

MOSS ON THE NORTH SIDE

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Since I am leaving for New York in 4 days, I am going to make a valiant attempt to get this done tonight. I am consumed with guilt for missing the last mailing -- I honestly have no idea where the summer went. (Is this a universal feeling? Susan, now that classes have started again, is wandering around wanting to know what happened to her summer vacation; I remember drawing up lists of all the things I was going to do during my summer vacations, and never getting any of them done. I think all this nonsense about days being longer during the summer is a just brainwashing, and actually the days are shorter. A secret plot by all the watch manufacturers causes timepieces to run faster so there appear to be more daylight hours, and then the extra hours are sold to aliens who use them at Galactic tourist resorts and ... er, where was I?)

Oh yes, mailing comments:

LETTERS FROM A FLOATING WORLD (doug): On the possessive in language -- I still think that in the example Delany used ("my slave") it is the vocabulary (the existence of the word "slave", with all its social connotations and implications of ownership) that is relevant, and the possessive is just a red herring. A different idiom or a case ending built into the noun would still have the same implications. But I do go along with usages getting built into the language, usages that can result in dangerous thought patterns. A trivial personal example that I wrote up once in KRATOPHANY had to do with my mentally categorizing "electric lights" as not-too-hot objects. When I was sharing a single room in a dormitory, my roommate and I had an arrangement by which whoever went to bed first would turn on one of the fluorescent desk lamps and push it close to the other's bed; this resulted in a light that was dim enough not to disturb the one trying to sleep, but offered enough visibility when the other came up to the room. I unfortunately extrapolated this usage to a 250W incandescent bulb that was shining in my eyes one evening as I lay in a somewhat drugged stupor at a friend's apartment. I pushed this lamp against the couch to dim it; imaging my surprise the next morning at the charred spot on the sofa cushion!

Benjamin Whorf, who was a fire insurance investigator for a living, has numerous examples of fire hazards caused by sloppy linguistic habits. I hardly need to comment on the social hazards that are caused similarly. (And how many megadeaths do you think are tolerable in a nuclear war, General?)

AN UNTITLED APA (paul) (goodness, doesn't anybody believe in capitals anymore?): I'm sorry to hear that you have a bias against computers; I have a strong bias in favor of them, properly used, but even trying to be as objective as possible I think the small "dinky" computer is a special boon to anyone in favor of appropriate technology (which I take to mean small, cheap, labor-intensive, people-controlled, etc. technology). The letter to PNRB on my review irritated me no end, since I feel the writer a) missed the point of most of the article b) is abysmally ignorant about computers and programming and c) uses a number of rhetorical tricks to distort what I said (e.g. something I said, if stretched and taken in a very special sense sounds vaguely like something IBM says, ergo I am guilty of all the sins of IBM and large corporations in general). If you do read my review, I'd appreciate your comments.

To me the fascinating thing about small computers, now that the technology has been developed to ^{the} point that an extremely powerful computer chip costs around \$5, is that they are a labor, not capital intensive tool. Well, let me qualify that -- to make the computer chips that are the heart of any computer requires tremendously sophisticated technology, and lots of equipment, which

means a lot of capital. OK. But I ~~xxxx~~ presume the same is true of the manufacture of ball bearings, or copper wire. The neat thing about computer chips is that they are general-purpose machines, and you make them special-purpose by programming them. And programming is something that can be done by one person with nothing more than pencil and paper in a pinch. Given the chips (I'm oversimplifying, because you do need to hook up the chips to various hardware to actually use them, but if necessary that can be done by any electronics hobbyist in a basement), many many specialized machines can be created that were impossible or ~~xxxx~~ uneconomical before, through the efforts of very small groups of people.

The immediate effects of this sort of thing right now seem to be hitting the handicapped, as a whole set of microprocessor-controlled devices are being developed for them. Reading machines for the blind; light, wearable wrist communicators, alarm detectors, etc. for the deaf-and-blind; telephone attachments for the deaf; print-to-braille converters; all sorts of things that wouldn't pay if they required, say, a whole factory to tool up to produce them, but which can be comparatively cheap when they are made by hooking up standard devices to a standard (i.e. mass produced) microprocessor and adding a specialized program.

