

# THE DIAGONAL RELATIONSHIP

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NEW HORIZONS IN GROUP SEX  
 "Those liberal bastards are fucking me again."  
 --Richard M. Nixon,  
 quoted in True Quotes

## INDECENT, BUT BORING

"It is difficult for the voter to enter the booth itself and swing the huge clanking handle that sets the machine and draws the heavy curtain that conceals the upper part of the body only, without feeling that he is suspected of being about to commit an indecent act; though even if the curtain were longer, hardly anyone could masturbate successfully in a polling place."  
 --Edgar Z. Friedenberg

If that is what the electoral authorities fear, I can reassure them. I give my word of honor as a gentleman that, even given time enough and privacy, I would not succumb to this temptation. One reason of course is that the voting process does not inspire me to masturbation. I am not at all certain I could give them a similar reassurance about other bodily processes.

My reaction to the gross public indecency scheduled for the first Tuesday in November is hardly unique. In fact, I have an uneasy feeling of being in a majority. I look at a typical pair of paid political announcements and see that the first is entirely devoted to Reagan (except for its last sentence), and the second to Carter. Needless to say the first is a Carter commercial, and the second a Reagan ad.

REMINDS ME OF THE CONFEDERATE ARMY: A THIN GREY LINE OF HAIR-OS



In fairness, it should be pointed out that the Democrat portrayal of Bonzo's sidekick as a nuke-wielding fanatic, and the Republican delineation of the Great Peanut as a bungler who has done to the economy things that no competent geek would do to a chicken, set a much higher standard of truth than your average political ad, but it would be nice, if only in the interests of novelty, to see ads that said something good about their own candidate, and I am sure that one of the parties will do just that as soon as they can think of something.

Ah, but I have not mentioned John Anderson. Actually, the great leap forward from the Lesser of Two Evils to the Least of Three is not some new breakthrough. It has been fairly common in recent elections, and perhaps the main thing that distinguishes the current Third Possibility is that he is not named Wallace. As near as I can figure out the famed Anderson Difference is honesty, and this honesty was demonstrated by the fact that he told the National Rifle Association that he favored gun control. Since he was already on record as saying that, one is hardly overwhelmed by his honesty in saying it again, but even such small things are gratefully seized these days. Perhaps we approach the day of a slogan St. Lenny once suggested: "Vote for me. I don't wet the bed!"

It has come to this: Two men clamoring for the Presidency, each basing his claim on the fact that he is not the other, while a third purports to be twice as good since, after all, he is neither of them. The electorate watched and tries to decide whom to vote against.

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I mentioned that I saw all this on television. Long-time DR readers may have guessed that these ads took place during an NFL game, as that is virtually all that I watch on the tube.

Correct. When I was a teenager, I had a 3-hour-a-day TV habit, but I kicked it cold turkey when I went off to college. During thanksgiving vacation, I turned on one of the shows I had been fascinated by before. (If memory serves, it was an hour-long detective show featuring the one and only Troy Donahue.) About 5 minutes later, I found myself saying, "You mean I used to like this shit?"

Since then, I have on occasion watched TV shows. There have on occasion been some that I genuinely enjoyed, though the last one that comes to mind was the original Laugh-In. But sometimes I feel that a good TV show would be one that did not insult my intelligence.

It is a matter of habituation. Not being terribly used to sitting down before the babble box, I tend not to look at it unless there is something special, and I would imagine that I do miss some enjoyable entertainment.

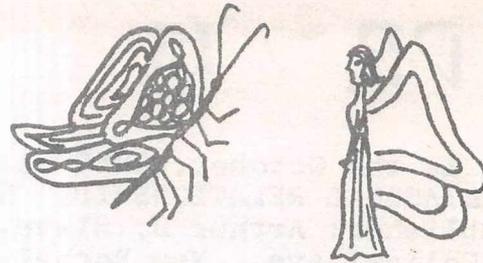
Others find that they enjoy television, as such. They consult the TV Guide, and, when things look bad, they seek out a program which will not insult their intelligence. They pick the least of several evils.

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Could there be a connection here? A network tries to win a majority of the audience in any particular time slot. To do so, they have to appeal to the least common denominator. In politics, this means a so-called "centrist" approach with something for everyone. In television, what happens is that a few approaches have been found to be generally acceptable--suspense, jiggle, violence, sexual innuendo, and real people degrading themselves in pursuit of fame and/or fortune--and these are generally used.

But what I am saying is not simply that the masses are stupid, and so everything they touch is stupid. There's a bit more to it than that.

Before becoming too smug, the literary effete snob who wishes to look down upon the visual media should take a look at the best-seller lists.



My designer?  
WonderWings, of course.

It is not a pretty picture. In fact, it is a lot like television--violence, suspense, gossip, and a steamy but inexplicit sort of eroticism which may be the literary equivalent of jiggle. There are exceptions; as I write this Tom Robbins's brilliant Still Life with Woodpecker leads the quality paperback list. But there are exceptions on television, too.

The difference is that readers have more options, that along with the mass-market stuff, there is intellectual material, as well as books for a variety of other small minorities.

Now why do the publishers do this? It is possible that they are motivated by sheer love of learning and the desire to be good people. It is a bit more likely that they do it for the money. Since it is not necessary for each book to appeal to a majority, they can publish books that appeal to a smaller audience and still make money.

Imagine if you will an arrangement where every bookstore consisted of a single rack, with room for one book from each publisher (perhaps changed after a set period of time). Is it not reasonable to guess that, under such a setup, only best sellers (or books that seemed likely to become best sellers) would be published?

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The means for making TV resemble the book business in diversity has been available for years--cable television. It has been hamstrung by shortsighted bureaucrats, fat-cat networks that see no need for change, etc. There is a slow improvement, however, and the fact that it offers the opportunity for fortunes to be made is encouraging.

I have seen visions of the ideal cable system--decentralized, cooperative, interactive. They are inspiring, and not too likely to be realized. But even if cable is taken over by the rich capitalist pigs, it will be an improvement over what we have now, because of the profits to be made by diversifying.

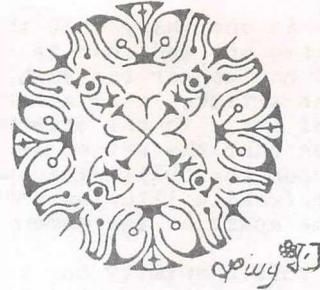
So far, I've referred to voting as indecent, and blamed it for "Charlie's Angels." Do I have anything else against it? Well, yes.

