

SNAKE CIRCLE

A Recursive Meditation

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F: Did you read my new play?

M: A new one? Did you give me a copy?

F: No. I just thought you might have seen it.

M: I might have. It might have been talked over — what's it about?

F: It's complicated.

M: How many characters?

F: Two, usually. Same old, same old. A boy and a girl.

M: Am I in it?

F: Why does everyone ask me that?

M: Can I have a copy?

F: Which version would you like?

M: The first.

F: Not the latest?

M: The first. Principle of antecedence.

F: What?

M: The three rules of decision-making: sinistrality, antecedence, and precedence.

F: I'm not sure I follow.

M: Just pick the rule that applies, and your decision is made. Sinistrality: pick the choice on the left. Antecedence: pick the one that is earliest in time. Precedence: pick the first in alphabetical order.

F: And only one rule will apply.

M: Usually. In cases of dire emergency — or whenever you feel like it — you can apply the contradiction principle and pick the opposite.

F: Makes sense.

M: That's how I manage to avoid taking the bus everywhere. I prefer to travel by train.

F: Can I write that into the play?

M: It's already in there.

F: So it is. Okay. Here's version one. Shall we read parts?

M: I'll read the men.

F: And I'll read the women's parts. Go ahead. You've got the first line.

M: *[Reading.]* I've been working on a new screenplay.

F: I should explain.

M: That's not your line.

F: The play's about...

M: Just let me read it. You can explain later.

F: Okay. From the top?

M: *[Reading.]* I've been working on a screenplay.

F: *[Reading.]* What's it about?

M: *[Reading.]* Oh, a trifle. A girl wants to tell a guy something, but she can't.

F: *[Reading.]* So what does she do?

M: She writes a novel and gives it to him as a gift.

F: And the novel's about the thing she wants to say?

M: In a way. It's about trying to say it.

F: The book reflects the reality.

M: Poorly. Details change.

F: Like what?

M: The genders of all the characters are reversed, for starters.

F: But otherwise they're the same people?

M: Almost. In the novel he's a dancer.

F: And instead of writing a novel to her, he dances?

M: More or less. The dance is about the same sorts of things.

F: The attempt to communicate?

M: Changed a bit. It features a pair of star-crossed lovers who can only communicate by mail.

F: What do they write about?

M: I told you. The snake eats its tail.

F: What do snakes have to do with it?

M: Just read this. I explain it there.

F: I read the female part?

M: Right. Ready?

F: You have the first line.

M: Skip to... there. The long shot of the two protagonists in a field of wild flowers, at sunset.

F: A bit cliché.

M: Shall I continue?

F: Go on.

M: *[Reading.]* "The snake eats its tail?"

F: *[Reading.]* “Imagine a long line of snakes, sun-bathing on a flat rock. Snake-eating snakes.” The dialog seems rather wooden.

M: The novel that she writes is more eloquent.

F: They’re in a field discussing this?

M: Well, actually I was hoping for a rather surreal snake sequence to fade in over the dialogue. All the snakes start to slither forward to eat the snake in front of them.

F: The first snake starves?

M: The line of snakes curves slightly, and as the camera dollies out we see that the snakes form a huge circle...

F: So the first snake’s eating the last.

M: Of course the snakes are really a metaphor.

F: The futility of it all, right?

M: The futility of communication.

F: Or attempts to communicate.

M: Her novel doesn’t really treat this in depth, though. It gets rather lost in descriptions of the protagonist’s dances.

F: The dance about the emailing lovers?

M: They’re emailing each other portions of Hamlet, more or less.

F: The inability to act?

M: A close parallel to the inability to speak.

F: Wait a second. Are all the snakes identical?

M: In the snake circle sequence?

F: Yes.

M: No.

F: I suspected as much. They change slightly from one to the next.

M: And the dancer's emailers aren't really writing Hamlet. Not yet. That happens several stories down.

F: I'm beginning to see.

M: And even then, it's still not *exactly* Hamlet.

F: It's not?

M: Polonius is named Ralph.

F: Why?

M: It's more probable that way.

F: More probable that Shakespeare named Ophelia's father Ralph?

M: No. More probable to appear in this play that way.

F: I'm confused.

M: You've heard of the infinite monkeys?

F: "If a million monkeys banged a million typewriters endlessly, eventually one of them would type out Hamlet"?

M: Well, it turns out that the monkeys will finish a lot faster if we allow them to make a few mistakes.

F: Ralph is a mistake.

M: Of course we can't specify exactly *which* mistake the monkeys may make, or the whole scenario is just as improbable.

F: But Ralph? For Polonius? Isn't that rather unlikely?

M: All the mistakes are unlikely. That's the point. Taken together...

F: No, I mean Ralph-Polonius in particular. Polo. Ralph Lauren. Don't you think the fashion designer substitution is a far-fetched coincidence?

M: They all are.

F: But there's an infinite number of them.

M: So they're all in the end likely to come up.

The dancer's emailers actually construct a puppet play.

F: But what's it all about? I mean, taken together, all the plots and sub-plots?
Or does everything just diverge into meaninglessness?

M: Even if they did, it would be a statement of some kind, don't you think?

[Stops reading.] That's it? That's the end of the play?

F: That's where the lines end, at least. The sequence doesn't end there, of course.

M: You mean the snake chain?

F: The snake *circle*. A circle has no ends. Even you and I fit into the ring at a certain point as the story races around and around.

M: But why change it at every telling? Why not just say what you mean?

F: It's easier to write in the abstract. Easier to write if you don't have reality as a yardstick.

M: But your point gets blurred with all the repetition.

F: Broadened, maybe. But it's all the same story.

My story. My opportunity lost. My desire not to leave the unsaid unspoken.

M: You're still not coming clean with me.

F: I wonder if I'd prefer a different version of this story. One a level up. Or down. What if I wrote about the story two levels removed from this? Or three? What if I added permutations? Middle-men. Intermediaries. A third-party. A rival. A lavender hippopotamus to munch on leaves and belch.

M: A surrealist who interjects random nonsense. An omniscient author.

F: A reality all this corresponds to.

M: I think you'll find it already written.

F: In one of the variations?

M: Perhaps.