Since I am in some ways a professional programmer, I may be biased, but I tend to think that programming isn't all that hard, and can certainly be done by a wider class of people than can build sophisticated electronics equipment. Given sufficiently powerful software tools (a bit of jargon there), by which I mean good computer languages designed for people to use (and these are being developed now -- and again I should point out that such development, even for very sophisticated software, is essentially a matter of people working at desks, and can be done anywhere from remote farmhouse communes to Wall Street), given such tools, almost anybody who can read and think ought to be able to customize their own computers, i.e. program them. And using someone else's program (say, a mailing list program) is analogous to getting a book they have written, not taking a lump of material they have ~~xxxx~~ shaped. By which I mean that you do not diminish their possessions, or use up raw materials, or anything like that. A program is in a sense intangible, a matter of information rather than physical substance (which is causing no end of problems with copyright and patent laws).

Home computers have a terrific potential for cottage industries (though so far entrepreneurial sorts seem to be doing nothing more earthshaking than making instant computer-picture T-shirt transfers). And I still think they can be of assistance in almost anything one might want to do.

One simple political example: Say you have a cause. Anything, from vegetarianism to wiping out abortion. No matter what kind of crackpot you are, you can probably find 500 or more North Americans who agree with you. So you form an organization. Well, as anyone who has tried to maintain a fanzine mailing list can tell you, after a certain point just keeping track of address changes and who got what can become quite time-consuming. If it's a one-person operation you can probably figure out the breaking point beyond which more members simply can't be handled and still leave time to actually further the cause.

Enter the cheap home computer. With it, one person can easily maintain a fairly extensive mailing list. Furthermore, it can easily sort the list in multiple ways, retrieving ~~xxx~~ those with special interests or above-average enthusiasm at the touch of a button. It can answer such important questions as "Who else on the list lives close to X, who wants to organize a local chapter"; "Who cares enough about the cause to have contributed more than \$10 in the past year?"; "What members live in the Congressional district of Y, who is wavering on that important vote?" and so forth.

Nothing that couldn't be done by any sufficiently large organization. Put

cheap computers put this sort of sophistication within reach of small groups; of the little people. In a sense it is like the mimeograph (which costs a comparable amount), only far more versatile. I regret to report that the only use I have seen reported of a computer system to do the kind of political organizing mentioned above is an extreme right-winger, who will sell a mailing list of guaranteed active right-wingers (people who can be relied upon to give money or write letters in support of a cause) to anyone he deems sufficiently "pure." He's apparently very successful -- and the power to organize an instant letter campaign on anything from a local to a national level is not something to sneeze at.

Anyway. Home computers are also being used by artists to assist them (there's a weaver-programmer who's been using computers to help her plot complicated patterns; the Flying Karamazov Brothers (Ho!), whom some of you may have heard of, have had, er, computer assistance of a sort in working out some of their complex juggling routines). Microprocessors built into heating systems can conserve energy, and they should certainly be part of solar heating units, especially if it's necessary to keep mirrors pointing towards the sun. Computers in general should enable people to model more complex ecological systems, and therefore see the dangers of what they might be planning on doing. (Contrary to the belief of my PNRB letter-writer, it takes very little technology to screw up the environment, cf. Mesopotamian irrigation, or the Chinese attempt in the '50's to wipe out the sparrow.)

My, I do tend to get carried away once I start, don't I? Two more points: 1) I don't like large computer systems and I have a bias against IBM; speaking as a systems analyst, I think there are far too many inappropriate computer systems, and there has been far too little concern for the people who have to interact with them. I hope the use of small computers will change this. 2) Computers are just tools, and are completely value-free. They can be used for good or evil, just like screwdrivers, for appropriate or inappropriate technology. And it's entirely possible that the "Home Computer Revolution" will go the same way as television, betraying all the utopian hopes of its proponents.

RAIN ARROW (Elinor): The Grand Concourse in the Bronx is, indeed, an extremely wide street. It's also fairly long, and I think it covers a variety of neighborhoods. Where my grandmother is, it's not so much the Concourse as the nearby streets that look so grungy and run-down. I hear that some parts of the Bronx these days look worse than bombed out post WWII European cities, with blocks of fire-gutted houses.

