

IN SUPPORT OF THE LUNATIC FRINGE

By R. G. CARTER.

Friday 1st November, 2013

1. *Preface.*

“A speculative or experimental approach which may result in some form of ficto-criticism, or narrative non-fiction; or an organisational structure that is specifically designed as somehow equivalent to your studio practice.*”

2. *The story of Mr Bond.*

I first met Mr Bond about 10 years ago, at his office on Queen Street. Right away, you get the feeling that Mr Bond runs his operation in an old fashioned way. The faded, type-written notice on the front desk reads: “Please ring the bell and wait for an appointment with Mr Bond”. The notice exhibits a barely discernible red felt pen border—its only graphic element.

A middle aged woman greets me. I explain what I need, as a child sent to the principal’s office. The room smells of boxes, dust and solvents. In a few minutes Mr Bond appears, in his 60s with sparkling eyes, wearing a suit that expects to get dirty.

Ten years later I find myself, once again, stepping into Mr Bond’s place. I’m greeted with a familiar face. A man I knew as Wayne, dressed formally in a business skirt, informs me he is now known as Erin. Prior knowledge of Erin’s prodigious understanding of all things electronic finds me unsurprised and somewhat comforted; she will understand about what I need. It’s always something *specific*, the reason to visit Mr Bond.

Glancing around I see the piles of boxes have increased in proportion to the elapsed years. Peering through a window into an adjacent room, items lie in display cases covered with dust. Precious elements from the

* Allan Smith (Apr. 2013). *Tuesday PgDip/MFA class.*

past. Beside me a box of yellowing papers detail a meeting of the Board of Directors, the Auckland Electrical Service Company Limited, May 1954. I wait a long time. Boxes of invoices from 50 years ago. Eventually Erin returns, and after some negotiation, explains that the part I'm looking for is "in the back", pointing, "Just go down there".

Moving behind the counter, the density of packed objects increases. Barely visible in the gloom, I can make out a figure hunched between a row of benches, illuminated faintly by the glow of a single bar electric fire. "Are you Mr Bond?", I ask.

The response is the ricochet of something small and hard in a distant corner of the room. Describing my requirement he responds by upending a bucket containing hundreds of tiny plugs of all kinds, each trimmed cleanly of their connecting wires. This moment vibrates with a silent energy, in a realisation that the spark has gone. These plugs are useless to me, but I want to stay. I feel somehow honoured to be here. This is the inner sanctum, the place where it is happening; where the collection is built. Also I am sad. Engaging him in conversation, we share some simple pleasantries, punctuated by the *ping*, as another tiny piece of metal impacts percussively on a distant surface.

3. *An interview with Alan Turing.*

Express Magazine:* It's lovely to finally have the chance to speak with you Alan.

Alan Turing: Well, thank you for asking me Michael.

EM: You've achieved the distinction of one of the notable openly gay academics of your generation. Are you comfortable with that status?

AT: Not particularly, and I do find the expression 'gay', in your modern vernacular quite disconcerting. In my early days at Sherbourne and even at Kings to some degree, my relationships were fairly free and open. However, outside the colleges there was enormous stigma; backed up of course by legislation. What they called 'gross indecency'.

EM: Indeed, it seems rather barbaric that your case was considered an expression of mental illness, rather than human affection or love.

AT: In hindsight this was the most troubling aspect of that sad time. I was aware, although, I did not accept the legal position. I went to

**Express Online* | *Gay Expression in New Zealand*. URL: <http://www.gayexpress.co.nz/> (visited on 09/18/2013).

the police for help, but quickly found myself the victim of “chemical castration”, which was the only alternative to prison - an outcome I just could not face. I feel that those events are of peripheral importance. The only humour I can take from that situation is in terms of the Imitation Game*.

EM: Please go on, I can’t imagine what could be funny about that.

AT: Well, if we remove the emotive element from the conversation and think of these ideas in terms of machine intelligence, can you see any connections?

EM: Nothing immediately comes to mind, although I have to say I’m not familiar with the full scope of that paper.

AT: If you will indulge me for a moment, I can perhaps phrase the idea in terms that endear itself to your readers. This version of the imitation game[†] is played with three players, two men (A & B), and an interrogator (C). The interrogator here is benign and there is no kind of criminal prosecution involved! The two men (A & B) differ in that A is a homosexual, or *gay* as you put it. The interrogator may ask questions to either player by sending messages, as you would in a modern email system. A message is sent, then after a period of time, a message arrives in response. The object of the game is for C to determine whether A is gay. Also B is instructed to help the interrogator guess correctly. The twist, is that without the interrogators (C) knowledge, A has been replaced by a machine, a computer.

