

It'll sure be nais!  
—Ezra

The objective correlative of the order book, the Linnaeus Nollson diaries, having been completely deciphered, I can now reproduce in full the entry for March 13, 1925:

As for the pornographic doggerel that I finally had translated, at first I could make neither head nor tail of it till, realizing that it was written in Pali, the ancient language of the Hinayana Buddhist scriptures, I hastened to Professor Lapleur of the Sorbonne, who rendered it quite easily into English. Lapleur's translation, written in his own hand, is on the back of the original Pali text.

Of a sudden, I realized that young Pound, alone among the poets of the city, had sufficient command of Pali to proposition my wife in that obscure and cryptic, albeit holy, language. Accordingly, I confronted him when he came to the shop to pay for the roses he had ordered.

"You're a louse, if you'll carouse, with another man's spouse!" I said heatedly. Pound was taken aback, but remained good humored. He complimented me on my ability to under-

stand Pali. Still, I was very put out. I told Pound that I had half a mind to tell Alice B. Toklas about his interest in Anais. Pound paled visibly; all Paris knew that Alice desired Anais with a passion that only unrequited love could nurture. He begged me for silence since, as he put it: "If Alice ever finds out, she'll beat the hell out of me!"

"Beat the hell out of you?" I sneered. "Why, she'll probably kick your butt half way to the Bois du Boulogne!"

Pound was now ashen. "I guess it's not nais to plot vais, not once, but twais," he moaned.

"You bet your sweet ais," I shot back. "Well," I continued, pressing my psychological advantage, "what do you plan to do about this?"

"I guess I had better cancel the order for the flowers," Pound said sheepishly. "And I guess I had better rewrite the poem too." Pound scribbled hurriedly:

Too bad.  
With a tweak of the nose,  
I now must dispose,  
Of each sensuous rose,  
Cause your husband now knows,  
That's how it goes.

"No," I said, "she'll just think it's another mash note from Gertrude Stein. But wait! If we

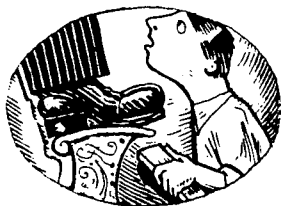
transpose but two words in the original Pali text and recast the third line, we shall have produced a perfectly presentable poem. You get to write your erotic verse and I get to save my wife's reputation."

Pound agreed. "Let there be commerce between us," he said. "I'll publish the verse next month, and if anyone ever asks who Thais is, I'll just say it's my Burmese cat."

It was all perfectly reasonable, and I decided that I would no longer pay attention to those backbiters who kept insisting that Ezra was a bit odd.

There you have it, an authentic slice of life, as life was really lived in one of those truly seminal epochs in cultural history. The Linnaeus Nollson Archive, now kept in the rare leaf room of the National Arboretum (where humidity and temperature can be mechanically controlled), contains material enough for at least eight monographs. I may be able to publish as many as eleven. Of course, I have not yet decided whether to publish everything I know, since it's best to keep you guessing. Eat your heart out, R.W.B. Lewis! □

## THE BOOTBLACK STAND



*Dr. George Washington Plunkitt, our prize-winning political analyst, has accepted a staff position with the House Ethics Committee, but he has graciously consented to continue advising American statesmen in these times of troubles. Address all correspondence to The Bootblack Stand, c/o The Alternative.*

Dear Dr. Plunkitt:

The President's decision to call off production of the B-1 bomber has caused considerable consternation with a large number of my colleagues on Capitol Hill who take it as an ominous sign. The President based his decision on the worst possible grounds, saving money. Saving money is simply not a proper function of the federal government. It is bad economics and worse economics. It hearkens to the horse and buggy conceptualization of government so prevalent among the opposition.

Of course, we all want to balance the budget, but one does not balance a budget as complicated as that of the United States government just by refusing to spend public monies. If the President really wants to balance the budget he needs to take a tough-minded approach to the vested interests. He will, in a word, have to

adhere to the politics of people, eschewing the politics of non-people. Balancing the budget is a people issue. The American people should not be enslaved by the iron will of some far-off accountant of whose life we know nothing.

Sincerely yours,  
Thomas P. O'Neill  
Speaker of the House

Dear Mr. O'Neill:

I could not agree with you more. If modern experience has shown us nothing else it is that governments can best be used for spending, not for saving. To me, when the federal government begins to save money it is just another example of big government sticking its nose into another area of the citizens' lives where government just ought not to go. Saving money is the citizens' God-given right. It is the prerogative of the individual, the church, the small family farm. Now if the

government moves into this area I just do not see how the little fellow is ever going to compete.

—GWP

Dear Dr. Plunkitt:

Since I became American Ambassador to the UN an ugly rumor has been circulating which I wish to get out in the open, to wit, the rumor that I am not very intelligent. Well, of course, it's true. I'm not.

Thinking gives me migraines and I get lower back pains when I have to read. I've asked my staff to boil all State Department documents down to three words. The words can be of any length, just so the memo has only three words—and not much punctuation, either.

Look, read anything I've said in the last few years—not very smart, obviously. But what else do you notice? Candor! I am very open. I am almost knee-jerk open. To me

being open is not just moral; it's a tactic for change. In an attempt to bring change and openness to the American people, I have just signed a lucrative pact to do a series of TV advertisements for a major American muffler manufacturer. The theme will be "America's UN Ambassador needs a Real Good Muffler Just Like You."

