

MOSS ON THE NORTH SIDE

MOSS ON THE NORTH SIDE #3 is published for CRAPA mailing #3 by Eli Cohen, 2236 Allison Rd., Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1T6. Begun May 21, 1978

It seems to me a lot has happened to me in the last two months. For one thing, there's my job: At the beginning of April my boss rather abruptly gave Vancouver General Hospital (where I work) two months notice. Now, you have to understand that the VGH Data Centre has an extremely complex payroll system that was designed and implemented by a group of people who didn't believe in writing things down. One by one they have all quit, and my boss leaving makes it unanimous. As of next week, our most senior programmer (senior in terms of time here) will have been here, oh, almost a year. I am third in seniority, and I started working in the middle of October.

So we are all going crazy trying to pick George's brains before he leaves (George is my boss), and our first project for June is going to be getting the Data Centre paychecks onto a manual system (so that we can work better without the nagging worry of not getting paid hanging over ~~me~~ our heads: it's entirely for the hospital's benefit ...)

One nice side effect of all this has been a reorganization of the centre -- instead of replacing my boss they've divvied up his job somewhat, and I came out of it with a raise, a promotion, and an official title of "systems analyst". Back in February I was busy designing an inpatient information system, but I was called, and was being paid as, a programmer. Now I'm officially a Systems Analyst; but we've been pulled off of all new projects, and are trying to get the existing stuff fixed up (and documented) while George is around to help (and all the projects he was going to do when he had the time now have to get done in a hurry), so I've been doing nothing but programming for the last month. Is there a moral in this somewhere?

The promotion and raise was effective May 1st, and exceedingly well timed, because on May 2nd I had my 30th birthday. I don't have too much to say about this event, but I would like to record the following for posterity: Susan arranged a little surprise party for me the following Saturday (my first notice of this came with a pounding on the bathroom door and Jane Hawkins' dulcet tones demanding that I stop hogging the john). At this party Susan presented me with a bottle of Cointreau. And (this is the interesting part), perched around the Cointreau was a 20" high stuffed frog with a peach stuck in its mouth! Furthermore, inside the peach (which was also stuffed) was a stuffed, squiggling black tadpole!

See, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore have this routine about a restaurant situated in a bog in the middle of the Yorkshire Moors ... oh, forget it. If you ever come to visit I will play you a recording of "The Frog and Peach".

And then I had an essay on Ted Nelson's THE HOME COMPUTER REVOLUTION published in the Pacific Northwest Review of Books. For which I was actually paid (this is one of the ways you can tell that PNRB is not a fanzine). You know, there are ways in which that check feels like the first money I've ever really earned. I spent two summers working for the U.S. Post office; I worked all through college as a research assistant for assorted sociologists; I did some statistical consulting in grad school, spent over 2½ years working for the Saskatchewan gov't, and this last half-year or so at VGH -- and all of it has been salaried work, where I put in my time and got paid accordingly. I mean, I was supposed to be producing stuff in that time, but the connection between production and payment has always been tenuous at best. Here I slaved away at well under the minimum wage, and got paid for the result. I have this essay that I produced with my labor, and I have this check for that essay. It feels strange; but kind of nice.

Why don't we try some mailing comments for a change? Maybe I can even find some of those marginal checkmarks I made. (Total digression: Does anyone out there remember MAD's "Marginal Marvin"?)

LOWER CASEMEANTS (Doug): Re the Delany quote (sorry, Susan, I mean quotation) "...in America one person could meaningfully refer to another as 'my slave ...' at which point the other person was constrained by the language to refer to the first as 'my master...' as if the bond of possession were somehow mutual and reciprocal." He then continues, essentially defining the so-called possessive adjective "hers/his" as implying some sort of real possession of its object.

This sort of pseudo-reasoning, reasoning by pun you might almost call it, really pisses me off. I have seen other people do this in the context of attacking "my wife" as sexist, because it means that the wife in question is the property of the speaker, of course. What utter rot! If I say "my mother" I obviously mean something entirely different by "my" than when I say "my hand"; likewise for "my country", or "my birthplace", or "my place of work" or "my taxes" or "my creditors" or any number of other examples. You have a part of speech which happens to be called the possessive; it could also be called the genitive or the plergh. Out of context, all it implies is that some sort of relationship exists between the subject and that object -- the relationship can be one of ownership, but ownership is only a legal concept, and is far from universal in meaning across cultures anyway. In a typical situation, the possessive may merely distinguish between possibilities -- "my neighborhood, not yours" -- and it strikes me as quite stupid to say that for the slave, "in no sense whatsoever is the master hers/his". I.e. there is no relationship between the slave and the master. Oh yeah? Then what is the fuss about? It's precisely because there is such a relationship that there's a problem.

