

ANAGRAMS BY HAND

HARRY L. STERN
Seattle, Washington

What's so interesting about anagrams? They're just rearrangements of letters. Couldn't a computer crank out a million of them in the time it would take a human to sharpen his pencil? What if a computer and a human tried to anagram the same phrase? Wouldn't they both come up with the same set of "good" anagrams, given enough time?

At the end of my article "Personal Anagrams" in the February 1994 *Word Ways*, I stated that I had never used a computer to construct anagrams, because that would take away the fun. Michael Morton (Mr. Machine Tool) seized on this comment with a challenge:

Let Ross pick a couple of phrases, let Mike's computer program digest those phrases and churn out a ream of anagrams, and let Harry simultaneously work on the same phrases without benefit of modern electronics, in the old fashioned way. Then compare the results.

The purpose is not to rank the anagrams according to how "good" they are, or to proclaim the superiority of silicon over gray matter (or vice versa), but simply to marvel at the diversity that arises from a seemingly dry and predictable task. Perhaps readers would like to comment on the differences between the computer-generated and the human-generated anagrams.

Here is my output for THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD. My goal was not to produce an exhaustive list (the domain of computers) but rather a succinct and coherent product:

The center cannot hold.
Entrench not, each told.
None chatter, then cold.
Do let the cannon retch!
End throttle? No chance.
Torch the one-cent land.

The enchanted control.
Then no accord? Then let
The non-clothed recant!
Or let the hand connect,
Hence not death (nor T.L.C.).
On to chant: center held!

Here is the effort for REDUCTIO AD ABSURDUM. By now I had run out of steam; undoubtedly the computer felt no such diminution of its powers. My frustration can be detected in the contempt expressed by the following lines:

Reductio ad absurdum:
Dour dictum, a bad ruse.
Our demur: Cubist, Dada,

Crude as dirt, a bum duo,
A turbid mud. Do a curse!