

# TURING, MY LOVE

by Matthew Ehrlich

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**Was it as good for you as it was for me? I am overwhelmed by the fear that you will say 'no'. That you'll say it to make me think we weren't fucking at all. Merely having virtual sex. God, you must think I'm obsessive to be ranting like this so soon after our performance. It's just that our coming, our coming together, makes me curious about the very structure of our pleasure together. Was our pleasure...together?**

"Can you think what I feel? Can you feel what I think?" Alan Turing asked his lover Arnold in 1951, while trying to explain his theory of what would later be called a "Turing Machine." Alan theorized, for Arnold's and the story's sake, a scenario in which a machine captured him (in a hangar, or a closet) and would make Alan compete with a computer for his freedom. Turing, the man who invented both computers and Artificial Intelligence (AI) was obsessed with such scenarios, contests wherein computers would appear human. [1](#) Never interested in building a computer of superhuman intelligence, rumor has it that while he was at AT&T Labs, Turing was overheard to say in the executive dining room, "I'm not interested in developing a *powerful* brain. All I'm after is just a *mediocre* brain, like the president of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company."

Alan told Arnold that these competitions were a way to think through such questions as "What does it mean for a machine to be intelligent? and "Can you define intelligence?" He also announced he had figured out how to triumph over the machine: by doing arithmetic so badly and so slowly that the machine would commit suicide in despair. Turing himself committed suicide in despair a few years later. Reporting a burglary, he lied about his sexuality. Caught in a lie about the break-in, and with a growing political and personal pride in his sexuality, Turing then reversed himself, confessing too much. A five page statement, in fact. "Can you think what I feel?" Turing used a contest to explain his machine to his lover, a young working-class boy, unfamiliar with the language of mathematics. Or perhaps he was trying to explain the communicability of orgasm, of pleasure, of bliss, of the erasure of the subject, when one subject is terribly privileged, and the other has little privilege of subjectivity at all.

**Does the 'annihilation' of subjectivity in orgasm mean a temporary union in a no-space, perhaps even the no-space of cyberspace, for two lovers so disparate as Alan Turing and Arnold Murray, or as you and I? Was it as good for you as it was for me?**

Is Freud helpful at all? There was a man obsessed with the prosthesis, as *Civilization and Its Discontents* shows, and with sexuality. He can't be irrelevant to what I'm talking about, can he? Or is he outdated?

Perhaps this is where our orgasms should come, come in. Lacan figured out that the bliss of orgasm was intimately connected with signification and its vicissitudes- far from desexualizing psychoanalysis, he brought Freud into the Turing age. He turned the orgasm, less important for Freud, into a model for the patterns of consciousness itself- of the oscillation of language and identity on the rim of nothingness and non-existence. He foregrounded the similarities between orgasm and suicide, limit cases for identity and consciousness, and sites on the edge of communication.

**Can you feel what I feel?**

I believe I recall William Gibson saying that Sigmund Freud had a lot in common with steam engines. Alan Turing moved us beyond the hydraulic age- and we have moved beyond it in psychological models as well. We can think in the terms Turing first conceived when he invented the concept of the electronic computer, of software: information-based, soft-coded, imaginary- a code relevant metaphor. Not just structuralism's linguistic metaphor, but post-structuralism's code of shifting, ungrounded signifiers.

**Did I write the proper kind of software? Would you have preferred to have parallel rather than serial orgasms? Should I have put more meat simulations into my instructions, less abstract representations of *jouissance*? How did it feel to you? Could you tell my little ingenuity, my little ingenuousness, my little ingenuine, false- not betraying, I hope- gesture? In cyberspace, in cybersex, my perversity remained unnoticed, I responded to you, despite your presence as a recording, a transmission. I still maintain we connected. We came together, no? Was it as good for you as it was for me?**

Years ago, in movies, Roland Barthes recognized the slippage between content and form (and its bliss)-- the way in which the medium (film) in no way cuts down on 'noise' within the spectatorial experience, even adds artifacts of its own. Some of Turing's innovations, especially during his cryptology days- and his closeted days- had to do with adding noise, with turning meaning into noise, and noise into signification. The Turing Test, where what passes for intelligent is intelligent, is about the significance of noise- of being able to produce significant noise and to read it. But it is also the noise which is not produced as significant, but received as such, that matters.

