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THE RETURN OF THE PATRIOTS

BY ALBERT JAY NOCK

I

OUR current literature, always rich in surprises, has lately provided one that provokes comment. I refer to the sudden change of heart which some of our critics seem to have experienced towards the American scene. One hardly knows what to make of it. Ten years ago, five years, even three years ago, these critics were going very strong indeed against the defects, degradations, weaknesses, stupidities of life in America. If they found any salvage at all in our society, they did not let on. They saw a very dark future for us. The lamp had held out to burn about as long as it was going to, and had already begun to flicker. One felt that under the circumstances any thought of patriotism savoured almost of indelicacy, and that even a sneaking sentimental attachment for one's own land and people was well-nigh inadmissible.

Now, there has been no change in these circumstances in the last ten years, as far as any one can see. Our civilization

bears precisely the same general character that it bore ten years ago, its ideals are precisely the same, its institutional, social, and cultural expressions are on precisely the same general level. Everything that these critics found objectionable still remains in full force. There has been no effective growth of public opinion against the imperfections that they dwelt on. If the future that these imperfections portended looked dark ten years ago, or five, or three, it looks just as dark now. If our life was then so unsatisfactory that the best reason and spirit of man had no choice but to pronounce it intolerable, that verdict must still hold.

Yet curiously, though nothing has changed an iota, some of the most articulate and convincing among our critics seem no longer to see these matters in the old light. They still admit that our society is imperfect, but whereas before they were depressed about it, they now regard its imperfections with a gladsome hope, and a faith amounting to certainty. One now infers from their writings—at least it is the only inference I can make—that they think if we merely keep on following our noses, pushing ahead with vigour and congratulating ourselves at the top of our voices on our progress, these imperfections will somehow slough off without our doing anything in particular about them, and leave us as a city set on a hill, a pattern and example unto all peoples, nations, and languages. We may not know where we are going, but we are on our way. To illustrate this remarkable change of heart, or change of front, I recall that one of these critics, only two or three years ago, published this desponding sentence:

I am wondering, as a personal but practical question, just how and where a man of moderate means who prefers simple living, simple pleasures, and the things of the mind, is going to be able to live any longer in his native country.

This is straightforward, plain, unequivocal, leaving no doubt of what was in the writer's mind. But the same person who wrote this published a book last year, a very good one,

a best seller of 1931, out of which I can make nothing but a continuous and affectionate panegyric on the "American Dream." It is the story of a people who, in spite of every appearance to the contrary, have built up a splendid nation, full of strength, hope, and promise, and apparently also—here is the strange thing—full of interest for the intelligent and cultivated citizen. The author ends his book with this rhapsody, a quotation from a woman writer, an adopted citizen whose enthusiasm for America—as is sometimes the way with adopted citizens—has always been notoriously indiscriminate and excessive:

It is not I that belong to the past, but the past that belongs to me. America is the youngest of the nations and inherits all that went before in history. And I am the youngest of America's children, and into my hands is given all her priceless heritage, to the last white star espied through the telescope, to the last great thought of the philosopher. Mine is the whole majestic past and mine is the shining future.

Would such a civilization as this be interesting? Rather. It would be the most interesting thing in the world. There ought not to be any trouble about living almost anywhere in a country like that. One would think it was made expressly for just such a person as this author declared himself only so short a time ago. "A man of moderate means, who prefers simple living, simple pleasures and the things of the mind"—why, he would find it the very pick of the earth. What one cannot get through one's head, however, is how it happens that this critic did not see the value of America's priceless heritage three years ago; also that he did not see the individual interest accruing to the citizen privileged to live here and look at the last white star through the telescope, and clip coupons on the majestic past and the shining future. If all this gorgeousness were visible three years ago, how could a critic not have noticed it, how could he have helped noticing it? Even a dead critic would notice a display like that.

