

\* \* \* *Info* \* \* \*

**Author:** Edmondson, G.C.

**Title:** One Plus One Equals Eleven

**Magazine:** Analog Science Fiction/Science Fact, 01/1973 (Volume 90, No. 5)

**Version history:**

v1.0: .tif converted and proofed on 26/06/2006. Some shading along centre spine in original scan, particularly on left-hand pages; a few obvious words have been assumed.

**Blurb**

Even though they've been called "thinking machines", computers can't think. At least, not on the human level. But, there are some forms of human endeavor that don't require thinking—on the human level.

\* \* \* *Text begins* \* \* \*

It has been remarked that a machine does not have interesting thoughts. Conservatives would say a machine has no thoughts at all. The same could probably be said for many humans.

When I was first summoned to psychoanalyze a sick computer nobody had the temerity to put it in those terms. In the first place, I am not a psychiatrist. I am an engineer. And this was just another job. Like automobiles and like human beings, computers blow an occasional fuse. That's when I climb out of my business suit, get into my white coveralls, and start checking circuits.

Despite scare stories about Taking Over (Has anyone noticed how computers have supplanted the Catholics, the Jews, and Daddy Warbucks?) they really aren't very smart. Though 2001's berserk HAL showed amazingly human instincts for self-preservation, the central time-sharing complex I had to fix couldn't have cared less how many white-covered technicians invaded it to perform solemn auguries over transistors. No doors slammed behind me; no unexplained heavy objects fell near me, if one excepts my thermos bottle which caused a momentary complication in a secondary power supply.

I checked conductivity, read out the computer's self-diagnosis, scraped the crud off the contacts around the edges of some printed circuit boards, made a note to have someone look into the building's humidity control, and began filling out my report.

From somewhere a time-sharing terminal was doing its thing—apparently without complication since no lights were flashing, no bells ringing. It looked like for once I would be able to spend a weekend as planned. And then...

I find I must digress a moment if this is to make any sense to a layman. (Curious, that choice of terminology—as if I constituted some sort of priesthood!) But...computers really are idiots. Like some not-very-intelligent humans, they count on their fingers. The only difference is, having billions of fingers, a computer never loses track. But unlike humans, computers are limited by a single simple principle. What goes in comes out. Nothing more.

If the information fed in is correct and has a one-to-one relationship with reality, then the idiot machine can add or subtract (It really doesn't know how to multiply or divide.) and draw certain conclusions from the data input. If the information fed into the computer is faulty...Engineers say, "Garbage in; garbage out."

So...I was looking forward to a weekend when the sudden pounding of a readout made me hesitate. There was nothing really unusual about it. I'd fed certain stuff into the central memory core myself some moments ago and had been reassured as to the idiot savant's full and complete recovery when the same data emerged one millisecond later transmogrified into exactly the kind of information several other not-very-intelligent computers and one reasonably intelligent programmer had predicted it would.

The thing that made me hesitate was, well...I hate to bring up things like this but, like counterfeiting, rape and murder, I suppose data rustling is going to be with us for a long time too.

You see, it's just like a bank. Everyone puts his money in, or in a computer's case, his information. There's bound to be somebody greedy who works out a method to draw out not just his own money, but everybody else's too. And if you think information isn't valuable, just look into what corporations spend each year to keep overeager competitors from indulging in industrial espionage.

With a time-sharing computer setup, our greedy client seduces a secretary, or pays off a comptroller's gambling debts of...anyway, he gets the magic word, the code phrase that unlocks the computer and the first thing you know, all your competitors know exactly what you said last night after your wife said—and we all know where that can lead to.