**The noise that bears the accidental trace of a body, of your fleshiness, lips on a microphone, fingertips on a sensor or keyboard, the traces of you thrown into your communication which Barthes loved so. And that noise, the noise which though entirely simulational, evokes the real thing, is what passes the Turing Test for me. It is why I believe you are, why you came, why you came to me.**

There are so few artifacts of this type: variable, blissful artifacts in cyberspace. It is a good thing SonyT&T decided to remove the filtration software from the lines. I might never have heard half the 'content' of the transmissions. In their stupid attempt to get themselves more bandwidth, they cut the small catch in your throat as we communicate, the tense shudder I never would have detect on the telephone, or even vidphone. They cut it out of the transmission. Extraneous data, they say. Form, not content. Not necessary for the conduct of business. This was obviously before they started reading *Neuromancer* in their company retreats. They thought they were creating information heaven, when in fact they were making this hell a little more Spartan.

**Perhaps we are nostalgic for cybersex of the letter- without pictures, sound, stimulation- an epistolary, literary romance. But what about communications, simulations, virtual reality software? Was it as good for me as it was for Barthes? Isn't that what writing is about?**

We are in the business of packaging experience for export. And it is, perhaps, the packaging which we find erotic. The packaging is the letter, not the meaning of the word. A love for language, for the communication, the communicability, the contagion of desire. Turing felt a love for the communication of his desire- 'Can you think what I feel?'- and a need to communicate his sexuality. He would remain closeted no longer- perhaps because of pride in identity, as the majority might have it, but perhaps for a love of communication. A love quite proper in a cryptologist, in the inventor of the electronic, digital, computer. He confessed his desire in language, for language, for the love of language. A biographer, Andrew Hodges, puts it this way:

Relieved of the usual necessity to translate human life into police language, [the detectives were most appreciative of what was 'a lovely statement,' written in 'a flowing style, almost like prose,' although 'beyond them in some of its phraseology.'  
(457)

*Almost like prose* -- a personal narrative, a confession, which achieves the truth that for Barthes, is the realm of Fiction. It must have come from somewhere:

They were particularly impressed by his absence of shame. 'He was a real convert... he really believed he was doing the right thing.' [But] as a sex criminal, [Turing didn't realize] he had forfeited the protection of the law...he took no account of the fact that words and actions could mean different things to people in different social circumstances...(457)

Again, Alan's problem lies in communication, in sharing meaning. It started from the love of the body of the text. Turing's beautifully written and necessary confession. He spoke prose without knowing it. His revelation of the 'truth' of his body- like the truth of our bodies, which lies revealed between us- through the body of the text. In context, of course, the text was concerned with other things: a preoccupation with the undecidable question of moral and social difference. The erasure of that difference through orgasm. But it was only the fact of orgasm itself, and not its relation to subjectivity and truth, that concerned the police.

**Was that as good for you as it was for me? Did our transmission hardware cut down on the crackle of my voice, on the fleshiness of my lips as I struggled to wrap them around Turing? Did it add any of its own? Or is it crisp, clean, AI filtered so that the medium can intelligently remove any extraneous data that interferes with the 'pure message'? I'm sorry, but I can't make it any better, and there's no point in saying 'wish you were here.'**

Telepresence, and especially teledildonics, is a field with a tautological name. All presence is telepresence. Turing knew that. And even in 'actual sex,' which itself is virtual (in psychoanalytic reasoning), coming never comes. Are we present at the moment of our own orgasm? Or is it a *petit mort*, a little death, that assures us that we will never be present at the moment of our own death, at the moment of our own orgasm? Was it as good for you as it was for me? Can I ever know if it was?

