

# TO B-OR-NOT-B

**M**ANY letters have been received by "The Listener" from people who heard the unusual talk from 2YA recently following the startling announcement, "This is 2YA. It is 9 p.m. on Thursday, January 25, 2060. Exactly 100 years ago tonight, at this hour, the last poetry reading to be broadcast over the New Zealand Broadcasting Service was heard from this station. In commemoration of that event, New Zealand's foremost mathematician, X. Y. Z. Fermat, will give a talk entitled, 'What is poetry?'"

THE explanation of this announcement is that a young apprentice technician in the 2YA Control Room accidentally pulled out half-a-dozen plugs which he hurriedly pushed back, as he thought, but which evidently crossed some wires. For reasons which the NZBS engineers have still not been able to fathom, the crossed wires cut into a broadcast which actually will not be made for another 105 years. Happily, the recording apparatus was working at the time and *The Listener* is able to print the horrible talk

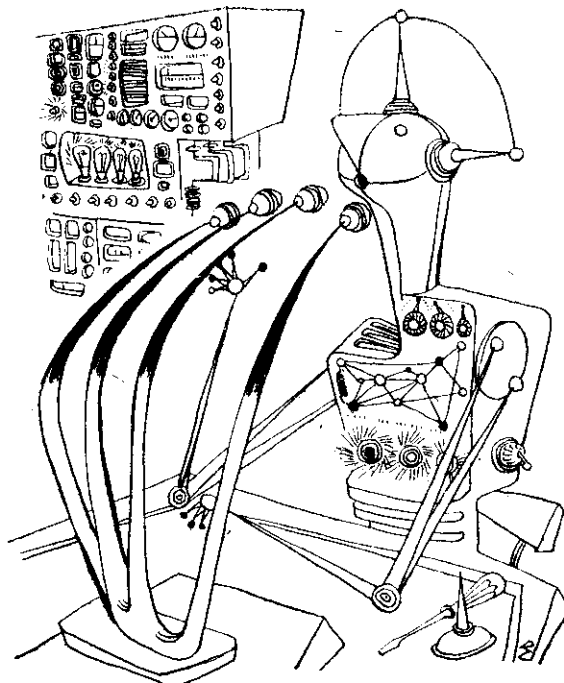
by W. B. Stewart

in full, or at least, such of it as could be heard through the very poor reception.

For the benefit of those who know nothing about cybernetics, that is, the science of mechanical "brains," it must be explained that X. Y. Z. Fermat is fairly obviously one such mechanical brain; hence the correction early on in the talk.

Here is the talk:

Good evening computers. Poetry was an attempt to express something that was inexpressible. Even the poets of the early 20th Century could see that this was a contradiction since it violated the law of excluded middle either-b-or-not-b . . . correction please, correction. I am sorry but one of my circuits has been invaded by a lawless impulse and I am now correcting the fault . . . since it violates the law, not-both-b-and-not-b. However, so lost were the poets to logic that such contradictions, which would ensure an automatic rejection and correction in any self-respecting computer, were accepted by them as profound, not to mention . . . (static) . . . has both a rhyming scheme and metre. A rhyme is the recurrence of similar sounds at certain intervals. For instance, middle 20th



"Good evening, computers . . ."

Century poetry constantly rhymed "moon" with "spoon." "Metre" is harder to explain but . . . (static) . . . prior to the victory of mathematics and physics over poetry and metaphysics (to name

but two of the major protagonists) some quaint arguments were advanced by both sides, especially the poets. Let me give one such with its obvious answer, taken from the correspondence columns of *The Listener* in the last month of 1958.

"Dear Sir,—Your mathematicians and physicists would stifle beneath an arid formalism that spontaneous love of nature sometimes amounting to an almost mystical pantheism which has inspired some of our greatest poets from the Greek pastoralists, through Shelley and Keats and the Romantics, down to quite recent men like Dylan Thomas. Can your mathematician formalise the liveliness of a dew-drenched spider-web, glinting in the early morning sun?"

This to us incomprehensible argument received the adequate reply from one of our spiritual forbears, "Your correspondent deplores our losing that delight in nature which inspired so much 'great' poetry. Why, sir, why should the hap-

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