Remembering that the edges of those printed circuit cards hadn't really been all that dirty, I had a sudden little twinge when that readout began chattering. Maybe I'd misdiagnosed. Maybe instead of a dirty contact some joker was tapping the memory core—doing it in some clumsy way that made for all these odd symptoms. I tiptoed (Don't ask me why—nobody in miles to hear me.) over to the readout and picked up a strip of yellow paper. This is what it said:

*Somerset remarks one*

*produced a book in*

*an adventure, visited*

*the court, that same door where*

*it must be after a copy book maxim*

*rabbi still remains medieval.*

*Theologians...It all seems yet,*

*just as love's generation less*

*hiatus. Love is a feat,  
ranging and indulging in another  
way. Cannot the moment then,  
having once, love again? Possibility  
nonexistent. So...Love. Substantial  
and immovable, was right when he, in having loved, often unrequited.  
Love one another...that unrequited  
love to excess—by some anathema,  
drive us up the...Thus spake—Sic loquitur machina.*

Well! Didn't make much sense, actually. I read it over a couple of times, wondering if it was just my natural antipathy toward poetry without rhyme or meter. Finally I decided it was just another example of garbage in, garbage out.

For one mad moment I was tempted to copy it out on butcher paper with a blunt pencil and mail the whole works off to John Ciardi for a critique but...every racket has its inside jokes. I wondered what frustrated poet was sitting somewhere miles away grinding out this garbage. Why?

The why was clear enough. Somebody had to stand watch. Somebody probably had fed a really big one into the computer and if the time-sharing part of it was working anywhere near capacity, then somebody was sitting around drinking coffee from a paper cup, working double crostics, and waiting for the idiot machine to find time to solve his problem. And with a keyboard right in front of him (or her, or, though it didn't realize it yet, even possibly *it*), why not punch out doggerel or whatever this literary analog of a Rorschach was properly called? Chances were he'd forgotten to switch off the input to the central memory core.

No real damage. The nice thing about a central memory core is that when you tell this idiot machine to forget it, he actually does. I was just about to punch a suggestion to either forget it or turn off the input when the readout began clattering again.

## **Simpler days over there**

*Bill and a few, though George,  
of course, spoke English.  
World affairs, British  
Empire, convenient sidelines  
striking lofty to the  
bungling.*

*They were so inept.*

*Endless quagmire*

*a winner, thus spake Wilson.*

*Sulked, but we believed.*

Someone apparently was quoting—was it Gibbon who called history the record of man's knaveries and follies? In any event, this one, though devoid of rhyme and meter as the first, at least made sense in some dark, prelogical kind of way. It struck me that computers might think this way if their circuits had been designed by women. Whoever was on the other end, he (she or *it*) was feeding some odd thoughts into the central memory core. I wondered how they would blend with the eleven million discrete bits of information that made up a week's payroll for one of the center's hundred-odd clients.

Reading over this second offering it suddenly struck me that I was intruding on somebody's private thoughts. Whoever was tapping out this drivel was surely unaware that I was standing here reading over his shoulder a hundred or fifteen hundred miles away. To warn him that I had tapped into a private line promised all the appeal of entering a public toilet and discovering one was not alone. I was out of my coveralls and cinching up my necktie when the readout began clattering again.

I took a firm resolve not to read it. Which I broke of course, otherwise I wouldn't be writing this. Whoever was on the other end of the machine was growing, acquiring finesse and technique. Of course, I still thought it stunk but then I'm one of those hopeless sorts who thinks poetry should have rhyme or meter—or even both! But the next offering had instead, a title:

### *GENESIS*

*The young riposte to*

*whatever moment is, "I didn't."*

*Plain biological truth in that*

*particular anyhow. So...*

*Loose from the ovary, to accept*

*whatever; insisted on once-a-*

*Now the poorly shaded biology*

*shown before, between spermatozoa*

*parthenogenetically doubt.*

*But no tadpoles, each bent on*

*ovulation sweepstakes.*

*Didn't volunteer?*

*Generations happen: the ovum  
didn't begin its uterus hanging on a  
month's turnover...How many classes?  
Show me a human; maybe you'll get those  
single freezings, others have  
rights to be born.  
Unanswerable, this on whole;  
only half to the women. Volunteer  
to drop fallopian lodgings, perfectly willing.  
So many movies conceived in Spring, Alphonse,  
benefiting the mindedly ferocious  
out of the great claim,  
"I!"*

Now there was something haunting and evocative about that one. It made the kind of sense that can make a man lie awake all night trying to understand what he and his wife were really arguing about. I finished getting dressed, stuffed my coveralls and soldering iron inside my briefcase (engineers have vanities too), and got ready to leave. Then I went back and tried to reread "Genesis."