Let's imagine another situation: There are four men and a woman alone together. The men think that a gang bang would be an excellent idea; the woman does not. Do you favor majority rule in that situation?

When I was in elementary school, I kept hearing about how voting was such a wonderful thing. But at the same time, I kept hearing more and more cases where voting is obviously inappropriate. We do not vote on the answer to 2 + 2. We do not vote on scientific questions. (Or do we? One thing I distrust about the antinuke movement is that it seems to be an effort to have people vote on the scientific questions connected with nuclear power. Now I am not too cheery about the prospect of my fellow citizens voting on scientific questions about nuclear power, especially those who believe that if a power plant malfunctions, there will be a mushroom cloud and a fireball. But even if we can get people properly educated--which means, among other things, that I have to do a bit more studying than I care to--where does it end? Do we next vote on genetic research, and everyone has to become an expert on that? Fortunately, there is a solution to the nuke problem that does not require voting. Repeal the Price-Anderson Act & make power companies fully responsible for any harm their plants do. Then see whether it's safe enough for them to chance it.)

Another area we do not vote on is what might be called human rights. As decent human beings, we do not vote on whether people with black skin will be permitted to live in this country. We do not (thank the Gods) vote on religious matters. (Though a group calling itself the Moral Majority seeks to change that. Gibbon said that the Holy Roman Empire was neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire. The Moral Majority is only two-thirds as good. Adrienne Fein suggests they change their name to "Modern Moral Majority.") Gays are demanding the right to love as they choose, without submitting their feelings to a majority vote. Indeed, some of us look to the day when all noninvasive, nonfraudulent private behavior is beyond majority, or any other outside, rule, for to do otherwise is to say that each of us is no more than property, to be disposed of as the majority sees fit.

Voting is defensive; the president cannot be too oppressive, lest s/he be voted out of office. That I accept. But perhaps the goal for humanity should be never having to vote again.



# Engineer Redux

## I

Last time, you may have thought I was going to review The Number of the Beast, by Robert A. Heinlein, but I did a whole bunch of literary theory, and wound up admitting that I hadn't read it yet. But now I have read it, and I am going to review it. I'm going to talk about some other stuff first, but I really am going to review it. Trust me.

## II

Ah, gentle reader, 'tis three months since last we met, and thus 'twould, mayhap, not be amiss, were I to recall that last time we were discussing stories as acts of communication betwixt writer and reader, rather than as things, and your humble narrator was suggesting that a number of such acts of communication, or--dare I say?--intercourse, could be seen as making up a relationship.

There was a time, early in the history of the novel, when lengthy discussions, like the above, were quite common in fiction. Henry Fielding, for instance, presented himself as a chatty sort, introducing himself to his readers and begging their pardon before unfolding his tale. Indeed, he followed the style of "tell them you'll tell them, tell them, tell them you've told them," with continuing discussions between the chapters of his novels.

Fielding's approach eventually fell into disfavor. Perhaps the problem was that, when Fielding wrote, the novel was still a new, upstart art form. (Fielding felt that he had to explain that what he was writing was a new sort of thing--a "comic epic in prose.") But eventually, the novel won respect as Serious Art. Thus, presumably, light banter from writer to reader would be as inappropriate as a priest interrupting his performance of High Mass to wave to friends in the back row,

And yet there was more to it than that. There are two self-defined groups of fiction writers: Artists and Entertainers. They tend to despise one another. Let an entertainer, like Robert A. Heinlein, say that what writers do is to compete for the reader's beer money, and the Artist flies into a rage. Let the Artist speak of the grandeur of art, and the Entertainer can be heard in the background muttering, "Bullshit! They're in the same business we are."

But there is one thing that these two groups can agree on, and that is that the writer should not appear (as such) in the story. To the artist, it is a matter of the Dignity of Art. To the entertainer, it is the idea that the writer is a performer who depends upon the "willing suspension of disbelief"--a fragile illusion which is liable to come apart at any moment.

And yet, this unanimity may be deceptive. It is known that clothing fashions have a way of recurring, that what was once fashionable, and now looks Old and Quaint, may return. Indeed, there are those who say that if we live long enough, we will see every clothing fashion come back, even unto the Nehru jacket. So it may be with literary fashions, on a much longer time scale, of course.

And indeed, in both camps, the principle of author's absence is being challenged. There is today a school of literary criticism, derived from the writings of Roland Barthes, among others, which holds that it is impossible for fiction to be about reality because words can never describe reality. All that fiction can ever be about is fiction itself, and perhaps the impossibility of ever writing anything meaningful about reality. (Those who think I am making this up, or wildly caricaturing an existing belief, may wish to look at the first chapter of Structural Fabulation, by Robert Scholes.)

To one who is not a Professor of Literature, this approach seems not only bizarre, but creatively impoverishing. I am tempted to say that these people have gotten carried away with the observation that the map is not the territory, to the point where they are prepared to outlaw maps. And yet, I suspect I have overstated my case, for there is one writer--the remarkable John Barth--who thrives upon these very assumptions.

Barth began with two witty, but fairly straightforward, novels: The Floating Opera and End of the Road. From there, he leaped to a massive and awesome parody of the historical novel (and a great many critical theories), The Sot-Weed Factor, and thence to the still huger Giles Goat-Boy, a bit of speculative fiction in which the University is the Universe. Here, perhaps, Barth found his own limits to growth, for his next book was a slim volume of somewhat interrelated short stories: Lost in the Funhouse. This was true metafiction, fiction based on the impossibility of writing fiction, and it seemed to be an end from which he could proceed only to silence.

But no--a few years later came Chimera, a triad of tales about the creative process again, late in which appeared, as a somewhat minor character, the novelist John Barth. His admirers (including me) feared, and his detractors hoped, that he had reached his own end of the line, that like the Oozlem Bird, he had flown in ever-decreasing circles until he vanished up his own fundamental assumption. Indeed, he was gone

for seven years, but he returned last year with the utterly remarkable and fascinating Letters, a novel in which the author himself appears, together with characters from all his previous books. (What a curious thing to do! Is this some sort of avant-garde mainstream idea?) I cannot begin to guess what Barth might do as an encore to that, but I am not prepared to count him out yet.