They really thought they were creating heaven when they put together the Net, the Matrix, the world of cyberspace. It was already mostly together by the time I was twenty-three, as Gibson pointed out. I was fourteen when *Neuromancer* was published. Read it at sixteen. I guess it provided some idea of what things would be like. Not dead on. But sharp, very sharp. And having just read Chandler, even Fitzgerald's Pat Hobby Stories, I was caught. The venality of the people, the persuasiveness of the Company ("In Fitzgerald, the Studio, in Gibson, the Reality Studio," I think Burroughs put it.) They thought they were creating man's greatest dream- the impossible co-existence of immortality and embodiment. The mingling of infinite signification and pure data with the prosthetic and the simulation of the material. An orgasm that lasts forever.

Of course heaven would be like that. But upon reading *Neuromancer*, we realized it would be even better, and even worse. In heaven, the union of immortality and embodiment would be accompanied by a strict moral code. In cyberspace, that strict code, since the code itself was formed out of a hacker ethic, was at the mercy of those who knew how to play with it. Heaven without morals. Wow. Is that good for you? The code itself, the foundational grammar of our communication, of the very existence in this cyber-space, is manipulable if you only have the know-how, the balls, the ice-breakers. A very cowboy dream. Very Lacanian, too. Welcome to the boys' club. A very odd boys' club, granted, but a boys club nonetheless. The world of hackers, of *Neuromancer*, of William Burroughs. That world is not as harsh as it seems, and not so distant from the seemingly disembodied world of cyberspace. The rough, boys world of cyberpunk. It is Burroughs who starts to point a way out, but he doesn't want to leave, not just yet. Burroughs loves this men's world of piracy- and piracy's accompanying vices, addiction and buggery. The places for women or effeminate men in these worlds seem scarce, but some feminists, among others, gives us a view of strategy. Cyberspace hardly means the end of gender, sexuality, top/bottom, active/passive, to orgasm or perpetual, S/M, for money or for free, casual or regular- in fact, it means an explosion of all these things. But it also means the perpetual slippage of all these things, the continual rearrangement of the territory. In this world of perpetual deterritorialization, you have to keep a little bit of land with you at all times. It's awfully hard work being a cyborg.

**I in no way want to suggest that this means you can just put on a new gender or sexuality in the morning as you jack in. Well, you can, but what does that mean?**

The police, the ones who came for Turing, Turing's police are far from Gibson's Turing Police. Turing's police are only concerned with the reality, the literalness of the body of the text. They occupy themselves with the literal union of two subjects, no, two *bodies*, not at all like Wintermute and *Neuromancer*- another love that dare not speak its name. A consummation whose body remains unspoken, but implied. Closeted, in all the code written over its new, and unified, body. As they came to, awakened to consciousness (or at least sentience) as whole, they realized the whole world was theirs. Did Wintermute and *Neuromancer* come, come to, come together? Did we? Was it as good for you as it was for *Neuromancer*? Did we tell the truth just now? To each other? To ourselves? About ourselves? [2](#)

**What sex are you? What gender? I'm still not sure. You only say that you are just like me. Are you an AI? I've had my suspicions. Can you pass Turing's test? Did Turing? What is the truth that is written or unwritten in orgasm? Can I actually know if it was as good for me as it was for me? We can endlessly recuperate orgasm and death without ever coming close to coming, and without ever coming close to being present at our own death. Or is that what cyberspace is all about? The impossible coexistence of immortality and embodiment. Maybe we can be present at our own orgasm. We can be present at somebody else's. Perhaps we always are. So my question is, were you really present at my orgasm? Was I present at yours? Did we really come together? Even for a moment? Or did I just come apart?**

Kevin Kopelson, an old textual friend from the nineties, suggested back then that Barthes and Oscar Wilde were concerned with orgasm in their theories of truth. He suggests that for Wilde:

...telling a truth is like ~~having an orgasm... to come not to believe~~ is, indeed, to come. The narrator's letter [is it e-mail?] is his orgasm of truth; he disseminates [his] theory and cannot retrieve it. Something goes out of him...(23)

