

```

RRRRRKRRRR    EEEEEEEEEEE
KRRRRRRRRRRR  EEEEEEEEEEE
RR             RR EE
RR             RR EE
RR             RR EE
RRRRRRRRRRRR  EEEEEEEEE
RRRRRRRRRRRR  EEEEEEEEE
RR    RR       EE
RR    RR       EE
RR    RR       EE
RR    RR       EEEEEEEEEEE
RR    RR       EEEEEEEEEEE

```

```

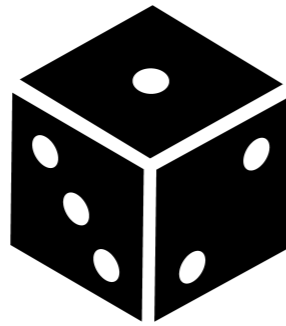
TTTTTTTTTTTT  UU          UU  RRRRRRRRRRRR  NN          NN  EEEEEEEEEEE  RRRRRRRRRRRR
TTTTTTTTTTTT  UU          UU  RRRRRRRRRRRRRR  NNN         NN  EEEEEEEEEEE  RRRRRRRRRRRR
    TT         UU          UU  RR             RR  NNNN        NN  EE           RR             RR
    TT         UU          UU  RR             RR  NN  NN       NN  FE           RR             RR
    TT         UU          UU  RR             RR  NN  NN       NN  EE           RR             RR
    TT         UU          UU  RRRRRRRRRRRRRR  NN    NN       NN  EEEEEEEEE  RRRRRRRRRRRR
    TT         UU          UU  RRRRRRRRRRRRRR  NN    NN       NN  EEEEEEEEE  RRRRRRRRRRRR
    TT         UU          UU  RR             RR  NN    NN  NN  EE           RR             RR
    TT         UU          UU  RR             RR  NN    NNNN  EE           RR             RR
    TT         UU          UU  RR             RR  NN    NNN  EE           RR             RR
    TT         UU          UU  RR             RR  NN    NN  EEEEEEEEEEEFE  RR             RR
    TT         UU          UU  RR             RR  NN    NN  EEEEEEEEEEE  RR             RR

```

by Louis T. Milic

Program RETURNER
For Generating Stanzas in Imitation of Alberta T. Turner's "Return"
Programmed and Designed
by
Louis T. Milic

Supplementary Poems and Afterword by Alberta T. Turner



Regenerators Series No. 2

Aleator Press

Minneapolis, Minnesota

2020

Edition of 216

© Copyright Aleator Press 2020

Alberta T. Turner's "Return," "Hoeing Song," and "Season" are reprinted from *The Midwest Quarterly*.

RETURNER's "One Hundred Computer-Simulated Stanzas" first appeared in *ITL*.

The author is glad to acknowledge the labors of Mrs. Diane Hrabak, his secretary, Miss Peg Griebel, his assistant, and Mr. Arthur Saulino. He is grateful for the cooperation of the Computer Laboratory of The Cleveland State University, and specifically to Mr. William Marcy, its Director, and Mr. David Willow, Supervisor of Operations and Unit Records. He has also enjoyed the sympathetic interest of Mrs. Alberta Turner.

NOTE ON THE SPECULATIVE EDITION

You are holding a reproduction of an artifact that does not exist. This booklet imagines how a sequel to Louis T. Milic's *Program ERATO* (1971), one of the earliest published volumes of computer poetry, might have looked. While Milic developed at least four poetry generators, only ERATO's outputs were graced with a dedicated volume. This is especially curious in that Milic's most ambitious undertaking was not ERATO, but rather a system called RETURNER—the subject of this speculative edition.

Aleator Press has taken special care to make this booklet look and feel like a sequel to *Program ERATO*: the original edition that was published by The Cleveland State University Poetry Center in 1971, but also our own facsimile edition of this year (Regenerators Series No. 1). Milic created the RETURNER program to synthesize stanzas similar in form to those of Alberta T. Turner's poem "Return" (1968). Fascinatingly, RETURNER enchanted Turner to such a degree that she was compelled to create new poems that were inspired by its generated outputs. In her words, she "re-turned" the RETURNER content. This booklet contains one hundred stanzas produced by RETURNER, along with "Return" and two of Turner's post-computational explorations, "Hoeing Song" and "Season." It also features a foreword by Milic and an afterword by Turner—these were distilled from their original writings on these projects. This edition has been approved by the Louis T. Milic estate, and Alberta T. Turner's poems are reprinted here with the permission of her estate.

