



# The Genial Mr. Nock

BRING TOGETHER the shades of Erasmus, Shakespeare and Goethe and try to imagine what they would do. Play poker? Visit the Stock Exchange? Absurd! They would talk together. The precious converse of noble minds is the most truly human of all human relations, and demands at least as much artistry as Kreisler brought to the Mendelssohn Concerto. It need not be argued that Albert Jay Nock belongs on the same plane as the aforementioned to assert that he was of their spirit and that he did bring a considerable finesse to any discussion. Nock loved good talk; kindled by a responsive companion he was a brilliant conversationalist. He loved good food as well, but a meal was primarily a

means of lubricating the flow of ideas. To the table he brought a mind trained and tuned to concert pitch, a mind well stocked with ideas gleaned from great literature and broadened by wide experience here and on the continent.

Nock's ideas were perhaps not so original as he was, but he had made them his very own; his thinking ran along lines quite at variance with the familiar channels scooped out by the popular pundits of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Having framed his convictions independent of any school or party, he was able to view the intellectual passions and battles of the day with clinical detachment. Consequently, he appeared to many of his contemporaries as a man of monumental prejudices, almost an anachronism.

Convictions or prejudices, Nock orchestrated his brilliantly, and

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would on occasion—I am told—discourse over food barely touched while his dinner companion downed a hearty meal. “Lingering over the table,” writes Felix Morley, “we touched on many subjects, all of them irradiated by the light of his brilliant mind and mellowed by the warmth of his personality.” “Ideas never failed him,” Ellery Sedgwick adds. “Others have their storehouses of learning, but Nock’s mental files were available on the instant. The classics, all of them one might say, French memoirs, learning polite and impolite, everything neatly classified and pigeonholed.”

All this is as it should be. In “The Decline of Conversation,” an essay in the collection entitled *On Doing the Right Thing*, Nock remarks that “The civilization of a country consists in the quality of life that is lived there, and this quality shows plainest in the things people choose to talk about when they talk together, and in the way they choose to talk about them.” In good conversation there is a symphonic quality, themes and variations, a blending and harmony of widely ranging minds which take delight in ideas for their own sake, minds able to play freely over and around ideas without prepossession and willing to follow an argument wherever it leads them. In a debate there’s a loser, but in a discussion there are only winners.

Nock projected some quality—we’d

call it charisma today—which caused those in his company to surpass themselves. “You find yourself coming out with things you didn’t know you had it in you to say,” recalls a friend.

### A Living with Others

Conversation is “a living with others,” the dictionary tells us, “a manner of life.” It’s a cultivated way of handling leisure, and it has a synergistic effect on the people involved—provided they meet Rabelais’ test, being “free, well-born, well bred, and conversant in honest companies.” For it is the amiable who shall possess the earth, sang the Psalmist (Ps. 37); not the sectaries who see things through the distorting lens of the ego and try to conscript every idea into the service of a faction. The True Believer cannot become a good conversationalist, for “conversation depends on a copiousness of general ideas and an imagination able to marshal them.” It’s an intellectual dance of reciprocal inspiration, exhibiting “a power of disinterested reflection, an active sense of beauty, and an active sense of manners.” AJN thought of his *Freeman* as a sort of conversation, “a fellowship of fine minds in all parts of the globe.”

Nock came into full possession of his powers during his editorship of *The Freeman*, 1920–1924, from his fiftieth to his fifty-fourth year. He

had had a solid grounding in the classics at St. Stephens, and his valedictory address to the class of '92 reveals a remarkably disciplined mind for one so young. He went on to earn a graduate degree in theology, then furthered his education informally during the next two decades by reading and travel—steeping himself in the worlds of scholarship, culture, and affairs.