Now some of my advisers are telling me that President Carter, a personal friend of

mine, is going to be touchy about my contract. This I find appalling. After all I am a perfectly open person, and besides President Carter made a bundle a long time ago. How do I break the news to Mr. Carter?

Sincerely,  
Andrew Young

Dear Ambassador Young:

I believe you have already hit on it. Tell him you frankly need the money and that

the muffler company really felt you were best qualified to speak on their product. Tell him that you thought the series of ads would bring new prestige to the United Nations, and see if you cannot come up with some sort of special price on mufflers for him. Maybe you could have one installed in Amy's tree house. Look, Andy, he'll understand. He's your friend, remember?  
—GWP

## BOOK REVIEW

*Social Limits to Growth*

Fred Hirsch / Harvard University Press / \$10.00

B. Bruce-Briggs

Fred Hirsch thinks he has a wizard idea to explain why economic growth must stop. He accepts the refutation of the "neo-Malthusian" hypothesis of physical limits to growth or exhausted resources; rather, there are *social* limits, which account for contemporary society's growing disillusionment with growth. The assumption of economic thinkers for the last two centuries that more is better no longer holds; today, more is less. Hirsch goes beyond the traditional notion of physical scarcity so long at the root of economics to a concept of "social scarcity"—when too many people achieve the consumption of a given commodity, its value is debased. For example, as more people go skiing at Aspen, the skiing is not so good. Commodities having the nature of being necessarily limited are labeled "positional goods." They retain economic or status value if only a few have them.

Economic growth creates more "social scarcity" and increasing competition for "positional goods." This is viewed as undesirable and therefore Hirsch speculates on how our thinking might be adjusted to better understand the problem and deal with it. In the course of this exposition he is very severe on conventional economics, both Keynesian and classical. The Keynesian system is seen as predicated on growth and as only a trivial adaptation of a laissez-faire system; it is blackened with the capitalist brush because market economics is Hirsch's principal target. To him, an economy ordered on the principle of achieving self-interest is necessarily counterproductive. A particularly nice metaphor is a crowd watching a parade: If one person gets up on tip-toe he can see better, so the others must also get up on tip-toe, and nobody has a better view yet everybody has the annoyance of a less

comfortable position.

Hirsch's argument is thick, but literate and graceful. Obviously, he has read widely in what used to be called "political economy," particularly the "Chicago School" of neo-classical economists, and he displays an impressive number of references and citations. It is a pity that he did not read less and devote more time to contemplating basic economics and to observing how things really work.

As his example of a *non*-positional good, he offers food. "To a hungry man, the satisfaction derived from a square meal is unaffected by the meals that other people eat or, if he is hungry enough, by anything else they do. His meal is an entirely individual affair. In technical terms it is pure private good." Well, some people *do* get satisfaction from eating things that are not available to others. And every bit of consumed food increases the price of food, which is a loss to all other potential eaters, in the short run. In this sense almost everything is a positional good. A fundamental notion of economics is that what I have, you cannot have. There are only a few exceptions, such as public health.

Hirsch offers four major examples of "positional goods"—automobiles, suburbanization, vacationland, and education. In his analysis, anyone who gets an automobile adds to the congestion on the highways which reduces the quality of owning an automobile. But for whom? People who get cars gain, while those who already have cars lose, but only after a certain saturation level is reached. The highway pioneers benefited as the number of automobiles increased so that mass production lowered the cost and provided profits for technological improvements, and the market built up to a point where paved roads and service stations became ubiquitous. Only after that level did congestion begin to become a problem. And it is very strange that Hirsch does not mention the conventional response to automobile congestion—building better roads.

Suburbanization is treated the same way. Everyone who moves to the suburbs degrades the suburbs. Hirsch credits a colleague with pointing out that the response is to build more suburbs farther out, but at a cost of longer commuting time. Too bad that colleague did not mention the response to the commuting problem—the suburbanization of jobs to shorten the commute. Regarding land, it is true, as Will Rogers said, "they ain't making any more of it." There is some ultimate limit to land use—fortunately we are nowhere near it. The great bulk of land in America, and even in England, is undeveloped. We are continually increasing the effective amount of usable land by improving access to it through cars and better roads.

Education is of particular concern to Hirsch. By expanding the number of university graduates, the value of a university education in its "positional" terms to the degree holder is reduced. Hirsch is a professor at Warwick, one of the English "red-brick" universities; he should know that their expansion increases the value of degrees from the *real* universities—Oxford and Cambridge. The same is true in the United States. The growth of the University of Massachusetts does not downgrade the worth of a Harvard degree.

In his attempt to discredit market economics he employs some even odder notions. To illustrate why a society cannot be based upon pure self-interest, he quotes *Catch-22*'s Yossarian: "It doesn't make a damn bit of difference who wins the war to somebody who is dead." Right, you cannot pay a man enough to die, which is why military forces have not appealed to pecuniary self-interest, but provided other incentives. In any event, a neo-classical economist would respond that the Army Air Corps was not asking Yossarian to die, but to risk his life, and offered him certain benefits and disbenefits to take that risk. Capitalist societies do not expect kamikazes. The most dangerous military spe-

*B. Bruce-Briggs is senior research associate at the Center for Policy Research. His new book, The War Against the Automobile, will be published in the fall.*