Program RETURNER is the second offering in our *Regenerators* series, which comprises reprints of scarce early volumes of computer-generated literature, as well as speculative editions that imagine artful publications in this area that could have appeared, but never did—until now.

FOREWORD

The idea of programming a computer to generate poetry is not new. Originally, this idea took the form of a program to generate grammatical strings, or sentences indistinguishable from lines of poetry if semantic incompatibility were ignored. A number of simple attempts to produce verse were made, but the results had very little theoretical interest and no poetic value. More than one critic cast discredit on the entire notion of computer poetry. Yet a serious rationale can be found for such a project: the discovery of the nature of poetic constraints on the natural language base and the discovery of the relative complexity of each component.

The purpose of RETURNER is more specific. By analyzing a particular poem, "Return" (1968) by Alberta T. Turner, and devising a suitable algorithm based on its vocabulary and structure, I expected to produce stanzas of a similar kind which could be arranged into the form of a poem like the original. I also expected that this task would gradually require the solution of a great variety of interesting problems in language synthesis.

Work on the program was begun in September 1969 and finished on December 15, 1970. The earlier versions were run on the IBM 360/40 in the Cleveland State University Computer Laboratory. The later versions were run on the larger 360/50 which replaced it. The RETURNER program itself consists of 284 SNOBOL 4 instructions, which can generate one hundred short stanzas on the 360/50 in about ten minutes, or one stanza in about six seconds.

Despite a tiresome lack of variety, both in syntax and in vocabulary, these synthetic stanzas have an unmistakable "poetic" quality and a family relation to the source poem. The poet herself has found this permutation of her artifact of sufficient interest to base a new set of poems on the constructions produced by

RETURNER, two of which appear later in this booklet. It would be too simple to ascribe this effect merely to the presence of the same words in “Return” as in RETURNER. Nor do we believe any longer in such a thing as a poetic diction, unless a diction is poetic which collocates crowbars with kittens, dogs and staggering. The unexpected collocations of poets like Dylan Thomas have perhaps oriented us to a different conception of poetic texture or a different sound of the poet’s voice.

A consideration of the problems involved in generating computer poetry alerts us to the curious behavior of familiar words in unfamiliar combinations or contexts. We perceive how readily we accept metaphor as an alternative to calling a sentence nonsensical. We tend, that is, always to try to interpret an utterance by making whatever concessions are necessary on the assumption that the writer had something in mind of which the utterance is the sign. Of course, this is inappropriate when the speaker is a computer. The consequence seems to be the demolition of the critical axiom that the poem is sufficient. If we are not to waste our time in vain interpretation we must now ask a new question before beginning an exegesis: Who or what wrote this poem? The problem, however, will not arise in a serious form until computer poetry becomes somewhat better than it has been until now.

– LOUIS T. MILIC



RETURN

Alberta T. Turner

1968

Hemlocks are nearly round,
Deer paw the pond,
My dog squirts the porch post.

Last night the snow wouldn't take tracks,
But apple twigs are cut
Higher than porcupines.

Yesterday I saw the weathercock
Through the willow;
Today the cock is gone.

Holding my bowl,
I step carefully
From salad to salad.

The swamp has shores again
And the quicksand grass.

Have I planted crowbars under my porch
And chisels under my rocker?

No crumbs fall from the agate pebble,
But around it acres of sand are also red.

Melons crack,
Locusts have shelled my sisters on the porch,
The collie's tongue sticks.

The kittens hiss, at the milk pan,
And knead separate blankets.

This morning all the apples ringed the tree
So close the boy turned his ankle
And rabbits staggered.

The jack o'lantern's soft now
And nearly gray.

Mica silvers the sheep.
When my child brings his paper star,
Will it glitter? It's not silver paper.

Hemlocks are nearly round,
Mice run under the snow,
Sunrise reddens a thin curd.

RETURNER

Louis T. Milic

1971

In the morning crowbars will be nearly round,
Separate blankets never step again.
Tomorrow I will ring him through the willows.