Again, the ablest and wisest among the muckrakers of twenty years ago has lately published his autobiography, which is also (I think) a best seller, and deservedly, for it is more than a good book, it is a great book, a great study of fundamentals in our public life. If I had on my hands a foreigner who wished to "understand America," this is the first of three books that I should give him for preliminary study, the other two being "The Education of Henry Adams" and Mr. Charles A. Beard's "Rise of American Civilization." The last few pages of this book, however, are devoted to a loose and hopeful patriotic rhapsodizing that the whole tenor of the book itself shows to be ludicrously devoid of foundation. This does not harm the book, because to a person of any literary experience its naïve sincerity is as manifest as its lack of logical continuity with all that goes before it; yet one is bound to wonder what the vagrant impulse was that made the author end his book in that way.

Again, the puzzled reader must ask himself in some dismay whether Saul is also among the prophets, when he considers the case of one of our younger novelists and a perennial best seller, who made his vogue by the fearful castigations that he has given our society and its culture in book after book for twelve years. This author, on a public occasion not long ago, speaking of our newer crop of writers, came out with this:

I salute them all with joy as being not yet too far removed from their unconquerable determination to give to the America that has mountains and endless prairies, enormous cities and lost farm cabins, billions of money and tons of faith, the America that is as strange as Russia and as complex as China, a literature worthy of her vastness.

This rhetoric is all very fine, but what about it when brought down into the realm of fact and common sense? What is there to justify taking this tone towards our society at present that did not exist twelve years ago? Clearly, nothing. Well, then, if this tone were justifiable twelve

years ago, it seems fair to ask why this novelist has only now begun to take it.

II

There are other signs, some positive and some negative, that we soon may find ourselves in for another era of pseudo-patriotic flatulence like that which characterized the decades preceding and following the Civil War; and there are signs, even more disturbing, that this era may also resemble those decades in an unreasoning glorification of the Average American Man. Among the positive signs is one that turned up not long ago in the newspapers when James McNeill died in involuntary exile on the French Riviera. James McNeill was an oil magnate who was mixed up in the Teapot Dome affair, and left the country to escape investigation. When he died, the newspapers came out with editorial reflections that might have been written by Edward Eggleston or Edward Everett Hale. They might have been lifted almost bodily out of one of those fine old jingo-nationalistic novels called "A Man without a Country" and "Philip Nolan's Friends; or Show Your Passports." Poor McNeill had shown the white feather; he had skipped. Now he was dead, a man without a country. Unwept, unhonoured, unsung, he had perished; blind, remorseful, broken-hearted, agonized by the thought that never again might he tread the soil of his dear native land, our great and glorious republic. All this was an interesting throwback, not only in style but in spirit, to the popular literature of what Mr. Lewis Mumford calls the Brown Decades.

Among the negative signs is Mr. Elmer Rice's play called "The Left Bank," recently put on in New York. Its theme, broadly, is that whereas our voluntary expatriates—at least the young and arty among them—have until recently been loudly vocal, they are now silent. Only a little while ago they were denouncing the United States as a land of money-grubbing, standardization, exploitation, and crass vulgarity. They ostentatiously shook off its dust from their feet, and

repaired to the Left Bank, where things were livelier and inspiration free for all. Now they are no longer heard from. Where are they? Why have they ceased to speak up? Can it be that they are home again and have settled down in a chastened reconciliation? Have they discovered that America isn't so dead bad after all? Are they now whispering among themselves that Old Lady Columbia may be pretty raw and spotty, and she may wobble a lot and every now and then blunder like hell, but, dammit, she's ours, and we're here to say she's the best in the world, God bless her!—just give her a little time and she'll make all the rest of creation look like a protested draft.