Contrast "my oppressor" with "my lover"; it's the existence of the word "oppressor" in the language that indicates the exploitation, not the word "my". (And as a side note, unless my memory of high school Spanish fails me, the idiom in that language uses something like "I am washing myself the hands"; would Delany make the case that Spanish speaking people don't feel that they own their bodies? Is this why abortion reform is so far behind in such countries?)

I am quite certain that on non-possessive Annares idioms have developed to allow people to distinguish "the partner" they live with from the one living with whoever they happen to be talking to. And their linguists undoubtedly have a word for "genitive constructions" that has no taint of possession.

Hmmmm. I suppose I shouldn't get so excited. But Delany should damn well know better. (Though come to think of it, he's the man who assumed that because a particular language had no word for "I" the concept was unthinkable, even though the speaker in question was using equivalent euphemisms and non-verbal constructions: BABEL-17 is to Whorf-Sapir as THE VOYAGE OF THE SPACE BEAGLE is to Spengler?)

And while we're on the subject of Delany's pseudo-science, remind me sometime to tell you why Goedel's proof may just not apply to the physical universe (see, the real world may not be as complex as arithmetic ...). But at least that's a lovely metaphor.

COPROLITE (Jeff): "... 360 degrees of flat, flat land." Susan told me about a Canlit story called "Streak Mosaic" (by Steven Scobie), concerning a B.C.-Prairie romance. Each person totally flips out in the other's environment, unable to cope with the other's mountains/flatland as the case may be. You gotta realize, in Saskatchewan they needed a mountain for the Winter Games' skiing event. So they built one.

IT'S THE PITS...IT'S THE COLISEUM(Don): I'm not sure I agree that all art is political. Perhaps all artists are political, if one assumes that almost everything people do has political significance, but it seems to me a lot of things that are recognizably art are politically neutral, and furthermore, some works may act as, um, mirrors for observers, reflecting their own prejudices back at them (as the real world does: if a novel is rich enough, a reader can enjoy it while

not noticing those elements that attack the reader's beliefs. Can you just see Nixon finishing 1984 with a sigh of satisfaction at the happy ending?) Mind you, many people refuse to distinguish between artists and their works -- I happen to like Wagner's music, but my father cannot comprehend how I can listen to such an anti-Semite.

I've got a marginal note here that I'm sure was part of a brilliant and witty paragraph I had in mind. Now all that's left is "Anthology idea: GREAT SCIENCE FICTION IN SUPPORT OF THE STATUS QUO."

I've got things to say about Idi Amin, but I'll save them for Denys, since he says essentially the same thing you do. Well, one crack: It's a sorry situation when someone like Amin might become immune from parody and outrage just because he's black -- I mean, except for the odd Archbishop or 70-year-old Jewish invalid, most of the people he's murdering are black too.

DON'T BOTHER THEY'RE HERE (Rick): Re housework -- suggest you invest in Peg Bracken's I HATE TO HOUSEKEEP BOOK. It's not just that she has some good tips, it's that she has the proper attitude towards all that stuff. (Seems to me I once saw a book called "Who says you have to eat off the floor" or some such, with the same idea in mind.)

BELLEROPHON'S RAGE (Denys): A brief comment on "reverse sexism" -- if I read you correctly, you are saying that historically (and currently), the class of women has been (and is being) oppressed by the class of men; the problem, in your terms, is to equalize the power of the two classes. I would agree that a solution to this problem would be to give more power to women as a class, and due to the current imbalance, to get anywhere at all you might have to create an imbalance the other way, hoping that when things settle down some sort of parity will exist.

But. I think the problem consists of treating individual men and women as members of classes, first and foremost. So that instead of human beings you have males and females, and when someone applies for a job the first thing you do is peg them as belonging to a category to which you can cheerfully apply all your prejudices. OK. So now you refuse to hire women bus drivers, because you don't believe in such things. So the government gives you a quota of women to hire. The short-term practical benefits are fine -- more jobs for women. But you now have massive institutions set up to insure that everybody doing the hiring is keenly aware that there are two classes of bus drivers, and you never, never compare people across classes, and you never forget which class each belongs. And the classes stay separate but equal. And anyone who changes sex is in real trouble, because they don't have a class to defend them and individuals don't count for anything.