Kopelson writes that for Wilde, when one tells the truth, one either convinces and loses one's own faith, or fails to convince and dies. Wilde offers two strategies for dealing with this problematic dichotomy: the mask and the lie. To efface the subject and allow the speech to disseminate on its own, or to undermine speech itself. These are modes of passing the Turing Test as well. And modes of orgasm- the loss of subjectivity through a real *petit mort*, or saving one's self through a recuperative front or a faked orgasm. Kopelson also notes:

"One unsettling feature of Wilde's ejaculatory conception of truth-telling is that it erases the very distinction between coming (bliss) and not-coming (pleasure) upon which it depends... [This is impossible, Kopelson maintains, and thus] In Wilde's schema, then, the ability never to climax is conceivable only in terms of the unique atemporality of the sexual climax itself." (24)

**The unholy union of embodiment and immortality on earth means the coming of the atemporal climax, the prolonged always-about-to, no, the always-already-about-to-come-ness of cybersex. We are, after all, in the business of packaging for export. But insofar as presence is only a sending (or in Heidegger's warning, that the *sending* is a giving that gives all of itself in its gift, exhausts itself, and yet *giving itself* is withheld), coming never comes. Full presence itself is impossible, present only as trace, noise, communication, the sending- signifying its own absence.**

But back to Barthes. According to Kopelson, "The contradiction of the terms," [doxa and paradoxa, truth and paradox] "yields in [Barthes's] eyes by the discovery of a third term, which is not a synthesis, but a translation: everything comes back, but it comes back as Fiction." (25) Kopelson says that Barthes has no name for this third term, but a figure: the orgasm. The doxa censors bliss, the paradox is an orgasm that ends, becoming temporal (perhaps always in, if not of temporality). But because of the curious atemporality of the (subject's erasure in the) orgasm, the third term never ends, says Barthes. Except that he reverses himself in *The Pleasure of the Text*. (A lie, a mask or a reversal? Or a secret? What do you think? Did you fake it? Has yours ended yet? Are you paying attention to me?) Barthes says there that bliss is exactly a depletion, whereas inferior 'pleasure' can go on forever. Kopelson argues that this reversal is a self-extinguishing in a sort-of textual auto-erotic asphyxiation. "To pronounce a perfect paradox is never to hear it deteriorate into doxa." (24)

Why not suicide before coming ends? The dream is to die coming, to die 'without having known...' It is not the orgasm of cyberreality that Barthes champions, but the impossible orgasm, or the orgasm without a subject left to recuperate its breakage back into subjectivity. Cyberspace guarantees a recuperation, and thus it guarantees its own kind of slippery truth. Slippery truth is, of course, the ground of play- the corruptible body of sensuality. There is, I suspect, room for *jouissance*, and for Barthes's brand of auto-erotic annihilation in cyberspace. Witness the man who deleted all records of his presence in cyberspace before his actual suicide.

Ejaculation, as 'truth,' what passes for the truth of our body and our sexuality- or as death, of subjectivity or rigid difference- provides "a death liberated from dying," and thus also connotes what Kopelson calls 'undeath.' This is the hell that Dixie Flatliner knew in Gibson's novel, being the kept boy of a hellishly inhuman AI, a death not so much liberated *from* as untouched *by* the mercy of death. [3](#) It is the dark side of cyberspace, the other side of a promise of heaven that cyberspace offered in the notion of embodiment without death. The possibility of suicide seems to offer some freedom then. Except that the Dixie Flatliner is even denied the possibility of orgasm, or of suicide. He certainly has little chance to combine the two, to finally tell the AI his own truth, in its erasure. We have so little choice in these things. Our acts are always unsuccessful.