Indeed, metafiction is quite popular amongst the Serious Lit set. It even has an Official Enemy--John Gardner. To Gardner, fiction should be serious and moral--straightforward stories about the good guys beating the doodoo out of the bad guys, and none of this effete-snob literary stuff with its subtlety and indirection and like that. But like a smut stumper studying more and more of the Nasty Stuff, or an undercover cop getting deeper & deeper into the lifestyle he is sworn to subvert and destroy, Gardner puts more and more metafiction into each of his own novels, with the moral message becoming ever more pro forma.

Meanwhile, there was a movement from the opposite side. Kurt Vonnegut has always spoken of himself as an entertainer, though I sometimes suspect that he, like the stereotypical comedian who aspires to play Hamlet, may have dreams of a more exalted role. In and around the science fiction genre he loved, but did not like loving, Vonnegut wrote The Sirens of Titan and Cat's Cradle, and other books, with a certain strangeness of manner, but with either a traditional third-person narrator or a first person who was not supposed to be identical with the author. In Slaughterhouse-Five, however, Vonnegut began with a "Chapter One" (not an "Introduction" or a "Preface") which appears to be the author describing the book he had written. That book, he tells us, begins, "Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time." These words are the beginning of Chapter Two, not Chapter One.

The novel which begins with Chapter Two has a fragmented temporal sequence (justified by a clever bit of metaphysical speculation), but it can be seen as a routine third-person-omniscient narration. To those who prefer to see each novel as an independent entity, I would imagine that the "Chapter One" device is an interesting one, but little more. But to those whose critical preference is looking at an artist's entire oeuvre, it may take on a new significance in the light of Vonnegut's next book.

Avon Books ad--NY Times Book Review  
19 October 1980

It is common knowledge that the book publishing industry is troubled. This is reflected in changing distribution patterns, much higher prices, diminished editorial and production standards, less review attention, and worst, the spirit of innovation and experimentation which had made publishing the most engaging of media. This was first seen in the hardcover publishing industry as publishers scrambled for blockbusters and began to ignore more modest works such as literary fiction and first novels.

Standards in ad writing are falling, too.

Breakfast of Champions begins with a "Preface." Here, the author himself (presumably) speaks to us. In the tones of one who is all too familiar with the heavy burden of a Great Potential, he warns us not to expect too much. He tells us about some experiences that he made use of in writing the book. He offers some thoughts on two themes which will recur in the book: People as Machines and the Role of the Arts.

Then, Chapter One begins: "This is a tale of a meeting of two lonesome, skinny, fairly old white men on a planet which was dying fast." Would you read a book that started like that? In fact, that might be the most unpromising first sentence of a novel since "You should see the size of the bug I stomped up in Gregor's room," which won the New York Magazine prize for such sentences.

I say that not to pick on Vonnegut, but to point out that there's something going on here beyond ordinary story telling. The narrator begins as if he were introducing the background (American consensus reality, ca. 1973) to the children of a culture who knew nothing about it. It is the tone of an innocent child--one who sees only What Is.

By the third chapter, we hear the narrator explaining that he is the one who created Kilgore Trout and all the other characters in the book. And so, perhaps we revise our view of Breakfast of Champions. It is not a novel about two old white men meeting. It is Vonnegut himself talking to us, explaining why he does not wish to write a novel about two old white men meeting. Perhaps this means that we should revise the standards by which we judge the book, treating it as an essay or somesuch, rather than as Art or Story Telling.

Or maybe not. For later in the book, the narrator is sitting in a bar with some of the characters he created (an odd notion in itself), and one of these characters says something which takes him by surprise and leads him to new insights.

Some readers may think that this idea of a fiction writer being surprised by something one of his characters does or says is fairly bizarre. Actually, it is a fairly common phenomenon, one which has been experienced by dabblers and dilettantes, as well as by real writers. For instance, there was a would-be writer who decided, for both literary and psychological reasons, to try his hand at writing porn. He discovered, to his chagrin, that his descriptive powers were such that he could not make even copulation sound interesting. His characters, equally bored, began carrying on lengthy conversations on philosophical topics. The writer wound up revising these and putting some of them in a new publication called THE DIAGONAL RELATIONSHIP. Some writers are surprised by their characters. Others write what is dictated to them by otherwise undetectable entities such as the God Aiwass or the beings from the Dog Star Sirius. Still others try to remain open to their subconscious. I am not at all sure what the difference is.

Know me do you? For hundreds of years Jedi have I trained, but when Dagobah I leave, people mistake me for a troll or someone named Markoff Chaney.

So I use TERRAN EXPRESS. Not just clout--the Force it carries!

TERRAN EXPRESS--The Planet Don't Leave Without It!

TERRAN EXPRESS

YODA

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And so, this part of the book is plausible. But is it a true statement of what happened to Vonnegut, or is it believable fictional verisimilitude?

As fiction, it can be considered like this: The unnamed narrator is a successful novelist who approaches the age of fifty with a feeling that he has lost his way. In an attempt to figure out what has gone wrong, he becomes as a little child, and tries to see the world without the preconceptions that the culture places upon it.

And so, he looks at What Is: material reality. And what he sees is a crazy, violent world. In particular, he notices two things: For some reason, the culture he lives in rewards those who are called "artists"--people who put paint on canvas or words on a page, rather than doing real work (i.e., moving matter through space). Secondly, he notices that, given the approach he has taken, he sees no way of distinguishing between people and machines.

The narrator goes through the book, pushing his fictional characters around as if they were machines, and trying to find the answer. But there is no answer in the terms which have been set. Finally, a character who is, like the narrator, an artist, departs from his preassigned role to remind the narrator of what he had forgotten.

Rabo Karabekian was supposed to be (in the narrator's view) a bad guy; he was an effete snob who created things that ordinary people couldn't understand (and thus must be frauds). But he surprised the narrator by pointing out that one of his apparently meaningless creations actually contains the secret that the narrator had forgotten--the unwavering light of human consciousness.

Thus Breakfast of Champions can be seen as a novel about the error of materialism. A materialistic system will place primary value on physical work. But it leaves out a whole dimension--that of Mind. Without that, people are machines and might as well be treated as such. But just as the true creator of value in the physical world is Mind (as in the inventiveness which multiplies the value of matter & effort), so true artistic creation comes from the mind and must include the mind in its work.