Mr. Simeon Strunsky has showed an uncanny sense of the psychological moment to bring out his book called "The Rediscovery of Jones." Mr. Strunsky has long been known as a mighty champion of the social mean, a Philistine of Gath, with six fingers on every hand and on every foot six toes, four-and-twenty in number; and the staff of his spear is like a weaver's beam. He is probably our most conspicuous exponent of the sterling virtues that reside in mediocrity, the most stoutly and philosophically *bürgerlich* of our bourgeois. As a writer for the New York Times he would be all this officially, of course, but there can be no doubt that he is so by conviction as well; he is the right man in the right place. He has now come out with a strong defense of Jones, the typical American who turns out to be a sort of shoe-string relative of our old friend Mr. Babbitt. Perhaps one should put it that Mr. Strunsky presents Jones as the actual type, of which, in his view, Babbitt is a carefully offensive caricature. Our intellectuals have derided Jones, it seems, without taking the trouble to understand him. Mr. Strunsky now proposes that Jones shall have his day in court and be rehabilitated, and he makes out an excellent case for his client, showing him to be in no respect worse or worse off than the typical *Bürger* of other lands, and in most respects better.

This is all very well, though mostly gratuitous, for one doubts that Jones's good qualities have ever been seriously obscured by any smoke-screen of caricature or contumely. Mr. Strunsky himself says that "the great mass of simple people" are not easily led astray in their estimates of character, which is very true. In Mr. Strunsky's words, they "are not as susceptible as their betters to current fads, fashions, formulas, discoveries and revelations; they obstinately see what they see and hear what they hear." I have often thought that Main Street's own estimate of Babbitt would be likely to hit much nearer the truth about him than the estimate of an outsider. I was born and bred on Main Street myself, so it is natural that I should think so, and perhaps I am wrong. Certainly, however, I have the right to say that during my residence on Main Street I never ran across any one who struck me as in the least like Babbitt; that is, like him all the time. Some of us, myself included, were like him in some respects some of the time; but not much, really, and not often, and when we were like him we were generally aware of it and none too proud of the resemblance. So I doubt that Jones needs Mr. Strunsky's attorneyship to set him square either with the neighbours or with the world. The neighbours took Jones's measure long ago, and the world is not too captious about accepting him at his face value.

But Mr. Strunsky ends his book with a most dreadful forecast. He says that "a survey of the American scene today demands on the part of the observer a new mobilization of courage."

In the period of insurgency just behind us it required no courage at all to say the most terrifying things about Jones. Everybody was doing it; that is to say, everybody who was anybody. . . . The present hour demands the courage to assert that the Fourth of July orator with his beetling brow and his unterrified cowlick . . . was, and is, in essence right . . . that the clichés, catchwords, stencils, "dope" of the Jefferson Bricks, the Elijah Pograms, the

General Cyrus Chokes, had in them, and still have, the sturdy nucleus of truth. . . . In the most unexpected quarters, in the erstwhile citadels of challenge and revolution and devastation, voices are being raised to suggest that perhaps in this respect and in that respect we did not quite do justice to the United States. In a little while these tentative exploratory apologies may have swelled to full choruses of praise.

III

One has, indeed, an uneasy apprehension that just this may happen; that a license of indiscriminate negation will be followed by a license of indiscriminate affirmation, and nothing more. The newer patriotism will be modelled on the old; it will be turgid, superficial, unintelligent, truculent. Forty years ago, no one saw irony in the practice of reading the Declaration of Independence every Fourth of July to people who knew all about the enormities of the Reconstruction period. The Republican party took "Our Glorious Union" as its watchword for conducting the most flagitious enterprises against the public welfare, in the face of a people who knew just what the party was doing and apparently felt no sense of incongruity. Congressmen brayed about our matchless Constitution before audiences who had lived through the whole régime of Grant-Belknap—Crédit Mobilier — Cooke-Gould-Fisk — Northern Pacific — audiences who had seen Samuel J. Tilden counted out of the Presidency and had felt all the creepy horrors of Black Friday. Everybody glorified his country, right or wrong, and except for an occasional derelict like Henry Adams here and there, everybody was a patriotic American, itching to tell the world all about it. Such was standard American patriotism at the end of the Brown Decades, say ten years after the Civil War. It was identical with the patriotism that Dickens had discovered and assessed at its true value on his visits here, the patriotism of Jefferson Brick, of Colonel Diver, of the Honourable Elijah Pogram, member of

Congress—the patriotism, in short, of as fine a set of scoundrels as ever drew breath in any quarter of the globe.