It's easier to throw around statistics and measure equality by percentage points. But that doesn't eliminate sexism or racism -- it institutionalizes it (in some places supervisors have to do "sight surveys" to count blacks because of those silly laws that prevent asking for race on applications). It's more painful to fight each individual case of discrimination through, but in the long run it accomplishes more. Parity of power is something that can only be true in a statistical sense. There's no way that the female, say the black female head of a multi-million dollar company is oppressed by some white male junkie living on welfare. And I guess I don't think that any method, including affirmative action programs or any equivalent legislation can wipe out a 10,000 year old imbalance overnight -- so if it's going to take time, take the time to do things right. And don't force people to identify themselves with a class (racial, ethnic, sexual, religious, economic, or whatever) unless they choose to. Remember PUDDINHEAD WILSON, where 1/32 black ancestry made you a slave.

I shouldn't blame you for stupidities committed by bureaucracies in the name of equality (and I obviously get more excited about the mis-use of statistics than most people). But I know how I would feel if I lived somewhere that forced me to identify myself primarily as a Jew (e.g. the Soviet Union); I extrapolate that feeling to tagging people as belonging to this or that race. In New York,

unless they've changed their procedures, when it came to filling out the "race" entry on the birth certificate, a child one of whose parents was black was listed as black. (Of course, "black" wasn't used then -- Negro was the term I think. None of the HEW race forms I've seen allow for the possibility of intermarriage, by the way. At least with gender there's less ambiguity over category -- till the reversible sex change operation is perfected of course.)

And speaking of categorizing individuals purely by race, let's talk about Idi Amin. You ask, "Is it an accident that this kind of satire gets directed at a black creep but not at a white creep?"

That's a fair question. Certainly it's impossible to tell what goes on in the mind of a satirist, and they may feel just a little extra tinge of license because the subject is black. But I submit that Idi Amin is unique among today's dictators, and there are many perfectly valid reasons why he is being picked on more than the Shah of Iran.

First and foremost, he is a flamboyant buffoon, which makes for good copy and an easy satirical target. As we look around the current crop of dictators, we see that things are in a pretty sorry state: South America is run by faceless juntas composed of interchangeable generals; the Soviet bloc has nothing but colorless bureaucrats; ditto for Communist Asia (except possibly for Cambodia ~~fm~~ where the news blackout keeps us in ignorance); etc. We no longer have a Krushchev (I know there are a lot more h's in there somewhere) pounding his shoe on the table; Castro gave up chicken plucking when he became a head of state; pistol-packing Ky is gone, along with Olympic swimming champ Mao ...

Despite the best efforts of Doonesbury, the Shah is basically not very funny. He runs a comparatively modern state, which means the torturing is done by the civil service. He tends not to send outrageous telegrams to the Queen of England, or wax eloquently over the virtues of Hitler on Radio Iran. Fundamentally, he's dull -- and while you can write polemics about him, I'd like to see you come up with a parody.

So Amin's major advantage is that he's (you should pardon the expression) colorful. Then there's the fact that he's the head of a primitive (in the sense of small, non-elaborate, not too modern) government. That means he is more directly responsible for the atrocities he commits, since there are fewer over-zealous bureaucrats to blame them on. The Shah may be important in Iran, but I believe he traces his imperial line back some 3000 years; should he suddenly drop dead his policies would doubtless be continued by his next of kin. Amin is running far more of a one-man government, and the class of such dictators is confined to heads of relatively small and/or underdeveloped countries.

There's one other point especially relevant to the attention he gets from the Western press. The Shah confines his atrocities to Iranians, and, well, we've all got problems says the Western press. But Amin made his stage career by threatening British citizens, wiping out the occasional half-British old lady, trying to shoot the typical British writer, etc. By way of comparison, it seems to me Chile (not one of our more enlightened regimes, you'll agree, and a white dictatorship by your standards) never got such publicity as when a (female) British doctor was arrested, stripped, and mildly tortured. Great copy, man -- and I'm sure that story sold more newspapers than any number of dry statistics about the thousands of Chileans who have disappeared into the maw of the secret police.

So Amin uniquely combines flamboyant, parodiabile behavior with actions that arouse moral outrage and are at the same time uniquely aimed at catching the attention of the Western press (and don't think he doesn't know what he's doing -- he's survived any number of coup attempts and seems to be a pretty shrewd cookie; he's also scored a lot of points with African nationalists for his treatment of the West). He'd do just as well if he were white. On the language: Unless you are equally upset at the parodies of LBJ's Texas accent, of Jimmy Carter's southern drawl, of JFK's Boston speech, of DeGaulle's French, and of every dialect joke from Myron Cohen to Godfrey Cambridge, there is no reason to pick on "De Fireside Chat." Oops, out of room.