There are two artists in the book. Nilgore Trout is obviously the narrator's favorite, and he is presented sympathetically. But like the narrator, he has forgotten the dimension of Mind, as in his novel, Now It Can Be Told, in which everyone is a robot. This materialistic approach leads to violence (as it so often does in real life), and Trout himself reaps some of the violence. Karabekian, having remembered the mental dimension, is rewarded by getting fifty thousand dollars for sticking a piece of tape on a canvas. But in the end, as the narrator is set free by the revelation he receives, so Trout is set free, and promised that he will gain fame and fortune, now that the one thing that was missing from his art is restored.

Do I find there what I hope to find? Of course. But I maintain that if I am mistaken, it is because I have left out something in the book, not because there is a True Meaning or what the author intended, or something like that.

One last note: I have read Breakfast of Champions several times and thought about it a good deal. I did this because I enjoyed my first superficial reading of the book. Vonnegut's next novel was Slapstick. I found it almost unreadably bad. It may have the sort of below-the-surface meanings that I found in Breakfast, but if it does, I may never know. Whether a story is worth taking the extra effort to find further meanings in is a question everyone answers for themselves. One thing a reviewer can do is to point out both the superficial interest of the story and (if possible) the deeper meanings, to give the reader an idea of whether s/he wishes to read once, more often, or not at all.

### III

I am going to talk about The Number of the Beast. I promise. But there are one or two more things to say first.

One aspect of reading I have discussed before is secondary realities. To some readers, the background of a book is highly important. Having read and enjoyed a number of books set in Darkover or Regency England or Yoknapatawpha County, they wish to return to the place where they felt those earlier joys, and thus, to them, a book set in a familiar reality has a head start.

Other readers become enamoured of characters, and wish to read more and more about their favorites. These two impulses have led to the creation of what is known as "fan fiction," in which people other than the original writer create stories in which favored characters or backgrounds reappear.

I suppose fan fiction can be traced back all the way to the folk creation of new tales about mythical or legendary figures such as Coyote or Tyl Eulenspiegel.

The first contemporary example I know of is the work of the Baker Street Irregulars, a group of Sherlock Holmes fans who wrote stories and nonfact essays dealing with their hero, reconciling apparent contradictions in Dr. Watson's accounts, etc. Philip Jose Farmer has written "biographies" of two of his favorites--Tarzan and Doc Savage, proposing geneological links connecting them with a variety of other fictional figures, from Dr. Fu Manchu to Leopold Bloom.

But the best thing that happened to fan fiction was STAR TREK. This tv show fascinated a group of people, many of whom felt the desire to extend the world that had been created for them. So they wrote stories of their own about the characters (notably Spock), background speculations about the nonhuman races in the show, etc. These ranged from pseudobiological speculation on the life processes of Vulcans to what some considered the ultimate heresy--tales in which there was a sexual relationship between Kirk and Spock.

This trend proliferated. Jacqueline Lichtenberg, who began her writing career with STAR TREK fanfiction and has since turned pro, pays her karmic debt by encouraging her readers to write stories set in the background of her House of Zeor and Unto Zeor, Forever. Darkover fan fiction is so popular that a book of it has been commercially published (The Keeper's Price, DAW pb).

One can see this same trend in one of the more unlikely fiction bestsellers of recent years, J. R. R. Tolkien's The Silmarillion. This book is more legend than story, telling the background of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings.

Critics who dislike a book by a famous author will often ask whether the book would have been successful (or even published at all) if it had been published under the name of "John Doe," rather than the famous name of its author. That is a relevant question at times, but it seems utterly inappropriate in the case of The Silmarillion.

For Tolkien created more than a book in Lord of the Rings; he created a secondary reality, and such was the power of this creation that readers wanted to read more about it, from its author, and in the context of the earlier work, The Silmarillion can be seen as a masterpiece of secondary creation and what might be called fictional myth.

"Personally, I'm in favor of tight pussy, loose shoes, and a warm place to shit. (In fact, I think most of this country's problems are caused by its being run by men who think those are not worthwhile goals, and consequently have a poor sex life, aching feet, and constipation.)"

--Marc S. Glasser

IV

I'm almost ready to talk about The Number of the Beast. Really. Just one more thing.

All of these discussions presuppose that there can be a kind of synergy in reading several works by the same author. Looking at the change and development of a writer over the years can be quite enjoyable, even if it is the sort of thing you can get a Ph.D. for.

I am by no means the first reviewer to discuss a major relationship with Mr. Heinlein. Alexei Panshin could almost be seen as one whose entire career has been a response to Heinlein. The first book of his to be published was the critical study, Heinlein in Dimension. Shortly thereafter, Panshin's first novel, Rite of Passage, appeared and it was seen by some as an attempt to do Podkayne of Mars right (i.e., with an adolescent female narrator who not only was intelligent and competent, but also lacked Podkayne's emetic cuteness). If so, it was a success, as in fact I would consider it just as a book treated in a vacuum. Panshin has since combined writing efforts with his wife, Cory, and over a third of their critical book SF in Dimension was devoted to Heinlein. He is, to them, the central figure of modern science fiction, the one must be understood to make sense out of the field.

But to H. Bruce Franklin, Heinlein is even more. Franklin's Robert A. Heinlein: America as Science Fiction (Oxford pb, \$4.95) treats Heinlein as representative of American capitalism (i.e., the Bad Guys). Franklin's political approach predictably leads to some bizarre judgments. (He is the only critic I have ever seen praise the egregious Rocket Ship Galileo. He likes it because the Nazis, rather than the Communists, are the villains.) Still it is an interesting study.

Both the Panshins and Franklin discuss The Number of the Beast, and so shall I.

V

The Number of the Beast, by Robert A. Heinlein (Fawcett pb, \$6.95)

So after all that, what do I think of the book? Do I think you should buy it?

It depends.

You mean, we've gone this far, and finally I tell you that ~~the better than of the~~ ~~it depends?~~ Well, it's like this.

The book begins in the unpromising manner I described last time--with two of the denizens of Heinlein's world discussing sex in the quaint native dialect.

INTERESTING. BUT, DOES IT JIGGLE?



We soon learn that this is to be an exploration of alternate realities, and that some of these come from books. (Indeed, two of the four leading characters have names derived from the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs.) But what the characters mostly do is what Heinlein's people have mostly done in the last few books: talk (onstage) and screw (mostly offstage). Once again, there will be those who wish it was the other way around.

Some of the conversation, like Zeb's description of how he got a Ph.D.) is delightful. Much of it, however, is petty squabbling over command. This running debate is broken by a few tepid adventures, but they are getting nowhere until they meet Lazarus Long and the characters from the Future History series. This leads to a metaphysical resolution (of sorts) and a great meeting of Heinleinian characters at which all is explained (or not, as the case may be).

