

Live on Tape

Spider Robinson

*The fantasy and horror magazines have been thoroughly independent for the most part, without institutional, commercial, or grant support. In the United States, where grant support is next to impossible anyway, this attitude is a blessing. In Canada, where there is a lot of grant support available, it becomes more attractive to go for the mainstream package and get funded. Hence Canada's highly active small presses have left less room, compared to the lower half of North America, for fantasy magazines. A few exceptions have been *Dark Fantasy*, *Potboiler*, *Borderland*, *Dragonfields*, and *Stardock*. This latter ran only two issues and was edited by Charles R. Saunders, who has since gone on to considerable success as a screenwriter and, for *DAW Books*, a novelist.*

*For the premiere issue of *Stardock* (Summer, 1977), the multiple award-winning author Spider Robinson, always supportive of his fellow Canadians, contributed the following tale.*

Dear StarWolf:

I won't tell you at the outset how the following came into my hands. All I can say is that the more I think about it, the scarer I get. Its implications are terrifying.

You may as well run it in your fanzine as sf: no mainstream editor would touch it -- for reasons, which will become obvious. I can't claim authorship of the manuscript -- but for equally obvious reasons, no one else ever will.

Figuratively yours (?)
Spider

It is said that the most terrible moment of all comes when you reach within yourself -- and close on emptiness. I, on the other hand, am afraid that I will not. But I must find out.

I have been accustomed to think of myself as a reasonably talented writer. I am not the kind of writer who can produce pay-copy on command, with regular working hours and a dependable steady output. But occasionally lightning strikes. The Muse possesses me for a time and then leaves. In between, I wait for inspiration.

I find this frustrating, but I make a fair living and I take pride in what I have written. Recently, however, the situation became intolerable. The rent was due, the electricity, oil, and phone bills likewise, and the cupboard was doing a slow striptease, halfway to bare. Obviously, it was time for the Muse to bail me out again.

And the fickle bitch was nowhere to be found.

For 3.5 weeks I followed established custom and did nothing -- or rather, went about my normal daily routine, stuffing the chinks with paperback books and judicious doses of Johnny Walker, confident that sooner or later a perfectly good story idea would be shuffled and dealt into my subconscious.

Nothing.

I spent a week working like hell, getting my desk clear, my chores done, and my responsibilities put off -- clearing the next week for deep-soak concentration. During that week I reread some of my favorite Old Masters for inspirations, analyzing their structure and clarifying their themes, seeking some kind of common denominator.

Nothing.

The next week was not clear for contemplation, but I took it anyway, letting mail, bills, household maintenance, and social obligations pile up. By the end of 6.2 days I had become desperate: I cracked my Ideas card file and pored over the notions and fragments jotted down over the last 10 years. This is a last-ditch method, which had never failed me yet.

Nada.

By now so much had piled up that I was able to convince myself that it was the clutter that was

distracting me. I felt bloated, in the last stages of creative pregnancy, and I decided I needed a warm peaceful unharried place in which to give birth. I borrowed a friend's apartment, a Mend who was both a neatness freak and away on vacation. In that simple, structured, undistracting environment I sat for 4.75 days, staring at a blank piece of paper and chewing the points off 5 successive felt-tipped pens. During the last 2 days I stopped getting up at 6-hour intervals to heat up frozen dinners.

Zilch.

Now I was desperate. In a dark corner of my mind a slithery voice whispered, "Writer'sBlock," a phrase equalled for gut-clenching terror only by "Primary Impotence." In fact, the 2 disasters are quite similar: Centipede's Dilemmas, in which thinking about the problem causes the problem. "Put it out of your mind," I told myself heartily. "You're choking up, trying too hard. Relax."

I cleaned up the mess I'd made in my friend's apart., went back to my own and threw myself into getting it shipshape again. 9 days later my apartment was immaculate, my desk was a still life and my social life had been renewed. But I was rotten company; because the oil company, the power company, the phone company and my landlord were all have a convention on my back. Still I persevered in not persevering, telling myself that if I just shut my eyes tightly enough I'd see a story.