EM: So correct me, but you’re proposing a theoretical game where this interrogator by asking questions has to identify from emailed responses who is the gay computer?

AT: In a manner of speaking. Of course, the whole gay thing is a bit of a red herring, in that gay and non-gay could be replaced by man or woman, as I write in the original paper. It does beg the question: What are the limits of machine intelligence? And also, just what does it take to convince us that someone is human? These are the questions at the heart of the matter.

EM: It’s refreshing that you feel so comfortable including aspects of sexuality in what might be considered to be a very serious scientific discourse. I have to show you a short rhyme we dug up during our back-

* A. M. Turing (1950). “Computing Machinery and Intelligence”. English. In: *Mind*. New Series 59.236, pp. 433–460. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2251299>.

[†]The imitation game is now known more commonly as the Turing Test.

ground research. How well does this describe you?

Turing
Must have been alluring
To be made a don
So early on*

AT: (Laughs) I've never heard that verse before. I have to say I'm flattered, but I contest that my appointment to that position was based solely on academic merit!

4. *The Computer Terminal.*

The 15 km bike ride was a common weekend occurrence. The destination was always the same, as was the cargo. One hour to get there. Then, if I was lucky, two hours to acquire the materials; sometimes less if the pipe-smoking proprietor needed access to his computers for potential sales purposes.

During that time I was faintly aware of other people, but my primary focus was the machine; I certainly did not talk to anyone. It seemed a doorway to a kind of community. Focused on particular interests, generous in nature, egotistical and proud, but at the same time, meek.

From this place originated my introduction to the *scene*;[†] the languages, protocols and priests. Your work a gift; subjected to the utmost scrutiny, and expected to be stolen. I became a collector.

Taunt your enemies, and friends. Do it well and you'll blow people's minds. Push it to the limit. Little did I know that I'd already met the master - or masters. I didn't know at the time, the extent of their collaboration.

Fort Street in 1989. An office building not long vacated, still showing the stains of 10 years of chain smoking. On that day I saw something – a piece of work – that changed everything.

It had it all. The scroll text, the 3D, the raster bars, the animation, the ray tracing, the psy-trance tracker. I can't remember what I said to him. Some technical question about how it worked probably. "Got a disk?", was the response.

* Andrew Hodges (1983). *Alan Turing: the enigma*. English. New York: Simon and Schuster, p. 94.

[†] Now known as the *8-bit demo scene*.

That act of sharing had me excitedly clutching the prize all the way home. I put it in the drive and spent hours watching it. The same simple movements. The beautiful reflections in the gathering waves. Trance music.

The next day I discovered the real gift. The source code. He gave me the stuff that shows you how it's done! The tricks. The Hacks. The optimisations. I still couldn't understand it.

I continued collecting, even tried to make my own contribution to the scene. I tried, but couldn't operate on that level. I would later discard my collection as worthless. We would meet again.

5. *Bobby Fischer and the Turk.*

“During a game I seem rather unruffled, but this is not really so. It is like a clown's face put on for the occasion. When I appear particularly calm I am really feeling especially nervous. Spassky sits at the board with the same dead expression whether he's mating or being mated” - *Bobby Fischer**

The diary of Boris Spaski on the occasion of the World Chess Championship, July 1972.

9 July: It feels like a circus here. Geller[†] is constantly on the telephone to Moscow. He tells me Fischer hasn't even arrived in the country yet! For all the political speculation, chess seems to be the least of all concerns. I feel naive to write that last sentence. The newspapers are promoting the match exhaustively as a battle between our two countries. Apparently Fischer has been making all sorts of inflammatory statements, giving the press plenty of grist for the mill. There is doubt he will even appear as he has asked for ten times the purse that is offered!

I took a nap. As I drifted off to sleep I remember the stories old Tolush[‡] used to tell me about Von Tempkin's chess playing machine, *the Turk*. I imagine myself, the concealed player in the magic box. The theatre continues outside. Every nuance of movement, every sign of life is under scrutiny.

* *Boris Spassky vs Robert James Fischer (1972)*. URL: <http://www.chessgames.com/perl/chessgame?gid=1044722> (visited on 09/18/2013).

[†] Spaski's Coach.

[‡] Tolush was Spaski's early mentor and coach.