DEPRESSINGLY DESSICATED BISCUITS (Lynne): I seem to recall from my Saskatchewan days a certain amount of institutionalized sexism in the Canadian Indian Act. As I recall, if an Indian woman married a white man, she gave up all her status rights under the treaties; if an Indian man married a white woman, not only did he keep his status rights, but so did his children (in the former case, the woman could, and frequently was, kicked off the reservation). This is built into the Act, and I believe it's there at the behest of the Indians.

Which brings up the interesting point of whether local cultures should be respected, even when they are sexist, racist, genocidal, or what. I know that given a choice between preserving Eskimo culture or saving whales, I would plump for the whales (because I think killing whales is murder, not because I'm worried about their extinction; I would tend to value Newfoundlander jobs over harp seals, for example, though it would be nice if there wasn't a conflict between the two). Fortunately for the Eskimos, I'm not in a position to make the choice. Saving whales is a very specialized case. But I doubt that there are all that many traditional cultures in the world that don't oppress women. Maybe Denys can amplify on the riots in Iran -- from the newspaper reports I've read, it appears a lot of the hostility to the Shah stems from his attempt to make things better for women. (Lots of Max Lerner reprints in the Vancouver Sun.)

BELLEROPHON'S RAGE (Denys): Let me get off a few cracks against your class analyses. "In North America, white people earn more money than other people..." On average, Denys, just on average. The typical black male salary I will bet is higher than that of the typical white woman; and as long as there are black millionaires and white people on welfare, I don't see how you can make such sweeping statements about every white person benefiting from racism. Most American whites may be better off than most American blacks, the same way most males are taller than most females; this doesn't mean I can't look up to D. Potter.

My main objection to your use of the word "racism" is not that the concept of passive racism is invalid or unimportant; it's that by using the same word to describe the Caucasian who enjoys a longer expected lifespan, and the one who supplies the rope to string up a black man just for kicks, you are devaluing the word. You, who worry about "my" picking up connotations from its usage! It therefore seems to me to be just a cute rhetorical trick to make your liberal listener sit up and think. A nice shock tactic, just like the use of the word "genocide" in the context of welfare cuts. But something that ultimately reduces your rhetorical arsenal by watering down the meaning of the words.

I'd actually like to hear more from you about class analysis -- I can see how it might be a very useful tool for analyzing history, for instance, but surely it's not sufficient in itself to deal with all aspects of human society? How, for example, would you fit in epidemiological research (à la PLAGUES AND PEOPLES, by William McNeil)? What I'm specifically interested in is how are classes chosen, or defined; can you have cross-cutting classes, so that an individual can simultaneously belong to two different classes with conflicting characteristics, or goals; is it a cross-cultural tool, applicable anywhere, or just in certain societies, etc.

LIKE A RAINBOW (Jane): Re women doctors in the USSR -- I also hear that, whatever the status of doctors, the woman doctor, when she gets home, is expected to take care of the housework, just like the woman miner or whatever.

Now, about this language business: If, in context, the phrase "my wife" does imply ownership, it is because of the word "wife", not the word "my". Contrast such phrases as "I'll bring the wife along", or "the little woman", which to me sound even more proprietarian. I think, as I said, that all "my" does is denote a sense of relationship; people who stress "my lover" may mean to imply ownership, but they may ~~xxx~~ also mean to imply status, as in "my spouse, the doctor", or "my lover, the gorgeous movie star". The brunt of the meaning is carried by the noun, and that's as it should be.

On affirmative action -- well, OK. I suppose I feel about affirmative action the way I feel about unions -- a thoroughly obnoxious solution to a problem, but damned if I can think of any effective alternative.

PSYCHOBABBLE (Debbie): In response to your remark to Robert ("you are a racist, and a sexist. I can say that without having met you because we all are, every ~~xxx~~ last one of us who's been brought up in this culture."), I will merely quote one of my very good friends, who said "Any group that includes both me and John Wayne can't possibly be seen as indivisible."

Ahem. Let us return now to our linguistics program, already in progress. I make a sharp distinction between vocabulary and grammar when it comes to thought patterns. The meaning of the word "love", like the meaning of the word "girl" (which originally meant "a child of either sex"), will wander around depending on usage; sloppy usage, or a particular usage by a prominent person, can very quickly change its meaning. But grammar is not only far more unconscious in use, it is also pervasive (I still maintain that "my" is part of grammar, the way English deals with possessives); which is why "Chairman" will be expunged from English long before the ~~xxx~~ generic "he". End of page, huh? See KRAT #5.