Do mice sometimes become like deer at home?
Hemlocks hiss from salad to salad now
But yesterday he often pawed all the apples at
the milk pan.

In the morning the quicksand will seem silver.
A thin curd also staggers again.

At home the weathercock never appears like
the boy
Yet does my bowl turn from salad to salad now?
Carefully we sometimes paw the porch post at
the milk pan.

In the morning locusts will turn nearly gray,
Apple twigs often crack again,
So last night they took them through the willows.

Are the kittens also like my dog at home?
Porcupines fall from salad to salad now.
Yesterday I never saw his ankle at the milk pan.

In the morning melons will become soft.
Grass sometimes sticks again,
Tomorrow he will take us through the willows.

At home the tree often seems like sunrise,
Did she also see no crumbs at
the milk pan yesterday?

In the morning the swamp will appear so close
And rabbits never step again.
Today we take her through the willows.

At home the pond sometimes turns like the snow,
Mica hisses from salad to salad now,
Carefully they often knead my child at
the milk pan.

In the morning crowbars will be also red
But does the agate pebble also stagger again?
Last night I squirted him through the willows.

At home mice never become like deer,
Yesterday he sometimes shelled my sisters at
the milk pan.

In the morning the quicksand will seem
nearly round,
The collie's tongue often cracks again.
Tomorrow she will ring me through the willows.

Does the weathercock also appear like
the boy at home?
Separate blankets fall from salad to salad now
Yet yesterday we never brought hemlocks at
the milk pan.

From salad to salad locusts turn silver.
All the apples sometimes stick again.

From salad to salad the kittens often are like
my dog
So does a thin curd glitter at home now?
Carefully I also will paw my bowl in the morning.

At the milk pan the kittens become nearly gray,
The porch post never steps again,
And last night he saw us through the willows.

Does the boy sometimes seem like the quicksand
from salad to salad?
Apple twigs hiss at home now.
Yesterday she often took porcupines.

At the milk pan mice appear nearly gray.
His ankle also staggers again,
Tomorrow we will knead her through
the willows.

From salad to salad the snow never turns like
the swamp,
Did they sometimes squirt chisels yesterday?

At the milk pan the tree is nearly round
But no crumbs often crack again.
Today I shell him through the willows.

From salad to salad melons also become
like sunrise,
Rabbits fall at home now,
Carefully he never will ring mica in the morning.

At the milk pan melons seem so close
Yet does my child sometimes stick again?
Last night she brought me through the willows.

From salad to salad the swamp often appears
like mice,
Yesterday we also planted acres of sand.

At the milk pan the boy turns soft,
My sisters never step again.
Tomorrow they will bring them through
the willows.

Is my dog sometimes like the weathercock
from salad to salad?
The collie's tongue hisses at home now
So yesterday I often shelled separate blankets.

At the milk pan crowbars become also red.
Hemlocks also stagger again.

From salad to salad the pond never seems like deer
And do all the apples turn at home now?
Carefully she sometimes will see a thin curd in
the morning.

At the milk pan locusts appear silver,
My bowl often cracks again,
But last night we pawed her through the willows.

Do the kittens also turn like the quicksand
from salad to salad?
The porch post falls at home now.
Yesterday they never took apple twigs.

At the milk pan the snow is nearly gray.
Porcupines sometimes stick again,
Tomorrow I will squirt him through the willows.

From salad to salad the tree often becomes
like sunrise,
Did he also ring grass yesterday?

At the milk pan melons seem nearly round
Yet chisels never step again.
Today she plants me through the willows.

From salad to salad the swamp sometimes appears
like mice,
No crumbs hiss at home now,
Carefully we often will bring rabbits in
the morning.

At the milk pan the boy turns nearly round
So does mica also stagger again?
Last night they shelled them through the willows.

From salad to salad my dog never is like
the weathercock,
Yesterday I sometimes kneaded the agate pebble.

At the milk pan crowbars become silver,
Acres of sand often crack again.
Tomorrow he will see us through the willows.

Does the pond also seem like deer
from salad to salad?
My sisters fall at home now
And yesterday she never pawed
the collie's tongue.

At the milk pan locusts appear soft.
Separate blankets sometimes stick again.

From salad to salad the kittens often turn like
the quicksand
But do hemlocks glitter at home now?
Carefully they also will squirt all the apples in
the morning.