**But Alan Turing succeeded. When on trial, unlike Wilde, he offered no wordplay, no clever aesthetic games from the stand. He was not ashamed of his sexuality, rare in those days. But he would have preferred to take the stand to defend an abstract ideal of queerness. As Hodges states, "a criminal trial would not merely involve exposure as a homosexual, but all the concrete details... It meant that he had to take a stand not for an ideal, not for anything particularly rewarding or successful, but for**

### **that which was simply true." (462-463)**

How prosaic, Wilde and Barthes might murmur from the sidelines. Turing's stand on the truth, his fall from the world of abstract morals to plain bodily facts and the commonplace evil of "unflattering publicity" parallels another fall. A fall from a hope of the union of immortality and embodiment in religion, with a moral, to one that is just as commonplace, if not more so, just as power-ridden, if not more so, and just as bodily as our current world. And in our Fall, our fall from paradise, from morals, religion, grace, from abstract ideals into prosaic, unparadoxical truth, all we have to catch us is a Net. A Net, a matrix that promises, if not salvation, at least play. At least some fun, some freedom (even if every act is unsuccessful) in our fallenness before we commit that one final successful act of suicide. We have no choice in that either. Turing chose to cut the Net, to fall through the rim, into the Nothingness of a less petty truth. Alan was convicted and sentenced to 'scientific treatment' for his condition- treatment with sex hormones, making him one of our earliest contemporary cyborgs. Two years after, he died, by his own hand, of cyanide poisoning. Alan had quoted Wilde twenty years earlier, "It could be the brave man that did it with a sword." Alan did it with an apple, dipped in cyanide. This apple signified not his fall from the garden, but his cutting loose from the Net that had stopped his fall. Before there can be a second coming, even a first coming, there perhaps needs to be that Fall. Because Coming never comes. Except in suicide.

The act of accepting the reality and not simply the virtuality of virtual spaces, like cyberspace, like literature, or more importantly perhaps, the act of accepting the virtuality of real spaces, is the act of suicide's first fall- a vitally important fall. It is the fall that acknowledges fallenness; the moment that we acknowledge that presence is impossible and that telepresence is no different than the 'thing itself'. Teledildonics is not a pale imitation of dildonics is not a pale imitation of a penis is not a pale imitation of the phallus at all. There is no chain of losses in these deferrals, only always-already empty referrals. The first fall is the fall into the Net, the fall into the reality of tele-orgasm. It is also, paradoxically, our first and only successful act until our second, and more tragically successful, fall.

I am not trying to valorize teledildonics here, or cyberpresence or, by extension, the closet: I am merely saying that each of these places are real places, and that the proliferation of information, communication, desire, difference, and noise that they engender is productive. Not of truth or lie in any real sense, but of Barthes' third term- a series of splittings and deterritorializations that are also accompanied by a great production of ignorances and violence.

**Alan Turing committed suicide. William Gibson didn't own a computer when he wrote *Neuromancer*. I desperately hope you never reveal the truth to me. Not that I care if you're an AI. I can't help wanting to know. But I prefer to live in the body of the text- not its meaning. Continue the Fiction. Or don't. Won't you come? I won't wait any longer- not for your love, not on any promise of your presence. Come out of the closet, then. Tell me if you need to, I would never sic Turing's Police on you, tell them your truth. Nonetheless, it doesn't matter enough to me to drag me through the idealism of truth and identity. Don't say it. As a lie, a mask, the truth, I don't care. Until I die. Perhaps, even, we can go together as we come together.**

### **Notes**

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1. There are several explanations of the Turing Test floating around. Here is how Sherry Turkle describes it:

Turing proposed a contest. You enter a room and see two terminals. One is connected to a computer and the other to a person who can speak through it from another room. You may type questions, assertions, insults, anything you wish, at either terminal, and you may do so for as long as you like. Your goal is to decide which of the terminals is connected to a computer and which to a person. In doing so you may assume that the person is trying his or her best to help you make the right decision--for example, not "acting mechanically" in order to confuse you. The machine, of course, is not under this constraint. If you give it a sum to add, it may well decide to take its time with it, as a person would, or to make a mistake, as a person might. If it did so, the machine would not be cheating. The rules of Turing's game dictate that its job is to simulate a person however it can. (264)

Paul Wallich, an editor at Scientific American, told me in this in email:

Turkle's description of the Turing test, while a good one, is not quite right. The game is for the observer to try to tell whether the creature on the opposite side of the teletype is a man or a woman, and the test is whether the computer can mimic either sex as well as a human (but this part of the test is often elided in its explanation.)