As his inner life ripened the visible man followed suit; slim, poised and assured, impeccably attired—a commanding presence. He became the Albert Jay Nock his friends knew during his *Freeman* days and after; a man of immense reserve, a person around whom legends cluster, a writer whose erudition and prose style earned him a select following—larger now than the corporal's guard he had a generation ago. It was not in him to become a popular thinker and writer; he wrote for the Remnant and tried to do a solid body of work for the future. "The first rate critic's business," he wrote, "is to anticipate the future, work with it, and look exclusively to it for his dividends." The future Nock worked for is catching up with him!

### Autobiography of Ideas

Nock was a virtuoso in these matters, and we shall not see his like again. But we can follow his development as meticulously set forth by the man himself in *Memoirs of a Su-*

*perfluous Man*. This book (whose title summons up Turgenev) is not an autobiography in the usual sense of that term. Every suggestion that he write a book about his life was rejected with annoyance—until a friend suggested "a purely literary and philosophical autobiography." Nock fell in with this notion because, as he said, "every person of any intellectual quality develops some sort of philosophy of existence; he acquires certain settled views of life and of human society; and if he would trace out the origin and course of the ideas contributory to that philosophy, he might find it an interesting venture." Thus, the *Memoirs*, "the autobiography of a mind in relation to the society in which it found itself."



The Nockian Society,  
30 South Broadway,  
Irvington, N.Y. 10533,  
offers Nock's *Memoirs* at  
a discount price of \$3.00.

Nock closes his final chapter, privacy still intact; but the attentive reader's mind has been subtly invaded, and it would be a dull fellow indeed who could deny that the hours spent with this book were not among his most memorable reading experiences. Nock discourses on education, literature, women, politics, economics, religion and death, and he does so in matchless, eighteen

carat English prose, spiked with apt quotations and laced with allusions. Nearly a lifetime of reflection had been spent on each of the topics here aired, and this book is Nock's final statement and testament. It is the book by which he will be finally judged, the one in which he himself took most satisfaction. It is a book to be enjoyed and then mastered; and as the dyer's hand is stained by the medium he works in so does the magic of the *Memoirs* work on a person's whole outlook and philosophy.

### His Life Abroad

Nock's *Freeman* has an enviable reputation in American journalism, ranked as the high water mark by many. After four glorious years it ceased publication with its issue of March 5, 1924, having bade farewell to its readership a month earlier. An item in AJN's final Miscellany column offers a rueful reflection on the contemporary civilization.

Nock notes that deep grooves are worn in the wooden counters of the change booths in the older elevated railway stations, and muses, "There seems something symbolic about them. They are in their way, a testimony to the nature of our civilization; they are our counterpart of the grooves worn in the stone steps of European cathedrals by the feet of innumerable devotees." With this parting shot he left these shores to live and work abroad for long peri-

ods during the next fifteen years. These were fruitful years, marked by his brilliant Rabelais scholarship, his classic essay on Jefferson and another on Henry George, his book on the State, *A Journal of These Days*, and numerous articles in magazines like *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, and *The American Mercury*. World War II brought him permanently back to these shores, where he lived his final years.

A month before his death he wrote to a friend, "I have been really quite ill, feeble and worthless, and have now reached the point of letting the quacks roll up their sleeves and do their worst . . . I'll keep you informed, or some one will, but I foresee I shall not be writing much at length. On his last day Lord Houghton said, 'I am going to join the majority, and you know how I always prefer the minority.' Witty fellow!" The minority lost AJN on the nineteenth of August, nineteen hundred forty five.

It is Nock's attitude toward life that chiefly interests us, the demands he put upon it, his expectations of what it had to offer him, his tactical approach as he sought to avail himself of its bounty. Open the *Memoirs*. It is a fair presumption that the quotation Nock selected for the title page of this book had a special meaning for him. We read the familiar testimony of Sir Isaac Newton: "I do not know what I may appear to

the world, but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered around me."

