When you read Evolution you are easily struck by the way in which the poetry, in quite an unusual way, places nature on an equal level with technology. These two entities are not in opposition, on the contrary they seem to presuppose each other. In the poetic fragments that flicker past on the screen technology appears rather as an untamed force of nature than as a man-controlled science. But this underlying mood of threat and uncertainty occurs only at a thematic level, the actual conditions of Evolution’s technical settings are strictly controlled by the AI that Heldén and Jonson created to generate and manipulate new poetic statements based on Heldén’s former (in book format) published poetry. Evolution is moreover a work that raises the question of the relationship between human, nature, and technology. And it is a work that draws attention to the question of what code and software mean in themselves.

What kind of AI is it that we, the readers, confront in Evolution? In the abstract to the online work you can read that Evolution “emulates the writing and composition of poet and artist Johannes Heldén, with the ultimate goal of passing ‘The Imitation Game Test’ proposed by Alan Turing in 1951”. In the original example by Turing all participants in the test are separated from one another, and if the interrogator can’t tell if the opponent is a machine or not, the machine has passed the test. In this case “the opponent” is already visible to “the interrogator” (the reader), and the ambiguity whether it is a text generated by a machine or not is never really at stake. But for a reader familiar with Heldén’s poetry something strange takes place on the screen. It is an almost uncanny feeling of having read the words that appear in front of you before, and probably you have, but not in this order. It feels as if we interact with something more than just a random number generator, of which the output is usually received as humorous or nonsense-like, and without any deeper literary consideration. The title, Evolution, implies instead that we are dealing with some kind of meta-heuristic optimization, or evolutionary algorithm that, inspired by biology and nature’s ways of evolving, strives to optimize and find a solution as good as possible based on a given source material. And what would happen if we couldn’t see the computer interface in front of us as we read? Would we be sure that we could tell the difference between Heldén’s ‘original’ work and the versions generated by the AI if we read it in print? One of the versions that flicker past (after 282 generations) capture this doubt in a nice way: “made or today being aware it patterns the choice you seem presence remember”

What we have here is ultimately one code (the alphabet) transformed into another (binary code) representing the same thing – Heldén’s poetry – through different kinds of rules. Would it instead be possible to program an AI (using the same data) that generates a text that would not remind us of Heldén at all? To create code that does not emulate a previous structure, that alters its own instructions and ultimately creates new ones while operating? To simply get rid of the biological author.