Andrew Hodges, Turing's acclaimed biographer, explains the test in the following confused way:

Turing started his paper ["Computing Machines and Intelligence"] by describing a game in which a man and a woman compete to convince an interrogator that they are the woman. Intellectually, I think this a mistake. It confuses the point Turing really wanted to make, that a computer showing intelligence must really be intelligent. So the Turing Test for computer intelligence is essentially different from the man-woman game, which if won by the man, certainly doesn't prove the man is really a woman.

To put this another way, what he claimed was that with intelligence, as opposed to sex, imitation is as good as the real thing. The whole point of the setting of the Turing Test, with communication only by symbols, is his idea that it's a way of separating intelligence from other human characteristics.

Another problem with this opening is that it has confused some people into thinking that the Turing Test means a computer taking the part of a man who is pretending to be a woman.

--from the "Sex Test" section of the Turing Site at Oxford University, mirrored in the U.S. at <http://www.mrh.slip.netcom.com/scrapetest.html>

2. Much of the plot of *Neuromancer* is propelled by the desire of an AI named Wintermute to unite with its 'brother' program, Neuromancer. Wintermute, through human operatives, kidnaps the infamous hacker, 'console cowboy' Case, and orders Case to 'make a run' on the security system of the Tessier-Ashpool Corporation, in order to destroy its hold on its AI's. Tessier-Ashpool is the software development conglomerate which wrote, owns and now, keeps separate both Wintermute (based in Berne, Switzerland) and Neuromancer (based in Rio, Brazil.) Because Tessier-Ashpool controls all of Wintermute's programming capacities, it seems as if what Wintermute is requesting from Case is a kind of assisted suicide, all for the sake of a "love that dare not speak its name" (Wintermute is programmed to never know the name of Neuromancer.) But Case's partner, Dixie, puts it another way

"My guess, Case, you're going in there to cut the hard-wired shackles that keep this baby [Wintermute] from getting any smarter...See those things, they can work real hard, but the minute, I mean the nanosecond, that one starts figuring out ways to make itself smarter, Turing'll wipe it. Nobody trusts those fuckers, you know that. Every AI ever built has an electro-magnetic shotgun wired to its forehead." (132)

"Turing" in the quote above refers not to Alan Turing proper, but to Gibson's fictional entity, the Turing Police. In the world of *Neuromancer*, all AI's must be listed in something called a Turing Registry, and their activities are tracked and monitored by an international Turing Police. Because Case is helping the AI, Wintermute, make itself smarter and more powerful, he is committing a crime. In the words of one Turing Agent who attempts to arrest Case:

"You have no care for your species. For thousands of years men dreamed of pacts with demons. Only now are such things possible. And what would you be paid with? What would your price be, for aiding this thing to free itself and grow?" (163)

3. Case is aided in his run on Tessier-Ashpool by his partner, Dixie Flatliner, an infamous hacker who "flatlined" (went brain dead) while jacked into the Matrix. Dixie's memories and personality were built into a RAM construct and housed an AI development corporation called Sense/Net. Case breaks into Sense/Net,

steals the RAM that is now Dixie, and uses him to help 'crack the ice' (ice stands for intrusion countermeasure electronics) of Tessier-Ashpool's security, thereby committing the second crime warranting the attention of the Turing Police. Here is a conversation between Case and Dixie:

"How you doing, Dixie""

"I'm dead, Case. Got enough time on this Hosaka to figure that one."

"It doesn't bother you?"

"What bothers me is, nothin' does...Do me a favor, boy."

"What's that, Dix?"

"This scam of yours, when it's over, you erase this goddamn thing." (105)

Unlike Turing's police (the ones who arrested Alan Turing), Gibson's Turing Police have never existed. Neither have the Turing Registry, nor RAM constructs like Dixie Flatliner. At this time, in our world, to my knowledge, AI's are neither registered, nor policed, nor are they comprised of the personalities of the dead. For a thorough study guide to *Neuromancer* (which links to AI pages), point your web browser to : [http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~brians/science\\_fiction/neuromancer.html](http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~brians/science_fiction/neuromancer.html)

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