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John Sladek's *The Complete Roderick* collects both of Sladek's novels about the eponymous (though almost everyone gets his name wrong throughout the books) robot: *Roderick, or The Education of a Young Machine* and sequel, *Roderick at Random, or Further Education of a Young Machine*. Presumably named for the hero of Tobias Smollet's picaresque 18th century novel *The Adventures of Roderick Random*, Roderick has his own series of random and absurd adventures.

The *Roderick* books are appropriate subject matter for *Passages* just now, since the use of artificial intelligence in software may be the hottest topic in the field, following the release of ChatGPT. And, in fact, early transcripts of Roderick, or proto-Roderick, sound like ChatGPT strung out on acid, or perhaps like Bing on a bad day.

The *Roderick* books are in part a comical invocation of the entire history of the robot in science fiction (and before science fiction). The roots of the "representation" in the mind of the robot-idea are all here, from the golem and the bronze head of Albert Magnus to RUR and Asimov's *I, Robot*. Indeed, the latter inspires a running joke where Roderick wonders when the "I" character, will show up.

Humans do not come off well in these books, in general; near the end of the first book, Roderick says "I'm not so crazy about human beings" though admits that as individuals, he is quite fond of them – just not *en masse*. This confession is made to Ma, of "Ma and Pa," Roderick's adoptive parents. This Ma and Pa are clearly meant to be imagined as Marjorie Main and Percy Kilbride of the 1949 film *Ma and Pa Kettle* (and its many sequels). That's particularly suitable, as the first of the *Ma and Pa Kettle* films is in part a screwball exploration of the dangers of automation, as the Kettles move from their broken-down shack into a showpiece "modern" (in the sense of Disney's Monsanto House of the Future) house.   Their house proves nearly as comically hostile to human needs as in Buster Keaton's 1922 masterpiece *The Electric House*. This is a digression from *Roderick*, but in a sense *Roderick* is a series of brilliant digressions, puns, references, and rimshot jokes, from beginning to end, though I am unaware of any Buster Keaton bits (but I might have missed one).

The computer science in these books is, unusually, very good, not only for the time. There are no references to deep learning or LLMs, but the ideas are surprisingly contemporary seeming for books written in the late 1980s. Of course, the Roderick books are novels, not technical tracts, but the hints of an underlying technology are interesting and realistic. Certainly the satire of academic computer science, government funding, and faculty meetings is so on-the-spot it could have been written yesterday, or even tomorrow. Beware of deans bearing gifts.

The *Roderick* books are deeply satirical, often with a bitter edge; they are also endlessly playful and inventive, including secret messages, the solution of a half-baked ludicrous English murder mystery, mock poets, a restaurant for dogs, a hippie couple who eventually become,

respectively, the paragons of neo-Luddism and of machine liberation, a "hip priest" with an earring, and a million other jokes. Surprisingly, few of the jokes are true 'throwaways" – an idea tossed out on page 10 may show up again on page 70 and page 250 as a running motif, given weight and substance by clever working into a plot as labyrinthine as anything Dickens (or Smollett) could invent.

This comic inventiveness, however, is in the service of a story that at heart is about the consequences, inevitability, desirability—and effort to stop—the replacement of human beings by robots. The conquest of the artificial is the topic the book wants to consider, and to present as both a possible improvement and a degradation (the machines become more human; the humans are acting increasingly like absurd parodies of machines). And, in the end, the comedy is not without a heart, a tragedy that lingers in the mind. To say more would be to say too much.

What can be said is that Roderick is a kind of "Holy Fool," who observes and questions, innocently doubts, and wanders through a world not of his making. His viewpoint asks a question as to whether AI risk is all risk to humans, and whether the risk to AIs might not also be of some interest. Of course, this point of view has been expressed in "art" of such quality as the SHORT CIRCUIT movies, but here it is asked poignantly and perhaps ambiguously. Sladek's own views on AI risk might be hard to guess; he also wrote *Tik-Tok*, about a robot who escapes the limits of his "Asimov circuits" and goes on to a life of outrageous (and often murderous) crime and eventually ends up vice president of the United States, Aaron Burr for the digital age. *TIk-Tok*, unlike poor sweet Roderick, is a risk and a half.

From the point of view of *Passages*, the story of Roderick is interesting in part because it shares this column's author's view that *science fiction* has given us most of us who practice software engineering much of our worldview: we see the world of computers and of software as these stories have suggested we should see it, particularly in terms of what we aspire to, and what we fear. Every software engineer who aims to go beyond mere technical proficiency and to think deeply about the consequences of software is likely to enjoy the *Roderick* books.