If you have picked this book up to find out what science fiction is like, put it down at once. In fact, if you are not already a Heinlein fan, you are almost certain to find it verbose, tiresome, and pointless. With another author's name attached to it, it would be lucky to be published by a vanity press.

But that's not all there is to it. For those who have read Heinlein, who have been moved and shaken by him, this is an interesting, if not a great book. For some, the fascination of seeing what happens when all of Heinlein's characters meet will be worth the price of admission. For others, the Heinlein voice and attitudes will carry the book. For some (including me) this could be a step in the philosophical quest which began with the strange idea of Stranger that we are all one.

But of course, we all rushed out and bought the book, first thing. So maybe I can give a categorical buyer's guide after all.

If you haven't read the book yet, don't.

Thy Neighbor's Wife, by Gay Talese  
(Doubleday hc, 568 pp., \$14.95)

Elsewhere in these pages, I speak about reviewing fiction in terms of the author's entire career, one's relationship with the author or his literary persona, etc. One would suspect that this approach is out of place when dealing with factual books, and yet somehow it turns up.

One example of this is the review which begins with a discussion of how much money the author got for writing the book. These reviews are almost invariably diatribes against a system which grossly rewards writing; the reviewer doesn't particularly care for. But such reviews are not what many readers seek in a book review. Many of us wish to know not if the book is in some abstract sense worth the money the publisher paid for it, but whether we will be adequately rewarded for the money we wish to pay for a single copy.

Thy Neighbor's Wife has drawn an inordinate number of such reviews. To many reviewers, it is monstrous that a writer be able to get as much money as Talese did, especially when he researched the book by fucking around at Sandstone and being jacked off at massage parlors. Some reviewers are further incensed by the fact that all this nastiness did not break up Talese's marriage. Clearly all of this proves that Talese is a No-Good Shit who has not Gotten Caught. Therefore, the book is no good, or at the very least, since the Lord has unaccountably failed to punish the sinner Talese, the reviewers must do so.

And yet it is not only the pious and envious who have attacked the book for what seem to me utterly the wrong reasons. I think DOONESBURY is usually one of the funniest and most perceptive newspaper features around, but by no means perfect. Trudeau has a tendency to sneer mindlessly at individual change programs. As Sen. Proxmire panders to those who believe that the Big Words used by scientists are Nothing But double talk intended to mystify the masses, so Trudeau panders to those who believe that the new terminology of the Human Potential Movement is Nothing But double talk intended to cover up horniness and selfishness. Thus DOONESBURY presents a caricature named Gay Talese who goes around pompously congratulating himself for being a Freedom Fighter when all he is doing is getting laid.

Or consider Thomas Szasz. I admire Szasz greatly for his independence of mind, for his cogent attacks on the "mental health" model, and for his timely warnings of the Therapeutic State's efforts to disguise its moral opinions as matters of value-free Science. But while he works heroically to defend those threatened with imprisonment under the guise of therapy, Szasz is also motivated by a moralistic streak which recalls from letting Bad Guys escape Punishment on the grounds of "mental illness."

Szasz's review of Thy Neighbor's Wife (in INQUIRY) shows this moralistic strain at its worst. Szasz is far too libertarian to wish to make fucking around a crime, but he is convinced that it cannot bring happiness, and he has little patience with a book that seems to offer contradictory evidence.

All these negative reviews made me really want to like the book, but I was unable to. For all that I consider this a well-intentioned book on an important topic, I cannot recommend it. The book is too long. Talese has done a lot of research, and he shows us more of it than many of us wish to see; one character worked for an insurance company, and so we get a list of the assets of his company and several other major ones. (Could it be that Talese wishes us to know that along with the fun he had researching the book, he also did Real Hard Work? Or am I sinking to Trudeau's level?) It is unstructured, or at least I can see no particular reason for the order in which he tells things. His prose leaves much to be desired; participles dangle throughout like so many limp dicks.

It's a shame. Talese tells us about the founders of Sandstone, an experiment in sexual alternatives. To me, these people are pioneers, as much as those who went West in the covered wagons, and more so than those contemporary fools who cross the ocean in a balloon and such. To me, they are heroes and martyrs, but I fear that Talese will not convince any who did not start out sympathetic.

The "sex freedom" revolution of the 60s was something important. I believe that, by destabilizing the Official Truths about sex, marriage, and sex roles, it paved the way for a feminist revolution which corrected its excesses and addressed the areas it missed. None of this comes through in reading Talese, because the only feminist who interests him is Betty Dodson. (And to read him, you would never know that there has been a gay movement.)

I will lay upon this book the Academic Critic's Curse; it has Historical importance. It tells us at least as much as we want to know about some people whose importance is beginning to be seen, and thus it can serve as a source. But it is nowhere near what it could have been.



# From Silent Tristero's Empire

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I have read all of  
I WILL FEAR NO EVIL.  
It seems to me that  
there are a few

possible explanations for the third character joining the main two.

1) The whole phenomenon of multiple personalities is a psychotic process of hallucination or delusion, generated by the shock of brain transplant. It is unreal in factual terms, and explainable only in psychiatric terms.

2) The soul/personality is immortal in essentially the same way as in STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND. It is loosely attached to the body. It does not end at discorporation. Also it is loosely connected with those other souls--and the bodies of those other souls--with whom it has shared water. Thus a really close soul can enter a body as a "guest," especially if invited by the "primary" soul already in residence.

(Most modern Americans tend to identify the center of self-awareness in the body as the brain, or at least the head--writers will mention that a character feels as though s/he is sitting inside his head, looking out at the world through his eyes. In fact, there is no proof that the center of awareness is in the head: this is purely a subjective perception. There is evidence that the mind and brain are correlated, but this is not necessarily the same thing, and we may be missing important pieces of evidence--which, who knows, we may discover in future. If "Out-of-body" experiences are a genuine phenomenon, then the soul/mind/personality may not be attached to any one part of the body more than another, and may not be entirely attached to the body at all. Or it may be that any part of the body can serve as a link. This would be consistent with the belief that a ghost, or discorporated soul, needs some link with the physical world in order to manifest, as in TO KILL THE DEAD, by Tanith Lee.) In other words, Johann is still linked to the brain he possesses, Eunice is still linked to the body she possesses, and Jake is linked to the relationship he had with both Eunice and Johann.