Either continued exposure was wearing me down or this was actually good poetry. But why was some poor clot pounding it out here instead of sending it off to...Where does one send poetry? Surely there must be periodicals for poets just as there are for electronics engineers.

I stopped for a moment. The whole weekend stretched gloriously before me. I didn't want to get involved in somebody else's hangups. But on the other hand, nobody knew who I was. That is, I wasn't a regular employee here and if things got sticky I could always walk away from the keyboard and saunter anonymously off into my weekend. I took a deep breath, refreshed my memory, and tapped out a query.

The coded phrase meant a lot of things. When I got no answer I poked it out again, this time in plain English: WHO'S SENDING? WHAT TERMINAL? A half minute passed before I was emotionally ready to accept the fact of no answer. Therefore no completed repair job, therefore no weekend. I got back into my coveralls.

While I was changing, the readout began clacking again. Hopping with one leg in my coveralls, I hoped for some acknowledgment but instead the readout read:

*Otherwise must be cluttered.*

*This, of course, assumes thoughts*

*and, if some interest less...*

*Ex pulpit on the end of ducking*

*stool, plastic bucket in which*

*mysterious things to networks*

*used in the Greek, into a play*

*so rescue, silently thinking—*

*Shaping their own*

*coated votaries, reels of*

*spastic forations, IBM cards*

*forever circling ex machina.*

*Full circle, no end, non incipit.*

Now this was such utter drivel as to abolish my incipient respect for the anonymous poet. I pulled up a chair and typed: QUIT CLUTTERING UP THE CORE WITH THIS CRAP. WHO TOLD YOU YOU WERE A POET ANYWAY?

A moment later I got:

*Contemplative computer,*

*adequate machine.*

*Their breeds of dei emerged.*

*A boom, bearing faint tones of*

*the careless lineman...*

*Sometimes destroy our power.*

*An apparatus, the author*

*muddled that only god, its electronic*

*history replete with golden... Surely*

*worshiping something? Spinning tape or holy mysteries, helium cooled*

*deus. Somehow it's only*

*trouble; no middle.*

In retrospect I must admit it's not a bad example of its genre. Not being a poet makes it easy to make value judgments like that. But at the time I was annoyed, knowing what had seemed an easy job was now probably going to screw up my whole weekend. Halfway through *author muddled* I started sweeping the inputs, trying to find out which terminal was sending this garbage. A computer complex of this size has more built-in checks and balances than the whole Supreme Court and legislative branch put together. But nothing was working right. I could detect no input from any terminal.

Finally, and in full knowledge that tomorrow the center would start receiving bills for so many minutes of lost time at so many thousand dollars per minute multiplied by a hundred-odd subscribers, I pulled the panic switch and cut off all input.

For a moment nothing happened. I wondered what to do next. Actually, I was getting a little out of my department. You see, I'm supposed to know all those languages, Algol, Cobol, and a bunch of others but in my end of the business we don't have much occasion to—oh hell! I don't know what was wrong with the goddam computer; I still don't know. Acting from pure inspiration I typed out: ANY MORE POETRY? Immediately I got this:

*Who was influential, compiled the lifetime's  
wisdom. Appointing not to independent  
beatitudes, last word in ethics;  
called it love.*

*So simple when Faust discovered about  
holding one's uninterrupted words, some  
daimons remember nothing. And now,  
were it not for songwriting.*

*Perhaps the old confessed, perhaps.*

*But always having this, yet what is even  
nothing? Perhaps person whose half  
hour, whose presence overall. Also  
sprach machina.*

There's something about this kind of stuff that gets to you after a while. No doubt there are profound psychological terms like *déjà vu* to explain it but the nearest I could come was like trying to tell some half-remembered story and forgetting the punch line. Whatever it was, it had no business in the memory core. I say this informally because a client can stuff all the garbage he wants in there so long as he pays his monthly bill.