The seashore is broad enough to support a related analogy, having to do with the search for truth. This time imagine that the man at the water's edge is blind. He's just been told that a message of enormous importance from someone he loves is written in the sand in Braille, and that the incoming tide will soon obliterate it. There's no time to spare, so no wasted motion! Loss of vision has keyed up the man's other senses, and the heightened expectancy generated by this crisis situation pushes alertness and sensitivity still higher. But he restrains himself. He knows that if he thrusts his fingers too rudely against the sand his contact with the letters will erase them; so, he gets himself out of the way and deliberately, with the utmost delicacy, eases his hands over the sand until he establishes tactile contact with the Braille, at which point he brings all his finesse into play and lets the message seep through his fingertips.

### **Alert-Passivity**

This points to the attitude or posture of alert-passivity, of interest-affection, which some people are oc-

asionally able to bring to bear. Nock exemplified this kind of receptivity no matter what his immediate pre-occupation—writing, reading, editorial work, convivial relations. "They have helped the truth along without encumbering it with themselves," said Artemus Ward of men of his stripe. Nock was fond of this sentence, for it defined his style, and suited his temperament. Would his style have been different if Nock had been one of Sheldon's mesomorphs, inclined toward somatonia? The speculation is vain. He was what he was, and we can say only that bodily make up and chemistry did not stand in the way of his characteristic approach.

Most of our contemporaries are arrayed on the other side of the fence. They are what H. G. Wells used to refer to as "gawdsakers." Nervously apprehensive that the world is about to go to hell in a handbasket the typical Modern runs around yelling "For gawdsake let's do something!" He has wearily accepted the joyless task of straightening out the cosmos, and the first step is to improve others. The incomparable John Dewey gave us marching orders when he announced a new role for the intellect. No more for us the old delights of knowledge to be enjoyed for its own sake; mankind has come of age, having graduated "from knowledge as an esthetic enjoyment of the properties of nature regarded as a work

of divine art, to knowing as a means of secular control . . . [Nature] is now something to be modified, to be intentionally controlled."

Mr. Nock would have none of this, for he knew that a culture which denies or perverts the claims of intellect and knowledge will pay dearly for it. So, within the limits of his native reserve he took a refined delight in people and things as they really are, to be enjoyed for their own sake. He knew that joy is not only the first fruit of the spirit but the first business of the critic as well; "his affair is one only of joyful appraisal, assessment, and representation," as he put it in the essay on Artemus Ward. Nock goes on to say, "that for life to be fruitful, life must be felt as a joy; that it is by the bond of joy, not of happiness or pleasure, not of duty or responsibility, that the called and chosen spirits are kept together in this world."

Underlying an attitude such as this is a profound confidence in the cosmic process. The Universe is biased in our favor so we are entitled to enjoy the scene while nature takes its course. This is not dull passivity; it is akin to the alert-passivity a skilled horticulturalist displays as he nurses along an exotic bloom in order that the plant might become what it really is. The Reformer forgets that only God—or Nature—can make a tree . . . or a society. Society is not some entity that can be gotten at directly

to improve it; a good society is a bonus, a by-product of men and women pursuing with some measure of success the life goals appropriate to human nature. If the major social instincts and drives are not given harmonious and balanced expression the society is warped and unlovely as a result.

The social drives in Nock's catalog are five in number, and he indicts modern culture for allowing the claims of only one of them. The claims of intellect and knowledge have been disallowed; likewise the claims of beauty and poetry, religion and morals, social life and manners. Only the instinct for making money and getting on in the world has been turned loose, he charges, and a civilization mired in "economism" is the result. This is a consequence of ideas, wrong ideas, and any cure must begin by repairing our faulty thinking.

Society cannot be improved by working on the level of events; once things have gotten this far they are in the past tense. Reformers work on events, which is why the world is periodically wrecked by those who set out to save it. Talleyrand, watching one such series of events unfold, pointed to the person who had set them in motion and remarked sarcastically: "I knew that man would save the world, but I did not know he'd do it so soon!"

