to argue about issues of language, selfhood, mind, digitality, and more, it is going to be increasingly important for those of us who profess criticism (to use John Guillory's phrase) to show epistemological respect for the social sciences as well as the natural sciences.⁷⁷ The stochastic parrots controversy fascinates me because its confidently pejorative use of the parrot trope to condemn the reliance of AI on copying and repeating the words of human others appears to conflict with the linguistic condition as it has been explored in literary studies. Language use relies on repetition. Literary writing relies heavily on repetition in many forms: genre, intertextuality, allusion, and quotation to name a few. Gerald Bruns recalls: "Years ago, Northrop Frye wrote, 'Poems can only be made out of other poems, novels out of other novels': all of literary history is a re-composition of received texts."⁷⁸ Our terminology for textual recycling reflects this history. I use the term "recycling" deliberately because this humble everyday analogy allows a wide latitude of interpretation. In practice there are many different modes of verbal repetition ranging from the intentional to the random or mechanical: we refer to borrowing, appropriation, citation, quotation, allusion, and of course intertextuality. David

76. See Peter Middleton, "Dark Matters: Historicising Science and Poetry since 1950," *Journal of Literature and Science* 5, no. 2 (2012): 77–82, and *Physics Envy: American Poetry in the Cold War and After* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

77. "It is only by tracing the filiations of this practice [of reading] as they extend from literature to the system of education, and beyond that, to the venues of the new media, that we might find a better way to estimate and realize our aims" (John Guillory, *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* [University of Chicago Press, 2022], 101).

78. Gerald L. Bruns, "Voices of Construction: On Susan Howe's Poetry and Poetics (A Citational Ghost Story)," *Contemporary Literature* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 43; internal quotation from Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton University Press, 1961), 97.

Roh's suggestion that we talk of "collaborative accretion" reminds us that these processes are inherently social ones.⁷⁹ Introducing the parrot, the comic, philosophical, and avian parrot, unsettles hierarchies of authorship, humanity, animal, and machine.

I have taken the stochastic parrots (a paragrammatic reading might call them sarcastic parrots) more literally than the authors intended, because comparing digital computing systems, hyped as a new form of intelligence, with an animal, opens up questions about both digital and literary practice. Do these machines pass the parrot test? When we read the parroted fragments of Waldheim in the poem *Voyager*, do we think of the result as expressed in Waldheim's own words, or in Reddy's words, or are we troubled as to just what this repetition signifies? Reddy's poem asks tacit questions similar to those asked by the authors of the stochastic parrots essay about just how and why readers ascribe intent and meaning to the borrowed text. Indeed, the whole debate about AI language models is haunted by the specter of intentionality.

We should not accept all the pejorative implications of calling AI language models parrots, not so much because this does a disservice to parrots, though it does, but because the creative force of such poetic transformations suggests that even the AI algorithms might facilitate creative transformations embedded by their human authors. Verbal repetition, however complex the procedures by which it is managed, could be more creative, cognitively interesting, and potentially different than philosophers, psychiatrists, and software engineers sometimes assume. Repetition's creativity may also take us to dark places, represented here by Reddy's underworld phantasms. The example of the poets invites us to wonder if even parroting by AI language models may not be entirely the empty-headed practice imagined by software ethicists, philosophers, or psychiatrists, that its inventiveness may extend, for good or ill, beyond assumptions about vacuous mimicry. It is time for more dialogue between knowledgeable critics of AI and the practitioners and readers of poetic forms of parrot practice that have come to be such a significant part of contemporary poetry. Howe, Reddy, and other poets exploring the phenomenon of fractal authorship in borrowed language are opening up aesthetic spaces beyond the confines of singularity. As recent controversies around conceptual poetry should remind us, the pejorative trope of the parrot is also a warning of the risks around verbal repetition, and their implications for our understanding of self, language, authorship, and history.

79. David S. Roh, *Illegal Literature: Toward a Disruptive Creativity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 8.