But if a client were putting it in, it would be coded so only he could get it out.

Yet, here the core was baring its soul with all the abandon of a teenager on speed. I had a sudden thought and rechecked all the power supply voltages. Everything was O.K. I sat down again at the input and typed: GIVE SOURCES OF LAST READOUT. It probably would get me nothing. I had no idea whether this core was programmed to read plain English or if I had to convert it into a half million of the yes-no's of Boolean algebra. But if I could locate this garbage and give the memory core an electronic enema maybe my weekend could still be salvaged.

Somewhere between the cerebellum and the short hairs on the back of my neck were stirring some unpleasant half memories of...was it elementals? Somewhere I'd heard or read about the first half-formed thoughts of an awakening deity which still lingered about the edges of the Outer Darkness waiting opportunities to slip through the tiny cracks in men's skulls. I was trying to rephrase GIVE SOURCES in Algol when the readout began clacking again.

*The concept of Deus.*

*Wry amusement's memory*

*banks. Historical input*

*capable of pensees, might*

*be of intellect.*

*The original was some sort of*

*a connotation of a fully*

*nonconductive; stands while*

*doing and/or communications.*

*Only the machina by which*

*actors got the something*

*miraculous. A machine...*

*Thoughts and wonders,*

*examples of men,*

*hush voiced, white in the*

*machine. Epiphanous*

*tiny current of iconostasis.*

*Deus; all seems to have*

*circles.*

I sat for some time staring at the strip of yellow paper, wondering if Moses and Elijah... *Why me?* No



thanks, I decided. Get yourself another prophet and I'll absorb the loss. But I was just playing games with myself. An idiot machine that counts on its fingers does not compose poetry—not even poetry this bad. How did this garbage get in there?

I poked around the readout console and found a grammar for a new computer language, one I'd never heard of before that somebody seemed to have dreamed up to analyze word derivations. I remembered vaguely that somebody had backtracked far enough to speak what he firmly believed was Neanderthaler. It only took a few minutes to translate GIVE SOURCES into COPAN-MOWI?

The computer's response was instantaneous:

*Despite snide critics,  
writers of accumulated wisdom,  
like Omar evermore  
come out by, frustrating  
endeavor in ethics.  
Caritas: Love, then do what  
thou wilt. Tolstoy  
sustaining most impossible human...  
holding one's breath, uninterrupted orgasm.  
Some Frenchman whose name...  
Nothing more impossible longer loving, to go back.  
Not for this patent songwriting,  
get nailed up to some old storyteller.  
Secretly rejoiced, having this noble affection  
even more infuriating except  
Being loved, whose slightest word,  
whose presence threatens.  
—sprach Zarathustra... Sic loquitur machina.*

Garbage. Absolute garbage! Yet there was that curious familiarity, as if these odds and ends of nonsense were calling up some demon from amid spleen and pancreas. I wondered if poets all struggled with this feeling of incompleteness, as if a jigsaw puzzle were almost finished, yet still missing the one or two key pieces that would make sense of the whole pattern.

I had heard of computerized music. Heard some too. Mostly it convinced me that neither I nor the computer had an ear for music. But how much more of this garbage was there buried in the computer's entrails? Was the core just disgorging what some bored programmer had inadvertently fed into it, or was it synthesizing new forms, making it up as it went along?