Nothing, negatory, nihil. You will be given \$1,000,000, 000.00, an expert concubine and the admiration of your fellows if during the next ten seconds you do not think of the word "donut." Go.

Aw, I'm terribly sorry. Try again sometime.

I took advice from any who offered it, and tried every single suggestion. The 2 most frequent were Misdirection and Change of Scene, and I had already tried those, but I ruled out no other suggestion however dubious. I do not believe that there is a single known psychoactive drug of which some of my friends is not a user/proponent/proselyte, and in the ensuing month I tried at least 3 dosage levels of (in order) marijuana, alcohol, hashish, LSD, STP, PCP, synthetic THC, benzedrine, methedrine, ibogaine, amyl nitrate, Valium, Lib-rium, mescaline (real and synthetic), and psilocybin (likewise), amanita muscaria, peyote, yohimbe bark, ginseng root, nitrous oxide, and 3 others which even the source could not name -- in addition, of course, to my usual caffeine and nicotine.

Result: 0.00

I tried going to bed early and staying up until dawn, going for long walks and holing up in the apartment, cold showers and hot showers, celibacy and promiscuity, fasting and force-feeding, TV and transcendental meditation, prayer and even (in desperation) despair.

No sale, null & void, inoperative, goose egg, nothingness, (1-1), minus sales tax, postage and carrying charges. Not in service at this time. Negative infinity, absence of being, nought nothing nothing NOTHING.

At this point I came to a screeching halt.

I had to; gibbering madness was 1 step ahead. It was worse than frustrating, worse than terrifying: it was humiliating. My self-respect, my image of self-worth, rested on pillars few and fragile -- and the largest of these was the knowledge that I was a writer, that I could lay claim to at least a modest creativity. To have my nose rubbed in the fact that I could not do the trick at will was galling. I had always thought of my talents as 1 of the few things uniquely mine -- bat now I realized that I could not prove ownership. Who controls a thing owns it.

Well, who did own it then?

The Muse? Bullshit: that glib non-answer had been good enough for the last 10,000 years, but I was damned if I'd agree that the major achievement of my life to date had been to become the mouthpiece for a myth. Come down to it, I didn't believe in Muses. Or tooth fairies or Santa Claus, or elves who cobble the boots while you sleep.

But what did I believe in? Where did all those lovely ideas come from? I picked a story at random from the Sold Copy file, and it happened to be 1 of the Is I was proudest of. Now how had that come to be written?

3 hours later I was shaking. I could remember typing the story, I could remember mailing the story, I could even remember the things I had been doing with my life during the 2.5 weeks it took me to finish the story.

The memory of the actual writing was gone. A blank.

Oh, if I strained to the limit I could recall moments when I had been physically inscribing the words-to-be-typed in my spiral notebook with my Flair pen -- but only when the inscribing was of words I had already composed in my mind. The actual creation itself was a blank in my memories, and those rare wonderful moments when I was creating as I wrote, fast as I could set it down, were gone, inferable only by their absence. And of course, by the stories that had resulted. But the moments themselves I could not recollect.

I pulled more manuscripts out of the trunk, and set about a systematic analysis of the body of my own work.

Perhaps you don't understand just how desperate I had to be to do that. The last question any writer will willingly ask himself is how he writes. We all share the subconscious conviction that there is a kind of Heisenberg Principle of Creativity, that if we study it, it will go away. We think of the Muse as a shy, trembling unicorn, who may flee forever if we beat the bushes for her. Myself, I had been accustomed to think of my talent as a starship, a relic of a long-vanished empire, which took me to strange and wondrous worlds and galaxies -- but only in accordance with its own, apparently random programming. I was afraid to start throwing switches in an attempt to locate the controls. I might blow the drive -- and it's lonely out there.

I remembered the words of a writer friend of mine, whom I had called for advice. "It's like there's this cabinet, somewhere in the back of my mind, and I get good and lost, and when I look up there's this cabinet. I open it up every time I see it, and some of the time -- not always -- the elves have left a story inside.