My opponent is Napoleon Bonaparte. He opens, but the next move he jumps his king over to the third rank - an illegal move. I pick up the king and return it to its position. After one more move he does it again; this time advancing his rook over the pawn to the third rank. Again, I take the rook and put it back. But he does it *again*, this time with the other rook. I pause to think. What would a great player do in this situation? Is it enough to take his pieces and return them to their positions again and again? Any great player would be insulted that his opponent did not respect him by obeying the rules of the game we both know so well.

I cast my hand across board toppling everything over. This pleases him greatly. He applauds the machine and I feel there is a great excitement in the room.*

6. *Peter and Jane's house.*

“Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories.” - *Walter Benjamin*[†]

Peter and Jane lived in a kind of bubble; a bubble or a shrine. I remember clearly the complex and eccentric adornments covering the dashboard of their old brown Datsun. In particular a mound of plasticine that formed the base for a small tree, twisted from bright, thin copper wire, and glinting in the sun. Some image of the blessed virgin always featured prominently in the composition.

As a couple they seemed to have a platonic relationship, hovering just short of sexual tension. In the context of their devout Catholicism, this was expressed as a kind of shared ecstatic being. A simple human proximity.

Their house was something remarkable. The density of objects created a looming effect as us small children explored the rooms. There was always the feeling that there was so much *more*. Several cats lived there also sharing equal status with the humans. A faint smell of cat food persisted into every room.

One of Peter’s main interests was trains, the other was computers. As with certain other aspects of their lives, the trains had assumed a

*Tom Standage (2002). *The Turk: the life and times of the famous eighteenth-century chess-playing machine*. English. New York: Walker & Co., p. 107.

[†]Walter Benjamin (1986). “Unpacking my library”. In: *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books.

status that was quite out of proportion to what we had previously experienced. An extensive network of train tracks negotiated the rooms by way of elevated platforms. A bedroom was devoted entirely to a sophisticated train layout, complete with buildings, trees and background scenery. Peeping from behind the painted clouds, the pattern of old embossed wallpaper could still be seen.

A schedule had been established and occasionally an engine pulling a line of trucks would emerge from the lounge room wall; making its way over the viaduct of the passageway and disappearing again into a tunnel by the front door.

Everywhere there was the optimistic gathering of potential. And everywhere the strata of disuse and invisibility.

7. The phone call.

As soon as I answer the phone I know what will happen. I know the situation, and I know the pattern. The only thing to do now is to get in the car.

It would be slightly easier if it was not so far. Turning off at Hill Road, and then together we pack bags into the boot. Three large bags. While this does not surprise me, I feel I need to say something. "You know, I'm just staying at K's place at the moment... so that means you can only stay tonight..."

We drive in silence for a while. The full details, including the accusations and injustices have been made explicit. This is not the time to discuss the details, no doubt still boiling inside her brain. Previous experience has taught me to talk less, as almost any exchange has the ability to become an argument at this point.

Home temporary sweet home is a brick and tile unit on St Lukes Road. My flatmate and leaseholder is unaware of the full implications of the situation. I'm always surprised by his bewilderment when Gale greets him with the same gushing welcome.

Inside I make arrangements for sleeping. Quickly I clear away clothes and bedroom items. "You can sleep here", I say.

Returning to the room half an hour later, I find it transformed. All available surfaces are adorned and covered. A large collection of logo-branded stuffed bears sit watching me from the bedside lamp. Various cups, candles and ornaments gather perilously to the table edge. The

sheets and bedclothes now exude a lavender glow onto the white walls. Everything is here and everything is needed. I think for a moment about the roles these objects play.

Dozens of small bears can't all be friends. The crystals and glass pyramids don't have any mystic purpose. The ceramic cow tooth pick stand and miniature tea cups; no practical use.

What has been built here serves as a hearth; the warm centre of the house. Only together, do all these objects speak of home.

8. *All I can say.*

It took a while to get the hang of the buffer, but this was always the lure used by my Dad to get me to help him. There were about eight big classrooms, and if we worked together we could get them done in about two hours. In practice Dad did most of the buffing, and I did most of the mopping.

This was okay with me; if I mopped fast, I could finish early and go and play with the computers. Discovered by accident behind an unlocked door, their main purpose was to provide a way for the physically disabled children at the school to communicate. When attached to a system of switches they allowed head, nose and mouth activation of a series of words, spoken through a speaker by a computer voice.

The computers could play games too. On one occasion, in the midst of gameplay, an unknown adult opened the door. The reprimand was more out of surprise than any real disapproval.

