

"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 sorrier 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