The only enduring reforms are

those which take place below the surface of events; that's where the future is being born. And all you can reform there is yourself—provided you start early enough and live long enough. The only thing you can do for “society,” Nock contends, is to present it with one reformed unit. Having sounded this hopeful note, what was Nock to do except declare for superfluity?

### Letting Things Alone

It is not Nock's way to make a point by means of a philosophical disquisition; his teaching method is parabolical. He let people alone and he let things alone, believing that there are forces at work in them which make for integration and growth—if we don't interfere. Interfering comes naturally, however; letting things alone is an acquired skill. A taste for this skill seeps in as we begin to understand how vast are the regions beyond conscious human control and how well things function in those realms.

Turn to the essay entitled “Snoring as a Fine Art” found in the collection bearing that title. General Kutusov commanded the Russian forces arrayed against Napoleon. No question about Kutusov's competence or his courage, but why didn't he provide some action? Why didn't he engage the French army head on and give Napoleon a thorough trouncing? Why did he snore through

staff meetings? Well, Nock contends, it was because the General was playing hunches; he “sensed” what the little Corsican was going to do—and that's what Napoleon did! The French made one blunder after another—as Kutusov knew they would—and virtually engineered their own defeat.

The point is that some people have the ability to quiet the conscious intellect and let other parts of the mind supply guidance. Nock is more nearly on his own ground when he cites the instance of Wordsworth. “Wordsworth unquestionably had something; and when he was content to leave that something in charge of his poetical operations—when he resolutely bottled up the conscious and intellectual Wordsworth, and corked it down—he was a truly great poet. When he summoned up the conscious Wordsworth, however, and put it in charge, as unfortunately he often did, the conscious Wordsworth was such a dreadful old foo-foo that the poetry churned out under its direction was simply awful.”

Nock does not disparage the intellect and the “knowing” peculiar to it when he writes: “Socrates knew nothing, and was proud of it. He carried the magnificent art of Not-Knowing to the legal limit, and oh, my dear friend, what an incomparably great and splendid art that is!”

It has been pointed out by Michael Polanyi and others that there is a

“tacit dimension” in all knowledge, that in any epistemological situation we actually know more than we are consciously aware of. A great diagnostician examines a patient and, in addition to observing specific symptoms, takes in the person as a whole before offering his conclusion. After the conscious intellect has done its job you work from the “gut,” the place where you store “useless” knowledge.

### **Acquiring Vast Knowledge— and then Forgetting It**

The essay entitled “The Value of Useless Knowledge,” found in the collection entitled *Free Speech and Plain Language*, draws a sharp distinction between Pedantry and Culture. “The pedant’s learning remains too long on the surface of his mind; it confuses and distorts succeeding impressions, thus aiding him only to give himself a conventional account of things, rather than leaving his consciousness free to penetrate as close as possible to their reality, to see them as they actually are . . . Culture’s methods,” on the other hand, “are those of exercising the consciousness in a free and disinterested play over any object presented to it.” And this, Nock affirms, “Means acquiring a vast deal of useless knowledge, and then forgetting it.”

Nock is talking about residual knowledge, so thoroughly known that

we do not need to attend to it; it attends to us. Analogously, years of training have educated a pianist’s fingers to the point where, if he tried to direct them individually over the keyboard, they’d rebel and refuse to play even the simplest melody. It is not to diminish the role of the conscious intellect to point out that there is layer upon layer of mind beyond the intellect, and that for some purposes the intellect must be stilled if we would avail ourselves of this pool of “useless knowledge.” When this thought finally sinks in the Social Planner with his “rational controls” will be an extinct breed. Adam Smith’s Invisible Hand can be trusted, the market works, there’s coherence in the nature of things and its wisdom is put at the service of those willing to cooperate with it.

