

On hating Vergil. Creativity in an Age of Machines

Today we suddenly find ourselves in a world where “creativity” is not necessarily a distinctly human endeavor. With the advent of artificial intelligence and the associated promises of a creative machine (be they justified or not), this idea is faced with an unexpected and fundamental challenge.

For the past two millennia, Latin literature, particularly its poetry, has been championed as the premier object for the study of human creativity. While “creativity” as a term is of post-Enlightenment origin, ancient reflections on the subject usually fall under the umbrella of the terms *synthesis* or *compositio*. This perspective, which analyzes creativity as a process of “putting things together” is now reemerging in the field of AI. In the latter, however, it is employed specifically to dismiss its “creative” potential when cast against human counterparts, who allegedly work in different ways. This paper reflects on these clashing approaches and tries to show that classical studies can offer fresh perspectives on both.

This year a series of advocates and detractors of the new technology have had to argue the potential connection between human creativity and AI – variously seen as either entities with fantastic powers or mere “stochastic parrots” (Bender et al. 2021). At the heart of these debates, though not always stated explicitly, is a question of the nature of creativity as such. In this discourse, even those who dismiss AI’s promises as delusional have no choice but to substantiate their view in a new and informed way. I contribute to this debate by reexamining past approaches to Latin poetry and try to shed new light on the differences, and perhaps similarities, between Roman poetic activity and the workings of modern AI technologies.

What is commonly overlooked is the fact that the assessment of the nature and quality of Latin poetry, and especially of now firmly canonized authors, has changed over this long period, in some cases dramatically. It is a curious detail, for example, that it was precisely in the incunabular period of “Classics” as an academic discipline, in 19th century Germany, that scholars developed an almost absurd hatred towards Latin poetry, above all against its figurehead Vergil (Conte 2007). This attitude is usually predicated on a dismissive view of Latin poetry’s allegedly “synthetic” nature. It did not seem to need any further qualification for Hermann Schiller, one of the main protagonists of 19th century German pedagogy, to write the following words: “The twelve books are spun out in a monotonous tedium; to get oneself to read them will cost some effort for every connoisseur of Homer. And although one might find the language, the verses, impeccable, exemplary, even worthy of imitation from a scholarly point of view, one cannot delight in them since at every turn one notices the toil and labor their production has been for the poet.” (Schiller, 1883; my translation).

This widespread attitude, shaped by Romantic aesthetics, only gradually began to change as Latinists sought to give a new intellectual grounding to their subject by exploring fresh approaches to creativity. Both sides, the detractors and the defenders of Latin poetry, interrogated the language of *compositio/synthesis* that we already find in the Roman authors themselves, and thereby share significant similarities with the current discourses around AI.

My contribution’s main aim is to briefly adumbrate a) why it was precisely Latin poetry that so often stood out as an object for the study of the nature of human creativity, and b) to suggest that it is worthwhile, especially today, to revisit the ideas that have sprung from those meditations in a new light and context. This context is a discourse that occasionally wanders on

the edge of an anachronistic Romanticism whose simplistic rancor for creations like Vergil's is not enough to meaningfully confront AI today.

In order to expand the picture slightly outside of the much-studied Vergilian opus, I will analyze a passage by another often-maligned poet, reading Manilius' *Astronomica* 2.749-87 as a detailed reflection on creativity from the perspective of *synthesis/compositio* and set it in conversation with today's challenges.

Bibliography

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