Yet in their innocence, the Babbitt and Jones of the Brown Decades were quite as worthy persons as their spiritual posterity of today. They were mere incurious echoes. The schoolboys who forty years ago declaimed Webster's reply to Hayne, and who pored over the agitating story of Philip Nolan in the pages of the old Scribner's Magazine, absorbed this Old Hickory spirit in all innocence. They felt an innocent incurious pride in it as they grew up and heard the Declaration read, and listened while some miserable opportunist praised the Constitution in his campaign for the late Elijah Pogram's seat in Congress. In all sincerity they voted to keep the party of Our Glorious Union in power through one administration after another. There seems to have been something wrong with Babbitt and Jones in those days, yet not with their moral integrity; what they had grown up to believe, they believed, or at least they believed they believed it, and so were quite sincere. Nor perhaps was there much wrong with them in respect of such complaints as our sociologists of the past decade might file against them; Mr. Strunsky might have taken up the cudgels for them as effectively as he does for their posterity today. Yet there seems to have been a little something askew with them, something that both the sociologists and Mr. Strunsky apparently have missed.

The Brown Decades gave place to the Gilded Age, which in turn ushered in the Gay Nineties. The social kaleidoscope revealed Ward McAllister and his Four Hundred in their futile stand against the irruption of crude Western money that broke on New York; it revealed Mrs. Bradley-Martin's ball and Jennie Jerome's wedding, and Anna Gould's trousseau and the Count de Castellane's pedigree. But meanwhile the old patriotism—the patriotism of Diver, Pogram, and Jefferson Brick—went strong. We were the coming people, and in all the world there was no match for

us. The Tyrant and the Despot of effete Europe drew their every breath in uneasy dread of America's indisputable superiority in virtue and valor—had not President Cleveland proved it by his Venezuela message? Freedom, Equality, Democracy, and the crescent glories of Republican Institutions—all these were ours, and by them we took our stand, unconquerable and unafraid.

Then came the Spanish War, and the old patriotism sagged a bit. Embalmed beef, Carnegie armor-plate, and yellow fever helped to take the shine off it, but the whole war-venture was hard to justify; it seemed a scurvy affair, look at it as you would. At this point a little light broke in even on Jones and Babbitt; even to them the old orthodox doctrine seemed to have blow-holes in it, and they were not so sure. Then came the muckraking period, and the light brightened; these were the days of Altgeld, Johnson, Golden Rule Jones, Pingree, and Gaynor in our public life. By 1912 a good many people had taken stock of our patriotic doctrine and decided that it needed revising; it could do with a little less wind and water, and a little more substance. Jones and Babbitt did not object, and even showed themselves somewhat impressed; and for two or three years there were some hopeful signs. Then came the European War and its revelations, about which perhaps the less said, the better. Then the Jazz-and-Paper Decade; then the great squeeze of 1929, followed by a two-year season of repentance; and now, apparently, the best our leaders of thought can do by way of bracer against humiliation and discouragement is to rub up the fustian of Elijah Pogram and the Brown Decades, and pass it out again.

IV

Well, no doubt, this is the easiest way. It is much easier to ladle out this sort of treacle and get Jones to swallow it than it is to find out what really ails Jones and his civilization, and get him interested in that. Yet there seems an

odor of shabbiness about it; it is the kind of thing, one might think, that one would just a little rather not do. Jones may now sit at home evenings and be inspired by the American Dream, and be assured that Jefferson Brick and Elijah Pogram were right and that Dickens was full of bile and prunes, and under this dosage he may go to bed as happy and groggy and satisfied as if he had had it straight from the late Coué or out of a demijohn. This is what his forbears did in the Brown Decades, and no doubt they were happy, after a fashion, in their inert romanticism. Still, the fact is writ large in our history that as long as Jones remained thus happily inert, things went from bad to worse, both with him and with the country; and the inference is that to encourage Jones in this attitude was—and is—to use him most unscrupulously.

