

WIN PRIZES

A Matter of Mutter

By Robert E. Pollack

You're walking from Hamilton to Havemeyer some Wednesday morning at 11:00. As you pass through the Class of 1848 gate, you happen to look up and see someone approaching from College Walk: your roommate's former roommate, your former roommate's roommate—someone you know by sight only, and have never spoken to. What do you do?

You look down at the bricks of the walk or right at the Ivy on the walls of Hamilton until, just at the right instant, you look up, meet his (or her) eyes, nod, smile, mutter a "Hiya" so soft that only you can hear it, refocus your eyes on the New Jersey coast seen down 116th street, and go back to thinking about women.

The other person does the same. Everyone knows all this. But did you ever consider the problem of precisely when to look up and meet eyes, and when to break

away? If either operation is premature, the other person is forced to squint and think of you for a longer time than is comfortable to him, or to twist his neck around awkwardly in order not to appear to cut off your greeting in mid-mutter. If the look comes too late, both persons are liable to walk on asking themselves, "Now who the heck was that?"

It has been found, after careful scientific study, that the proper moment for pseudo-greeting (as it is termed) comes precisely ten steps after that moment when you feel the first sensation of uneasiness at knowing that:

- Under no circumstances will you actually say hello,
- Under no circumstances will the other person care to say hello to you, and,
- You owe him a dime, or a cigarette.

Here are a couple of problems

for you to work out at home:

1) You are a junior in the College. You are walking from Butler to the subway kiosk along College Walk when you see your former Humanities A instructor, an assistant professor of English, walking towards you. He gave you an A-.

What is the proper mutter distance between you— (a). 20 feet. (b). 10 feet, (c). 18 inches? What is the proper distance if he gave you a C+ and laughed when he handed back your term paper?

2) You are an assistant professor of English. You are worried about the publication of your latest study of the role of earwax in the later poetry of John Donne. You have 75 English A themes to mark by 3:00; you have absolutely no interest in the topic which the department asked you to assign. In the distance, you see the doors of Butler spewing forth undergraduates. You recognize among them one whose term paper the previous year was remarkably rapid, but nevertheless not incorrect.

What is the proper mutter-distance here. What is it if the student is walking with a young woman, talking incoherently at the top of his voice?

(Send your answers to 934 Hartley Hall. Prizes will be awarded for the best entries.)

ENGINEERS