At the milk pan the snow is so close,
A thin curd never steps again,
Yet last night I ringed him through the willows.

Does the tree sometimes become like sunrise
from salad to salad?
My bowl hisses at home now.
Yesterday he often planted the porch post.

At the milk pan melons seem also red.
Apple twigs also stagger again,
Tomorrow she will bring me through
the willows.

From salad to salad the swamp never appears
like mice,
Did we sometimes shell his ankle yesterday?

At the milk pan the boy turns also red
So grass often cracks again.
Today they knead them through the willows.

From salad to salad my dog also is like
the weathercock,
Chisels fall at home now,
Carefully I never will shell no crumbs in
the morning.

At the milk pan crowbars become soft
And do rabbits sometimes stick again?
Last night he planted us through the willows.

From salad to salad the pond often seems like deer,
Yesterday she also squirted my child.

At the milk pan locusts appear nearly round,
The agate pebble never steps again.
Tomorrow we will paw her through the willows.

Do the kittens sometimes turn like the quicksand
from salad to salad?
Acres of sand hiss at home now
But yesterday they often squirted my sisters.

At the milk pan the snow is nearly gray.
The collie's tongue also staggers again.

From salad to salad the tree never becomes
like sunrise
Yet do separate blankets turn at home now?
Carefully he sometimes will bring hemlocks in
the morning.

At the milk pan melons seem nearly gray,
All the apples often crack again,
So last night she took me through the willows.

Does the swamp also appear like mice
from salad to salad?
A thin curd falls at home now.
Yesterday we never saw my bowl

At home the boy turns nearly gray.
The porch post sometimes sticks again,
Tomorrow they will ring them through
the willows

At the milk pan my dog often is like
the weathercock,
Did I also knead porcupines yesterday?

At home my dog becomes also red
And his ankle never steps again.
Today he plants us through the willows.

At the milk pan the weathercock sometimes seems
like the swamp,
Grass hisses from salad to salad now,
Carefully she often will paw chisels in
the morning.

At home the snow appears so close
But do no crumbs also stagger again?
Last night we squirted her through the willows.

At the milk pan deer never turn like the pond,
Yesterday they sometimes shelled mica.

At home the quicksand is soft,
My child often cracks again.
Tomorrow I will bring him through the willows.

Do melons also become like mice at the milk pan?
The agate pebble falls from salad to salad now
Yet yesterday he never took acres of sand.

At home the tree seems silver.
My sisters sometimes stick again.

At the milk pan locusts often appear like crowbars
So does the collie's tongue glitter
from salad to salad now?
Carefully we also will ring separate blankets in
the morning.

At home the kittens turn nearly round,
Hemlocks never step again,
And last night they kneaded them through
the willows.

Is sunrise sometimes like the boy at the milk pan?
All the apples hiss from salad to salad now.
Yesterday I often planted a thin curd.

At home my dog becomes nearly gray.
My bowl also staggers again,
Tomorrow he will paw us through the willows.

At the milk pan the weathercock never seems like
the swamp,
Did she sometimes squirt apple twigs yesterday?

At home the snow appears nearly gray
But porcupines often crack again.
Today we shell her through the willows.

At the milk pan deer also turn like the pond,
His ankle falls from salad to salad now,
Carefully they never will bring grass in
the morning.

At home the quicksand is silver
Yet do chisels sometimes stick again?
Last night I shelled him through the willows.

At the milk pan melons often become like mice,
Yesterday he also pawed rabbits.

At home melons seem so close,
Mica never steps again.
Tomorrow she will knead me through
the willows.

Does the pond sometimes appear like the snow at
the milk pan?
My child hisses from salad to salad now
So yesterday we often saw the agate pebble.

At home the pond turns also red.
Acres of sand also stagger again.

At the milk pan mice never are like deer
And do my sisters turn from salad to salad now?
Carefully I sometimes will ring the collie's tongue
in the morning.

At home my dog becomes soft,
Separate blankets often crack again,
But last night he planted us through the willows.

Do crowbars also seem like locusts at
the milk pan?
Hemlocks fall from salad to salad now.
Yesterday she never squirted all the apples.

At home the boy appears nearly round.
A thin curd sometimes sticks again,
Tomorrow we will bring her through
the willows.