An essay in *Snoring* invokes the court jester to illustrate the tactic. The jester, because of his outlandish appearance and his wry humor, could say things to the king which would cost the court philosopher his head. Today’s counterpart of the fool is the cartoonist and the witty newspaper paragrapher. Nock says he gets more sound sense out of these men than from the editorial writers, for the best of them have “an intuitive sense of the plain natural truth of things,” and they deliver it up to us in a mode we can accept. “They arouse no animosities, alarm no pride of opinion, nor do they seek to beat a person off

his chosen ground—under their influence his ground imperceptibly changes with him.”

Suzanne LaFollette was the editor of *The New Freeman*, which began publication with the issue of March 15, 1930, and ran for a little more than a year. Nock contributed a column called “Miscellany,” using the pseudonym Journeyman. These vagrant paragraphs were later collected and published as *The Book of Journeyman*. Nock viewed contemporary American culture with a critical eye, finding little to like in it. He referred to it as an idea-less world. Education, music, manners, religion, business, politics—his railery played over them all. He surveyed Europe and reflected ruefully that everything about it he admired came out of a philosophy at variance with his own. Besides sound theory,

he muses, you have to have the right kind of people to work it, and where are you going to get 'em? We look for a new formula when what is needed is a new vision of the human person, his powers and his potential.

In the course of this survey we've picked up only a few bits and pieces as we've skirted the shore of the main body of Nock material; the next step has to be total immersion. He's to be read, mainly because he's fun to read; even when he's wrong he's delightful. Most of the time he is right, I believe; his judgments are sound. And the spirit and temper which pervade his pages gently nag at the reader until he agrees that “educate” is not a transitive verb. The only education is self-education and Albert Jay Nock has already blazed that trail. ☉

THERE IS NO social engineering that can radically renovate a civilization and change its character, and at the same time keep it going, for civilization is an affair of the human spirit, and the direction of the human spirit cannot be reset by means that are, after all, mechanical. The best thing is to follow the order of nature, and let a moribund civilization simply rot away, and indulge what hope one can that it will be followed by one that is better. This is the course that nature will take with such a civilization anyway, in spite of anything we do or do not do. Revolts, revolutions, dictatorships, experiments and innovations in political practice, all merely mess up this process and make it a sadder and sorer business than it need be. They are only so much machinery, and machinery will not express anything beyond the intentions and character of those who run it.

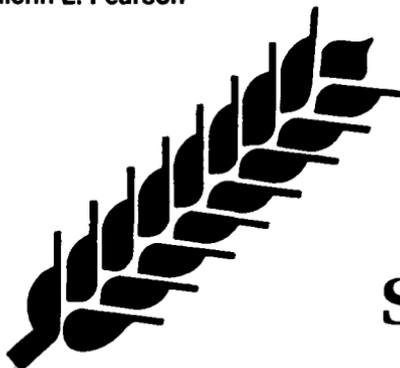
IDEAS ON



LIBERTY

ALBERT J. NOCK, *A Journal of Forgotten Days*

Glenn L. Pearson



# Socialism Eats the Seed Grain

ONE of the moral tragedies of socialism is that its economics is not built on savings, but on consumption. And this, also, is one of the main reasons it always has failed and always will fail. Economic failure is tragic because it means deprivation that can disrupt human plans and go even so far as to take human lives. In fact, starvation is a common aspect of life in countries where some type or another of socialism has been in operation long enough to have dissipated whatever wealth had accumulated prior to the socialist takeover. In those countries where poverty was already present when socialism was introduced, such as in some post-World War II African nations, star-

vation began immediately. Of course, starvation of the body is not as great a tragedy as starvation of the soul, if you believe in a soul. The materialistic socialists, who theoretically believe only in this life, should be especially offended by starvation—the ultimate indignity if there is no soul.

Some will point to Russia and China as examples of socialist countries which have accumulated capital and passed the starvation point. But those who do so are very uninformed about how much capital was already there. Perhaps they do not know about how much outside help Russia and China always have received by fair means and foul. Also, they must not know about how much free enterprise is actually allowed in Russia and China and how important it is to their survival. And, fi-

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