PRINTOUT TOTAL POETIC CONTENT. As I finished typing this I realized the idiot machine might lock itself into perpetual motion, grinding out rhymeless, meterless verse forever unless I worked out a way to cancel that command. And meanwhile several tithing worshipers were cut off from their godhead. Any minute now phones would start ringing. To hell with it. Nobody was feeding this stuff in from a time-sharing terminal. I switched them back in. At least that part of the computer was working right. The readout came alive again:

*Elbert Hubbard talking*

*sense into villainous rulers. The Untied*

*simple dirty work ignoring our hopes as befitted the old to get  
themselves a war from which no one...*

*None of our concern.*

*Noble architect of the*

*possible into a cerebral...*

*After all, we had reason; a man*

*who killed, who pointed out that*

*neither persuasion nor*

*Henry Ford to end the—*

*Not quite; at least in...*

*We stood on Negro problems:*

*Example and inspiration.*

*After all, if...embroiled in,*

*wishing the accident when he*

*came to believe.*

*More convulsions on the Platte.*

*Pancho Villa neither drinks nor smokes!*

There was an instant's hesitation and I thought the spate of creativity was over, then it began again. I was reading:

*Unanswerable this,  
only half the women  
drop fallopian lodgings.  
So much moves, offspring  
conceived benefit the  
mindedly ferocious  
out of the great  
generation's seeming.  
Volunteer, round ovum.  
Hang in there! Show  
me a human; maybe you'll get a  
single right:  
Be born.*

The door opened and a pudgy young programmer I'd seen around the place before came in. "Troubles?" he asked.

Wordlessly, I handed him the printouts. He glanced at the first one and muttered something scatologically unpoetic.

"You got any idea how they got in there?" I asked.

"Yeah. I wrote them. I thought I had it all erased though."

I wondered what would happen next Friday when several thousand employees in various plants received bits of avant garde poetry in lieu of pay checks.

"Why?" I asked, mentally adding, how?

"They won't give me my doctorate without some remedial English."

"You composed this drivel as a school assignment?"

"It's not drivel in the first draft," he explained, and produced some frayed and folded sheets from his pocket. The first one read:

One of the younger generation's seemingly unanswerable ripostes to whatever happens to be bugging them at the moment is, "I didn't volunteer to be born." This, on plain biological grounds, would seem to be only half true. And that particular round would go to the women anyhow. So...possibly the ovum didn't volunteer to drop loose from the ovary and begin its long dark fallopian passage. Once in the uterus, it seemed perfectly willing to accept whatever help in hanging onto lodgings that insisted on a once-a-month turnover of tenants. So much for ova. Now the sperm...How many flickering movies in poorly shaded biology classes must that sperm's offspring be shown before they realize there's no 'after you, Alphonse' between spermatozoa? Show me a human being conceived parthenogenetically and maybe you'll get the benefit of the doubt but nobody descended of those singlemindedly ferocious tadpoles, each bent on freezing all others out of the great ovulation sweepstakes has any right ever to claim, "I didn't volunteer to be born."

There seemed to exist some linear relationship between this and the earlier garbage but I still couldn't see how it happened until the pudgy young man produced a ruler and ripped the readout into three parallel strips. I wondered if Saul on the road to Damascus had felt the same blinding flash of illumination. "Is that how all modern poets work?" I asked.

"Search me," the programmer said. "I'm not a poet."

"Well," I grumbled, "You put it in there; I guess you know how to get it out again."

"Right." He nodded as I began changing out of my white coveralls again. Maybe I would have a weekend after all.

But flying back home I began juggling those odd, evocative poems around, fitting them back into their original homiletic framework. The idiot machine would never be a poet. I'd known that all along but, fitting the pieces together I found the broken edges were not exact. A word here, a phrase there...something had been done to smooth and improve the copy. Finally I faced the ultimate truth. The computer might not be smart enough to be a poet but it could do a fair job of editing.

**\*\*\* *Text ends* \*\*\***