Heinlein discussed the question of professional women in PODKAYNE, even if he came up with all the wrong answers--the kids are supposed to be warped because their mother kept working after they were born, and Podkayne decides that it is more fun to take care of babies than be a pilot. (She may be overcompensating for her mother's "lack" of maternal feeling.) She also rationalizes that she cannot be a pilot anyway because she can't get as good training as a man with money. Podkayne is competent, intelligent, and efficient, and is probably selling herself short, rationalizing accepting a variation of the "feminine" role rather than a "masculine" one. She was badly in need of some consciousness raising! In fairness to Heinlein, it should perhaps be pointed out that he described quite accurately the sort of thinking many women still do, indeciding not to try to change society but to find the best compromise they can within a set of given conditions. It is even possible that Heinlein recognized that Podkayne was rationalizing; her thoughts that a woman wouldn't really be successful as a pilot because "The Old Woman" just doesn't sound the same as "The Old Man" as an affectionate nickname for a captain would seem to indicate that Heinlein described attitudes quite well, even if he did not speculate as to their accuracy or implications.



Robert Anton Wilson On the "nature" problem:  
California Bucky Fuller suggests that "Universe" should mean everything that exists including me and "environment" should mean everything that exists excluding me. This is totally arbitrary, like all definitions, but at least is (or seems to me) clear and bereft of muddy metaphysics.

Of course, this distinction is only useful in some areas of discourse. In other areas, it becomes necessary to note that environment and me are constantly interacting, exchanging energy, etc., and that we cannot, ultimately, be disentangled. (That is, we can only be relatively disentangled for special purposes in special areas of discourse.)

This does not clarify the "nature" problem, but possibly confuses it further. I'm sorry. I'm doing the best I can. Give me a few more years and maybe I'll figure it all out.

In any case, I cannot feel, imagine or conceive myself as outside of "nature." I seem, to myself, as natural as any hamster, rosebush, cockroach, bear, rock, pelican, or star anywhere. I may be peculiar, but that does not make me unnatural. Pelicans are peculiar, too. Lobsters are very peculiar.

I think my blasphemous inability to develop a sense of guilt has to do with this inability to develop a feeling of being outside nature. When a moralist (Christian, Marxist, Libertarian or whoever) tells me I should not be what I am, I am not offended; I just think they are silly--as if they were telling a lobster not to be a lobster.

Einstein got into relativity by imagining vividly what it would feel like to be a photon. I got into whatever is wrong with me by imagining vividly what it is like to be a cow. I was living on a farm and doing acid at the time and maybe the six-legged majority on this planet somehow got more real (or as the mystics say, more Real) than the domesticated primates with whom I am supposed to identify.



I don't know if I'm a star imagining progressive games in which I pretend to be a cow, a lobster, a domesticated primate, etc. or if I'm a domesticated primate imagining I have been a star, a lobster, a dinosaur, etc.

Ecology and ethology make perfect sense to me. So does sociobiology, that bane of the Left. But nobody makes any sense when they start telling me that I'm unnatural or that any part of domesticated primate life is unnatural. I don't know why birds sing or why Beethoven wrote Sonata 23, but, while both astonish me, neither seem un-, anti-, super- or infra-natural to me.

I have read Theodore Roszak, who argues at length that everything or most things that I like are unnatural. I concluded that Roszak does not like the same things as me, but I could find no merit in his claim that what he likes is natural and what I like is unnatural. I think that he and I are equally natural, but different, as the purple-arsed baboon and the preying mantis are equally natural, but different.

And I have read you, Arthur, arguing that nature is "mundane shit" but that did not change my perceptions. I merely registered that Arthur Hlavaty has different perceptions than me--which is not astonishing to me, since it is an axiom of my neurology that everybody has different perceptions. I continue to perceive all of nature, including myself, as beautiful, mysterious, grand, and radiant with intricate intelligence.

James Joyce said he had never met a boring person; he was a Humanist. I have never had a boring perception, because I am a Universalist.

Seeing views widely different from mine as the way other nervous systems perceive the world, rather than as EVIL IDEAS or THREATS, is a very useful approach, and I'm learning to do it more & more. Seeing myself as utterly a part of nature is a bit harder, tho. I wish I could do it, since it would have the same liberating effect as believing in any form of determinism: I would never have another responsibility, as long as I live.

In answer to Sam Konkin, I am an agnostic about everything, not just about "God," and for totally pragmatic and selfish reasons. I have observed that when certitude enters a human mind, mental activity then quickly ceases. Wishing to continue mental activity, I therefore avoid certitude. This is not a philosophical position (I am not a philosopher) but an empirical rule for growth, change, and mental alertness.

I'm as agnostic about Sam Konkin as I am about "God," or more so, since I have had a great many experiences with "God," or with what is alleged to be "God," and only a few experiences with Sam Konkin or what is alleged to be Sam Konkin.

I am also dubious about Sam's proposition that if you can't prove something, you should assume it has been disproven, or pretend that it has been disproven, or label yourself as one who has disproven it. (This may not be exactly what Sam meant but it is as much as I can understand of his argument against agnosticism. I am sometimes slow.) I think at once of the alleged 10th planet beyond Pluto. Nobody has found it yet, but astronomers do not for that reason assume it is not there; they go on looking. Similarly, the proposed quarks in quantum theory have not been found yet, but physicists do not assume quarks are not there; they go on looking.

To "go on looking" seems worthwhile to me, because it is good exercise for the intelligence, and also because if one goes on looking, one generally finds something, although not always exactly what one was looking for.

I suspect that "God" is a term invented by humans in certain cultures to describe experiences of contact, or seeming contact, or mind-fusion, or seeming mind fusion, with an intelligence or intelligences that are, or seem to be, inhuman or trans-human or super-human. I suspect that similar experiences in other cultures led to the invention of terms like "the Buddha-nature," "the True Self," "the World Soul," "the Atman," "the Tao," and once, a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, "the Force." I also suspect that Alan Watts was a very smart man in simply calling it It. And I suspect that contact, or seeming contact, with It provoked philosophers and scientists to such terms as "Mind" (as distinct from individual mind (Plato), "orgone" (Reich), "implicate order" (Bohm), "the psychoic Level" and "synchronicity" (Jung), the "neurogenetic" and "neuro-atomic" circuits (Leary), "Life Force" (Bergson, Shaw) "synergy" (Fuller). These are suspicions, not certitudes.