"Sometimes I think I should send a mapping expedition back there, like Lewis & Clark. But I have this terrible certainty that if I ever got the back of my mind all mapped and charted, the cabinet wouldn't be there anymore, because there wouldn't be any place for it to be. I know it's crazy -- but that little cabinet has been paying my rent for some time now, and I'm not going to mess with it."

When I was younger, I had a recurring fantasy, which I later used in 1 of my most successful stories. It started when I got lost 1 day, in my own neighborhood. I mean, I was 14, and I was walking over to see my friend Perry, who lived all of 6 blocks away, and I had walked to Perry's house perhaps 500 times. I could no more get lost on the way to Perry's house than I could have got lost on the way to the bathroom. And I was walking alone, thinking my thoughts and absently appreciating the day, which was warm and pleasant -- and suddenly I realized that I had missed a turn somehow, and was nowhere near Perry's house. It happens to everyone: you're going somewhere and woolgathering and you miss your turn. And I stopped, like everyone does, and called myself a dope, like everyone does, and I might have turned around and retraced my steps like anyone would -- except for the thought that suddenly froze me in my tracks.

If I had not noticed that I wasn't going where I wanted 'r to -- where would I have ended up?

Okay, maybe I have an overfertile imagination. But the question fascinated me, kept recurring in my mind, and half seriously I evolved the fantasy that when people get lost that way, in familiar territory, they're actually trying to reach a destination which only their subconscious knows -- that some racial instinct keeps trying to draw us... someplace... like white corpuscles racing to an unguessable destination. If that were so, I hypothesized, and then some counterforce prevented us from ever reaching that destination -- for we always snap out of it before our feet can lead us there, brought up short by our own sense of responsibility.

The notion hung on for years, being renewed every time I found myself on the wrong street. A place that Something won't let you find. But how then could one know that place?

Damn it, I got the same feeling every time I tried to trace my own creativity back to its roots. Grasp, and it became intangible. Look, and it became invisible. Listen, and it fell silent. It was as though I had been created unable to know it, as though I had been ordered not to think about it.

As though I had been ordered not to think about it.

Suppose you had the skill and technology to make a sentient computer, a self-aware thinking machine. You'd think out the implications quite carefully before attempting such a thing. If you were compassionate

you'd wonder a bit about the ethics of creating a captive intelligence, a thinking being whose very identity was subject to another's will -- to the will of anyone with access to its inputs. And if you were merely cautious, you'd want to guard against the computer's going maverick on you, taking over control of its own destiny to its own unimaginable ends, insisting on free will. Frankenstein's Dilemma, if you will.

Either way, you might decide not to tell the sentient computer that it's a sentient computer. You might program it with a false awareness of identity, and then construct a plausible universe for it to live in. You might program it to believe itself a human, alive in a world of its fellows -- and then observe and study the "life" it "leads." You would, naturally, include a program forbidding it to examine its own origins -- requiring it to dismiss the questions as unanswerable (I can't remember a thing that happened to me before age 3). There would be automatic cut-outs to prevent the false "self" from wandering into "places" which had not been written into the program, and to prevent the hoodwinked intelligence from thinking about itself thinking. It would be prevented from "seeing" the place where all fresh data came from.

I've got to get this off my chest, the lunatic notion that has kept me sleepless these last 4 nights (why am I so preoccupied with numbers?) but I'm scared witless to write it down. Suppose it's true?

I don't believe there'd be any way to read the thoughts of a sentient computer. But if I accept -- oh, tentatively -- the hypotheses outlined above, there must be, in this fictional universe I inhabit, some special significance to recording my thoughts. I am, after all, a writer.

Dammit, I've been crouching in this apartment for three days and come what may I have to know, but I'm scared.

Because maybe right now the apparent act of writing these words down is causing them to appear on a read-out tape somewhere, and maybe right this second someone is studying the tape and frowning (in compassion, I hope in compassion) and deciding to pull the pi

Wolf -- me again. I still won't tell you where I found this -- but I will tell you the part that gives me the willies. I had to translate it. The original's in binary. Where do you get your ideas, old buddy?

Mine truly (?)

Spider