The next day Dad told me I had a job to do. The same man who caught me playing games explained that, because no-one else knew how to use the computers, they would like me to add some words to their vocabulary. The result of this would be a new set of words that would be available for the kids to say.

The computer used a kind of *predictive text*, where each successive selection of a letter narrowed down the subsequent choices, to keep the number of *clicks* to the minimum.

It was a strange feeling, having at your fingertips, a list that represents every possible word a person can say. No verbal communication outside this list was possible, and as a child I was given the task of extending the realm of expression of someone I had never met.

After working my way through the supplied list of words, I was asked: “OK to Save?”, “OK”. Then, “Save main dictionary or save special?”, unsure, “Save Special”. “Merge or Replace?”, “Replace”. “Saved. Special dictionary overwritten”.

After a few seconds it occurred to me what had just happened. A large chunk of this person’s vocabulary had just been replaced. Anxious and guilty I tidied up and left the room, not wanting to return to the scene of my crime.

9. *The mower and the blue flame.*

For a long time I pestered Dad to be allowed to mow the lawn. This activity appealed to me for a number of reasons, not the least the requirement to wear ear muffs; creating an aural cocoon that separated more distinctly my inner and outer worlds.

The engine hummed and burbled, coughed and vibrated though my arms and shoulders, making hands feel bigger, softer. There was a process involved, and from the start, a topology was adopted and continuously refined.

Trees and fences became principals in the game of vegetative consumption. Monotony untouched by boredom, connected by a loose strategy of cut grass. How to negotiate a garden bed? A tree stump? Gradually shaving away area; enclosing and reducing to nothing.

It’s good to sing while you mow. No-one can hear you; you can barely hear yourself. The songs don’t need to make sense; an indulgent singular karaoke.

Gale sometimes helped me. She particularly enjoyed the grass clippings; the catcher almost too heavy for her to lift. A soon to be realised steaming mound.

The weed whacking was the last part, made more difficult by the need to trail the big yellow electrical cable behind. Stretched to it’s maximum extent, frequent stoppages were required to re-route.

I worked at a patch of stubborn kikuyu that tufted awkwardly near a fence post. A growing feeling of frustration began to dissolve into a slowing of movements; a diminishing of the senses into a mute internal echo.

Chunk.

Turning backwards a brilliant blue flame, as from a bunsen burner, burst from the cable. Gale was stepping away, a pair of long handled edge cutting shears in her hands. The motor spinning down. The world moving in again. Some realisation of what had happened began to dawn.

10. *The bash.*

The boy who took care of our gate was unusually tall and somewhat overweight. *Clink*. For a while I would stop what I was doing and go to the front porch, expecting to greet someone coming down the path. The gate was closed. No-one was in sight.

This evening was warm; the bubbling sounds of parties drifted in the breeze. I was home alone, slightly drunk, watching a movie about Bob Marley.

There was a shout. I got up and went to the door. The boy ran past the gate and was suddenly crash-tackled, sending him sprawling onto the concrete.

I ran over to him; lying face down. His attacker, recognised as my neighbour, stood over him, swaying slowly. I got between them and tried to turn the boy to see his face. The glare of the street light blinded me; nothing is visible outside the bright cone of light.

Squinting toward my neighbour, he shouted a train of abuse; adopting a drunken boxing stance and slapped the unconscious boy in the face. I fended the slowly dodging attacker. "Simmer down. Simmer down."

The boy had started to fit. Small bubbles of saliva formed a foam at the corner of his mouth. I tried to gently turn him on his side.

Slap. Another blow this time harder than before. Incoherently voiced accusations; other people are around.

The boy suddenly got up and ran; too drunk to keep his balance he veered across the road. Someone is distracting the drunken boxer. He's fired up and ready to chase him down.

In a daze the boy half staggers, half runs back toward the foot path, tripping on the curb and ending up at almost the same place he was before. He seems more conscious now, no longer fitting but very drunk. He lies there.

Two other men stand by him, passengers in a car that has pulled up. The driver is guiding the neighbour across the road; shouts of abuse and occasional attempts to break away and come back in our direction.

I know where the boy lives. “Lets just take him home”, I say to them, beginning to lift. He weighs a tonne. They are incredulous. “He flashed the kids at the primary school”. I keep trying to lift; they help but not much. I look up. In a few seconds my eyes adjust to the light and shadow. People have gathered on their driveways in small groups.