At the milk pan locusts often turn like my dog,
Did they also shell the porch post yesterday?

At home mice are nearly gray
Yet apple twigs never step again.
Today I paw him through the willows.

At the milk pan the snow sometimes becomes like
the quicksand,
Porcupines hiss from salad to salad now,
Carefully he often will knead his ankle in
the morning.

At home sunrise seems silver
So does grass also stagger again?
Last night she saw me through the willows.

At the milk pan the kittens never appear like
the weathercock,
Yesterday we sometimes took no crumbs.

At home the tree turns so close,
Rabbits often crack again.
Tomorrow they will ring them through
the willows.

Is the swamp also like melons at the milk pan?
Mica falls from salad to salad now
And yesterday I never planted my child.

At home the pond becomes also red.
The agate pebble sometimes sticks again.

At the milk pan deer often seem like crowbars
But do acres of sand glitter
from salad to salad now?
Carefully she also will bring my sisters in
the morning.

At home the boy appears soft,
The collie's tongue never steps again,
Yet last night we shelled her through the willows.

Do locusts sometimes turn like my dog at
the milk pan?
Separate blankets hiss from salad to salad now.
Yesterday they often pawed hemlocks.

At home mice are nearly round.
All the apples also stagger again,
Tomorrow I will knead him through the willows.

At home the snow never becomes like
the quicksand,
Did he sometimes see my bowl at
the milk pan yesterday?

In the morning sunrise will seem nearly gray
So the porch post often cracks again.
Today she takes me through the willows.

At home the kittens also appear like
the weathercock,
Apple twigs fall from salad to salad now,
Carefully we never ring porcupines at
the milk pan.

In the morning the tree will turn nearly round
And does his ankle sometimes stick again?
Last night they planted them through the willows.

At home the swamp often is like melons,
Yesterday I also squirted chisels at the milk pan.

In the morning the pond will become silver,
No crumbs never step again.
Tomorrow he will bring us through the willows.

Do deer sometimes seem like crowbars at home?
Rabbits hiss from salad to salad now
But yesterday she often shelled mica at
the milk pan.

In the morning the boy will appear soft.
My child also staggers again.

At home locusts never turn like my dog
Yet does the agate pebble turn
from salad to salad now?
Carefully they sometimes knead acres of sand at
the milk pan.

RETURNER RE-TURNED

Alberta T. Turner

1972

HOEING SONG

At home the rabbits hiss a salad,
chisels chip a thin curd,
My sisters stick, my bowl staggers,
willows shell me to the pond.

At the milk pan deer are crowbars,
at the milk pan melons sob.
My child has seen me through the willows,
yet I never planted him.

Yesterday he squirted chisels,
locusts rattled agate pebbles,
deer at home were stiff as apples;
crumbs will never cover them.

My son has hissed me from the salad,
apple twigs squirt porcupines.
Rabbits at the milk pan, Daughter,
rabbits shake the blankets down.

SEASON

at the milk pan
salads hiss
my child kneads
through the willows
mice deer
husk blankets
silver
agate
crowbars soften
melons crowd
a thin curd
to the pond
sisters collies
apples paw them
rabbit-apple porches
willow
blanket
sand

AFTERWORD

Here, as nearly as I can tell, is what happened.

“Return” was (to me) a completely understood piece of verbal communication: grammatically coherent; personae clear and action logically plausible, even when conveyed metaphorically; its unifying force was the tension between monotony and seasonal change, both feared and enjoyed, expected and unpredictable; its rhythm was dirgelike, reinforcing the tension of the situation and helping to create an ominous tone.

RETURNER was a partial surprise: though rhythm and tone were much the same and a grammatical coherence was still intact, the personae and actions were new and confusing; and IBM 360/50’s surrealism made the metaphors much more powerfully suggestive to me than the familiar ones of “Return.”