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Your Tibetan reviewing principle sounds a lot like Lewis; I'm glad you see fit to credit him later. Perhaps a

bit of Heisenberg thrown in. The reservation I have about your Trinity of Perceiver-Perceived-Medium which I read as You(Reader)-Author-Book is that it leaves out -Market, that is, the Reader-as-Perceived-by-Author. What I write for you is not what I write for Dick Geis, even less so for Bob Poole...and even then, what I write for you qua loc is not what I write for you qua friendly letter (or even mc). It's not just the media variation (the same letter and typer, even if the next stage of publication may differ) but the Other Eyes that are reading. As Lewis recommends, I write for my intended audience.

I was giving essentially a first-order analysis. Your comment leads to the interesting possibility of more complex forms, such as a writer's entire career seen as a communication process, with feedback loops.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING  
ABOUT THE RECESSION?

I'M SIMULATING THE  
ECONOMY THEN STIMULATING  
THE SIMULATION AND SEEING  
WHAT HAPPENS



Now you've really asked for the Heavy Guns (the casual reader will turn the page and save his/her Self much Grief; philosophy fandom turn here first). Proofs of Nonexistence remain, your "examples" notwithstanding, nonexistent. Phlogiston and Aethyr (so we won't confuse it with diethyl ether, which I will show you exists any time you want to step into a lab with me, heh, heh) did not have their nonexistence proven! They had their claims of proof of existence disallowed! Aethyr is far from dead; the quantum mechanicians are playing with "empty space" as a medium from which particles and anti-particles spring into "existence," interact, and promptly annihilate each other. And space itself seems to warp and change its "medium" properties when light passes through; just bring me a Black Hole into the lab and I'll show you some neat tricks you can do with it and a flashlight. (Don't ask me which hand to hold it in; you brought the Hole in, that was our premise.) And call phlogiston "heat quanta" and what do you think microwave photons are? Ask your newer ovens!

The point is not that the Universe is weird, incomprehensible, and will bite if you turn your back on it. The point is that the definitions of Aethyr and phlogiston presented were untenable with the evidence put forward. Nonetheless, something which is not unrecognizably distant in concept from that "disproved" was accepted. The evidence for it was there. And this is the way the Aristotelian world works; fukk off, Korzybski, and excuse me, A.E., sir! The claimer of existence gets to make all the claims he or she wishes; we the debunkers have to knock each and every one down.

Now if the Claim itself is a General Principle, and we knock that down, various forms of that principle are knocked down for all time. But that's Axioms & Theorems, not the great game of Undefined Terms & Definitions. ("What's a What, Daddy?" "I'll show you What for, you precocious little...!")

So, my final statement to the Theist who claims God exists is, "Point!" And to you, chicken-hearted atheist, who desires Sufficient Evidence for disbelief, look around you! If you see no evidence for belief (do you see any?), then... it ain't there! Go to bed and sleep well, my child; I'll wake you up when anything happens.

And while I can't generalize to all Agnostics, not having met them all yet, I can say that the ones I have met fit my description all too well. They recoil in quaking fear when presented with a convincing argument one way or the other and cling to their non-existent Middle Way like Linus and his blanket.



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Your "long and loosely structured essay" on Heinelein was a great, sprawling romp through your views on the written word. I found a cornucopia or three worth of thought-provoking material, and only a mild twinge of disappointment upon discovering that it did not after all lead to a look at Heinelein's latest two offerings.

Moving right along to atheism, on the strength of this serendipitous seque, your exchange with Konkin was interesting. There are too many people, standing under the umbrellas of deism, agnosticism, and atheism, and they don't all look out and see the same things. Konkin's view is uncharitable to agnostics because he sees the atheist as saying "prove it to me," knowing it unprovable in the atheist's terms, and therefore to him an agnostic has to be shallow or cowardly. His problem isn't with his views on religion per se, it's with too narrow a definition of the word "proof" (rhymes with "logic"), and with leaning too hard on the philosophy that all knowledge must be presented to him as an argument to be accepted or rejected, without personal investigation on his part and therefore without the potential of involvement on levels other than logic and the rules of debate. Your view, Arthur, is stronger philosophically as well as pragmatically. Philosophically because you are aware that skepticism is not in itself a positive or negative position. Pragmatically because, given the tripartite labels of deism, agnosticism, and atheism (yes, maybe, and no, respectively) there's no reason to move off of "maybe" unless and until it amuses you to do so.

What made this exchange interesting, at least from my point of view, is how the medium gets in the way of the message. The message is that you both are basically uninspired by religion. The medium is how you got there and how you choose to conceptualize the image. I remember, from moons ago, the rather non-hyperlexic person who asked me: "If you were given proof, would you Believe?" Words failed me at that point in the discussion. I knew the other person well enough to know that the question was not "are you an asshole?" It was, in this instance, "aren't you being stubborn, and unsociable and (horrors) avant garde?" I could call myself an agnostic and be comfortable with it, because I'm a "maybe." I can also slide under a corner of the atheist's label, because "maybe" gets followed with "but I sure doubt it." If someone asks, I say I'm an atheist. Any discussion which goes behind the label usually winds up with everyone in agreement that two more labels wouldn't be excessive largess: one for "I think there may be a God, but I don't know" and one for "I don't think there is a God, but if there is I'm sure She's amused by all the speculation." Of course, some feel that both are versions of agnosticism, but usually five minutes with a good dictionary (looking up the labels) convinces them otherwise. For example, expressing disbelief makes me an atheist, but religion is a hypothesis and not a fact, and I accept philosophically that lack of ultimate knowledge is what makes religion a hypothesis. I want a better label, if I must have one at all, because it's too crowded with different viewpoints under the existing umbrellas. If someone doesn't come up with a more acceptable one, I may switch to "apathetic."

I would agree with Adrienne that sex is better when dealt with from a process orientation, rather than the goal orientation which elevates orgasm beyond its importance. Singlemindedness has little to recommend itself when it passes into obsession. Maybe this is why there are games I can enjoy, like chess, without thinking in terms of whether I win or lose. Of course, I do often think in terms of how well the game is played...



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I see a basic and real connection between the Heinlein of STARSHIP TROOPERS and STRANGER. Heinlein is an elitist. He doesn't really

like the masses because they don't know how to live (in Nests without sexual hangups) or what is important--being prepared to die for one's family (or Nest). He has a view of moral rot to equal any puritan except that he excludes consenting sex from the evils that men have descended to. I get the feeling that Heinlein would loathe the hippies because they are incompetent hedonists. Mike and group are competent hedonists. One has to apply oneself (study Martian) to gain admittance. Mike would have scorned those who attempted to ape the trappings, water brotherhood, Nests, without knowing Martians but it was probably the way the world went: Take away the hard parts.