Why aren’t you helping me? Does he deserve the bash? Are you just scared I’ll call the cops? Blood is drying on my arms and hands.

11. *The worst job I ever had.*

In the early 90s a major refurbishment project began. Known then as Oakley Mental Hospital, and now empty of patients, I walked into the wide towering spaces; the enormous wooden staircases where I would be spending my time.

The tools of the trade were simple. One right-angle scraper. Sharp or blunt, it did not matter. What was required was even repetitive movements; a technique easily learned and without scope for refinement.

Through the smell of saw dust and solvents, the unmistakable scent of old wood and urine permeated the building. Contractors worked to remove vast areas of institutional linoleum from the floors, leaving a layer of ancient black gunk; the remains of adhesives used to lay the floor 50 years ago. As the residue was stripped back, the timbers slowly woke, as if from a long period of hibernation.

My job was the staircases. The usual mechanical techniques for removing the black gunk did not work here; everything had to be done by hand. Four hours at a stretch, I began to invent ways to break the mind-numbing boredom.

Drifting, I imagine the echo of shuffling feet; endless walking with no destination in mind. The *clomp clomp* of heels and the slight squeaks as the soles change direction. The clank of trollies, instruments, food containers. Shouts and exclamations. The distant din of a piano accompanied by discordant voices. A keychain jangling in the lock. A wail of grief; experienced as clearly as twenty years ago.

No-one ever came to check on my work; there was too much other stuff to do. It was hard to see much difference anyway; the black adhesive moving and reforming in blobs and lines, unwilling to be separated from the surface it had grown accustomed to. In my own world and without much thought, I left the tool on the floor, and walked out the door.

12. *The good son.*

Porridge washes off the pots easily if you soak them in cold water. You need to know these things when you work in a kitchen. And these were big pots too; enough for 80 people.

Our chef made an effort. And he understood the residents well; average age 85. Comfort food and nothing too unusual. The classics: pavlova, beef stew, roast lamb and potatoes. Not too spicy and everything slightly overcooked. For those who had trouble with solids, a certain proportion of the meal would be blended into a smooth paste. I tasted it once; surprised how much of the original flavour remained.

The only thing difficult about this job was the early morning starts on the weekend. That, and my final task for the day. At around two o'clock, when the cleaning was done and the floor was mopped, I was posted to the *secure wing* for general care-giving duties.

Entry was via a coded door; into an overly warm hallway with small rooms either side. Outside in the garden, a large fence enclosed the flower beds.

Many people in the secure wing were affected by dementia; alzheimer's being common. The staff related stories of dramatic personality changes, almost total loss of short term memory, and people trapped in time; living as a twenty year old woman in a world of sixty years ago.

Introduced to Ada, I was greeted immediately with happy recognition. "How are you John? I'm so glad to see you!"

She chatted excitedly, asking about all sorts of family events. I answer haltingly, searching for some common ground—ground she feels has already been well established. Sitting beside her, a man of about her age, to whom she does not talk or in any way acknowledge, despite the fact that he is holding her hand.

Later I am told her son John, passed away thirty years ago. And the man who sat so patiently beside her was her husband.

"He visits regularly every Saturday. She never recognises him."

13. *Afterward.*

The task of composing this text has been a challenge. A necessary abandonment of the conventions of academic writing was used to shift

the emphasis from the structure of the text to the situations and personal idiosyncrasies connected to the people involved.

My interpretation of the vernacular, strongly relates to a personal voice. For this reason I choose to mix fact and fiction, invent histories and take liberties where it might serve to enlighten the reader as to the nature of my creative practice.

14. *A note about the production of this booklet.*

The page layout and typography used in this booklet were created using the TeX* typesetting system. This software uses a system of typographical rules derived from several key works† to create beautiful documents. As such, no graphic designers were harmed in the creation of this work, as the design decisions were delegated to automated processes.

The overall format is based on a facsimile of Turing’s famous paper *On Computable Numbers*‡. A question was asked to an internet typography forum, to provide a way to approximate the typographical style of the famous paper. The response was generous and practical; allowing me to quickly typeset my existing document as *On Computable Numbers*.

The type is set in TeX Gyre Schola.

*TeX - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. URL: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TeX> (visited on 09/20/2013).

† Editions of Acta Mathematica and Indagationes Mathematicae mathematical journals from around 1910.

‡ Alan Turing (1936). “On Computable Numbers, with an Application to the Entscheidungsproblem”. In: *Proceedings of the London Mathematical Society* 42, 230??265.

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