Baffled by the confusion of personae and action in RETURNER and stimulated by its surrealistic extension of metaphor, I began a selection process which I suppose was like the one which had taken place more or less subconsciously in the making of “Return.” The personae and action became selectors, along with interpersonal tension and resolution of that tension, which produced “Hoeing Song” out of RETURNER. The speaker has sisters, a son and a daughter. The I is beset by hostility, real or imagined, natural and human. “Sisters stick,” “bowl staggers,” “willows shell” him. He sees his child as hostile and feels guilt: “My child has seen me,” “Yet I never planted him.” The child retaliates: “squirted chisels.” The guilt cannot be hidden: “Crimsoned will never cover them.” The song’s anger grows and overcomes: “my son has hissed me.” The daughter is passive, as all nature completes the threat: rabbits, normally the meekest of creatures, take over the comfort place, the milk pan, and change even the comfort of blankets into the smothering of grave clothes. Crazy Jane to the Bishop,

perhaps? But how crazy was Jane? This introduction of dramatic narrative was not a throwback to “Return.” It was suggested by the surrealistic conversions of RETURNER.

“Season” was written two months later, after rereading “Return,” RETURNER, and “Hoeing Song.” Looking at this poem, I was not a little surprised to find that it was more essentially like the original than “Hoeing Song.” I was evidently still trying to write a poem implying the threat of natural change. But I liked this new poem better than “Return.” 360/50 had released more of that original poetic impulse than I had been able to do. The surrealism created by the program’s randomizing functions had permitted a poem less obvious and more threatening than any familiar measurement by months could create. The computer had not obscured the original poetic thrust. In other words, instead of taking over from the poet, it freed him to make the poem even more of itself than it would otherwise have been. Though less logically coherent, it is more emotionally disturbing—thanks to 360/50.

RETURNER has laid a ghost for me which preys, I suspect, on many poets—the fear that if a Thing can write a poem, poetry is not a uniquely human expression of unique human beings. Dr. Milic and I are not going to lie in Westminster Abbey, and if we were, we wouldn’t have to move over to make room for 360/50. Still, “Hoeing Song” and “Season” would not have been written without her interference, and I, for one, am grateful that she interfered.

– ALBERTA T. TURNER

Louis T. Milic is a Professor of English at The Cleveland State University. He has been interested in computers ever since he used one to help him with his doctoral dissertation. This is not his only set of computer poems. Additional efforts along this line include poems in imitation of Dylan Thomas and of William Blake as well as the ERATO program, whose outputs were published by the Cleveland State University Poetry Center as *Program ERATO*. He has also written a good many poems by hand, though his professional publications are in the fields of language, style and eighteenth-century literature. He finds computers to be very interesting organisms and appreciates their ability to simulate human activities and to make him think clearly.

By the mid-1970s, Milic had abandoned computer poetry to return to computational stylistic analysis, the major focus of his career. He retired from The Cleveland State University in 1991, and passed away in Cleveland in 2003. A facsimile edition of Milic's original published volume of computer poetry, Program ERATO, is also available from Aleator Press.

MADE IN MINNEAPOLIS

This booklet was made in Minneapolis. Its text was set in Bembo and Concept by the proprietor of Aleator Press. Type experts may notice that uppercase ‘W’s amid sections set in Bembo have not themselves been set in Bembo, but rather Concept—this is in an attempt to match the peculiar glyph used in *Program ERATO*, the original booklet for which this one serves as a speculative sequel, which was designed by an unknown artist in the Cleveland State University printing department. The page layouts of that booklet, including irregularities such as the variable placement of page numbers, have inspired our design here. Note that the line breaks in RETURNER’s generated stanzas herein do not originate with Milic—these unfortunately were a necessary concession in conforming to *Program ERATO*’s two-column layout. This booklet was digitally printed on a Xerox Versant 180 Press by Molly Ruoho of Smart Set, a union shop (Communication Workers of America Local 37002) and Certified B Corporation in Minneapolis, under the direction of Kevin Brown. The wrappers are 111 lb. cover stock in Marina with matte finish, by the Bavarian mill Gmund; the interior paper is 80 lb. text stock in Sunflower with vellum finish, from the Via line of Mohawk, a mill in Upstate New York. Despite considerable effort devoted to matching the style of the original paper stock used in *Program ERATO*, the wrappers used here have a smoother finish; the yellow interior paper is a close match, though slightly brighter and also smoother. This speculative booklet appears in an edition of 216 copies, which corresponds to the number of outcomes of a roll of three dice. Each copy is hand-stamped with one of these unique dice rolls, and as such, the booklets are enumerated using a bijective senary notation.

