We have to trust the machine

Ever since people began producing signs and storing them in various media such as clay and stone, papyrus and paper, the practices of writing, reading, and counting have been closely linked to each other. The first works of ‘literature’ in Mesopotamia were lists of numbers and calculations. After that came poetry.

And poetry would soon involve counting in its own way – the counting of syllables and lines, tropes and turns and rhymes. It would develop into an exquisite alphanumerical procedure, on the one hand founded on the verbal habits of an oral culture, where no external storage for memory was present, on the other hand formed and transformed by the potential for complex combinations and elaborative play inherent in the work with written signs. Out of this situation a system of rules and instructions for literary expression and signification developed, codified by disciplines and practices such as rhetoric and poetics.

In order to write a sonnet, you have to be able to count to fourteen and sometimes five and sometimes twelve. And you have to be able to shape your tongue and hand according to a set of instructions. As these rules are internalized in your body and mind the literary machine is set to work, the program can run. The input – the accumulated vocabulary of a situation. The output – words intended and unexpected. The output – love or faith or melancholy or delight.

When John Cage started writing mesostics around 1970, he could fall back on a long tradition of poetic artifice. In the Middle Ages and the Baroque period a lot of permutational poems and acrostica, for example, were produced. The seeming linguistic frivolity was held in check by religious motivation and a metaphysical underpinning. It was not the poet who was expressing himself. He was at best a medium for something else. Perhaps it was just a way of letting nature as a book, as writing, manifest itself and evolve? In a similar manner Cage’s mesostics as well as his I-Ching procedures are linked to the intention to overcome the personal stance and the self-centered expression. But in order to let in chance and unpredictable expansion and growth, a rule or constraint is necessary. Oulipo considered such constraints a necessary condition for literature worth the name. And there were and are others.

Perhaps poetry, if not literature in general, is inherently algorithmic. Even automatic writing is regulated, dictated. Moreover, the algorithmic imagination is a crucial trait in modern and modernist writing – from Mallarmé to Cage to concrete to digital poetry, etcetera. This way of setting up rules, coding, writing programs, that will execute something when an input is fed into the machine is an attempt to align the subject with the world, to negotiate the differences and similarities between ourselves and the objects with which we co-exist. But not through ordering and fixating things and words, humans and machines, according to a strict perspective, according to a geometry or a pre-conceived scheme. Or rather – the pre-conceived is a way of exploring, of testing, even of letting go.

This is also perhaps what poetry, at its best, aims at – to use certain instruments and machinery to explore, but not knowing exactly what or who or where to discover. A condition is set up, in letters and numbers, through writing, through code, through the
triggering of voltage differences; a set of instructions which will activate a step-by-step procedure, which will offer us words and images and ideas and emotions, which will not only symbolize or represent something, but will dig out channels through reality, passageways to travel. Algorithmic poetry will not set humans against machines, the subjective against the objective, but overturn and displace such binaries in an attempt to let things happen, take place, expand and change and perhaps, for good or bad, evolve.