

My Beloved, Bedevilling Computer

I gaze lovingly at the green screen of my computer on which I write every morning. It carries out my orders obediently, but I can't stop myself from asking it one question : whose side are you really on?

In the bad old days, no one had much doubt about where computers stood. As they whirred and chattered away in the back rooms of giant corporations and government offices we knew that they were all firmly ranged on the side of Mr. Big, of authority, conformity and discipline. They were the beasts of business, the agents of tyranny. They eagerly persecuted innocent tax-payers, credit-card holders and bank customers with preposterous, impersonal demands for instant payment - and no human being knew how to answer back.

But nowadays it all seems to look different. Almost everyone who has his own computer soon feels a sense of glorious liberation. Neurotic writers who once felt persecuted by the computers' bullying tactics, were amazed when their pet machines turned out to be patient and considerate helpers. The computers loved to find words and discover spelling mistakes; they relished the drudgery of switching paragraphs around and they silently filed everything away onto their little floppy discs. With the personal computer comes membership in a club of addicts, a society of converts who passionately compare notes at cocktail parties about their new software, surreptitiously slipping away to try out a new program [...].

What prospects lie ahead for the computerized individual ? Will he be able to defy the corporate powers, to hitch his computer to data banks across the ocean, to chat with other friendly computers, to bypass accountants, lawyers, publishers, even printers ? ...Might there be a hidden price to pay to this seductive Mephistopheles ? ...When Samuel Morse invented the telegraph and someone said, "Maine can now talk to Florida," Ralph Waldo Emerson replied : "Yes, but has Maine anything to say to Florida?"

Anthony Sampson, *Newsweek*, 1983