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Your reply to Anita Cole was quite correct, and I would like to amplify it a bit. Rape occurs be-

cause of sexual repression in a society which prevents people from functioning sexually in a healthy way. Pornography is in many cases an unhealthy sexual manifestation (although some pornography avoids the insane aspects of sex) but the effort to suppress pornography is part of exactly the same effort at sexual repression which drives so many people crazy on the subject in the first place.

I concur with your approval of John Sladek's Mechasm and would also like to advise people that he has written other books, The Steam-Driven Boy and The Müller-Fokker Effect, the first being as good as Mechasm and the second being even better. I think that Sladek is the funniest writer in SF.



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I doubt that better erotica would significantly reduce the incidence of rape, as it has been pretty well

established that most rapists have no interest whatsoever in the enjoyment of their victims. Rape is a crime of violence, whether it be petty psychological violence or blatant brutality. Rape is something men do to punish women for being women. They enjoy the terror and helplessness of their victims. It is true that some men really don't know what they are doing, but most rapists--repeat offenders--do it for the thrill of knowing that they are forcing someone to do what they do not want to do.

Now, an improvement in the state of porn might alter the attitude juries have in judging rape cases. Unfortunately, simply changing porn probably won't be enough, since the mass media--television, R-rated movies, even GP and G-rated movies, all keep the fiction alive that women can't take responsibility for our own sexuality and therefore that men must force women to accept sex. In fact, straight media are more likely than porn to portray sex in this imperialistic fashion. There are plenty of people who never look at pornography who believe that the only way a woman can be made to recognize the value of some supposedly wonderful male is if the man forces himself on her. These people labor under the illusion that there is no such thing as rape, which is why rape is the hardest crime to convict. Frankly, I have always found GONE WITH THE WIND to be a much more dangerous, violent piece of sexual propaganda than anything in, say, PLAYBOY or BRUTE magazines.



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## Convergence

The announcer reads from a piece of paper in front of him: "Trading on the New York Stock Exchange has been suspended indefinitely because the Exchange computer is down." That announcement over, he picks up the next piece of paper--a commercial--and reads, "Now modern computer science can help you...."

One thing modern computer science may or may not eventually be able to do is to create machines which think. Of course, whether or not such a feat can be accomplished depends on how we define "thinking."

Perhaps the most interesting approach to this question comes from a man named Alan Turing, who posed it as a problem in communications. Not being a telepath, I cannot determine by direct inspection whether anyone but me is thinking. But I have noticed that other human beings communicate with me in ways which indicate that they are going through mental processes similar to mine.

Therefore, Turing suggested the following test: The experimenter sits at a computer terminal. The subject is in another room, with access to the same computer. The experimenter enters questions, and the subject replies. If we cannot tell, from the answers, whether the subject is a human being or a machine, we must conclude that the subject is thinking like a human being.

Here's an example: There are programs which do nondirective psychotherapy. It has been unfairly suggested that all a nondirective therapist does is to say, "Why do you ask me that question?" Of course, it's a bit more complicated than that. Actually, there are a variety of replies. If the client seems angry, the therapist should probe the source of the anger, or try to restore calm. Other comments call for expressions of compassion, neutral requests for more information, etc. Computers have been programed to do this sort of thing, and people using these machines have confided their innermost secrets, in the belief that the machine understood them.

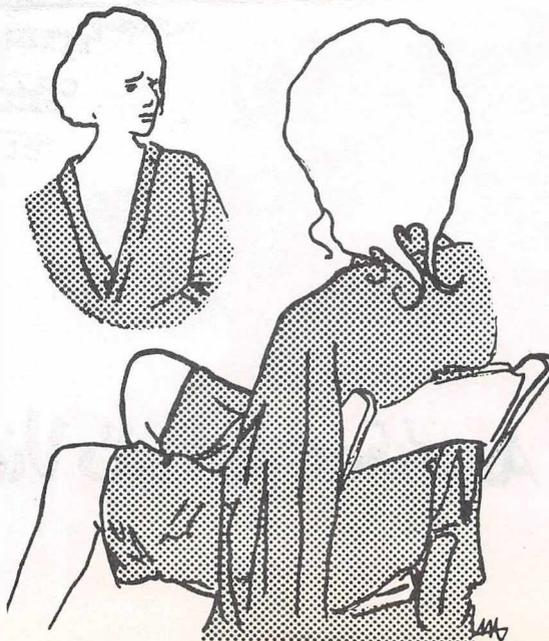
Of course, there's a trick to it. The therapy programs I am familiar with pick key words out of the client's statement, recognizing that one word is liable to indicate anger on the client's part, while another shows that the client wants to be consoled. The machine reacts to these words. A sophisticated student of such programs can guess what the key word is and use it in such a way that the machine will give an obviously inappropriate, "programed" response.

The Turing test thus can never quite prove that the subject in the next room is actually thinking, but as the subject passes more and more sophisticated tests, the hypothesis of actual thought begins to seem more credible.

That sounds like a bit of a drawback, but maybe it isn't. As Karl Popper has pointed out, that is what we do with all scientific theories. It is the nature of things that a scientific theory cannot be proved, though it can be disproved at any time. A good scientific theory is one which has stood up to a great deal of testing, but can still be disproved, or at least shown to have exceptions, at any time. The creationists who say that "atheistic evolution" should not be taught exclusively in the schools because "even the scientists admit that it's only a theory" fail to realize that there is nothing higher than a theory in science. It is only in dogmatic religions, like Creationism and Marxism, that there are absolute truths which can be maintained in the face of any amount of contradictory evidence.

Thus the Turing test. There are those who believe that it is impossible in principle to build a machine that can satisfy every possible Turing test, and there are indications that they may be right. Indeed no machine has yet been built that seems even close to human thought in this sense. (For a further discussion of this and related matters, see GODEL, ESCHER, BACH, by Douglas R. Hofstadter (Vintage pb, \$8.95). Robert Anton Wilson recommended the book in these pages a while back, and I would like to second that recommendation, for anyone who thinks they might possibly be interested in studying formal logic.)

But there's one thing that bothers me. I think that announcer I told you about flunked his Turing test.





Another Artist's View of the 3 men on the cover