What really ails Jones is not what the sociologists say. What ails him is that he asks too little of life. He makes too ridiculously few and slight demands on his civilization. Mr. Strunsky presents Jones as an easy-going fellow, and praises his American diffidence in the presence of his self-appointed monitors, his "American good nature and open-mindedness." But that is just the trouble with him. He is too diffident, too easy-going and good-natured, and his mind is open at both ends, so that a great many things run out that it would be to his advantage to detain and ponder over. Chief among these is the importunate suggestion which his civilization holds up to him at every turn—if he could only see it—that he is not getting anything like his money's worth out of life, and that he ought to wake up and raise the devil with a society that denies him more.

Let us consider one or two of the many points at which Jones is gouged. First, the society around him doggedly refuses to regard him as a spiritual being; it keeps insisting that he not only can, but should, live by *things* alone—things that are manufactured, bought, and sold. It insists that his life should be made up exclusively of things, and that with-

out an ever-increasing abundance of things and an ever-increasing appetite for more things, his life would be just no life at all. Hence he should be always doing, in order to be always getting; every little bit added to what he's got makes just a little bit more; and by continuous implication, the effort to *be* or *become*—to become something essentially different from his present self—is a diversion of energy from the main business of life, and should be discouraged.

Second, the whole practical conduct of Jones's civilization is adjusted to the absolute-minimum average. It is everywhere carefully graded to the lowest common denominator. Education, for instance, contemplates only that symbol of mediocrity, "the average student." The literature that Jones reads, the plays he sees, the amusements he takes part in, the social manners he adopts—these aim only at the standard set by the lowest common denominator of intelligence, taste, and character. Thus our society offers Jones no incentive whatever to rise above the level of these average capacities, no matter what his own capacities may be; in fact, it puts upon him a continuous repression and discouragement if ever he shows signs of attempting a breach with normalcy by living up to the full measure of his own capacity in any respect but that of doing and getting.

Third, in consequence of the foregoing, the leading characteristic of Jones's civilization is its hardness, and the penalty that nature puts upon hardness is hideousness. There is nothing of the soft play of life in Jones's society; the sky over the poor fellow's head is of iron and brass. When he seeks surcease from doing and getting, he has only the choice of putting himself at the mercy of raw sensation or of feeling himself uncomfortably alone in the world. He is deprived of the happy sense of co-operation with his fellows except as he finds it in the workaday business of doing and getting, and in such recreations as are addressed directly to pure sensation. Hence in work and play he must live always from a very shallow depth of being; his vocations and

avocations, his newspapers, machines, games, domestic and social surroundings, all attest this. They reflect a life that is overspread with the curse of hardness, and therefore overspread with an immense tedium, an immense ennui. Years ago Stendhal, looking over the earlier Jones and Babbitt, remarked that "one is disposed to say that the source of sensibility is dried up in this people. They are just, they are reasonable, but they are essentially not happy." A glance at the later Jones and Babbitt shows that the true line of social criticism begins here, with this observation of Stendhal, and not with the little matters to which the sociologists and Mr. Strunsky give their attention.

For, really, one can not get much worked up over the superficial untowardnesses which engage the sociological mind. In the face of a constitutional disorder, one takes pustules as a matter of course. Middletown is a scandalous place, no doubt; political corruption, racketeering and hijacking are bad, and so are lynchings. Jones's newspapers are contemptible, his radio programs mostly odious. Certainly Prohibition is a disgusting régime; certainly industrial exploitation is carried to abominable lengths. It is monstrous and shocking that interested persons should be able to find it worth their while to spend nine million dollars to elect some ignorant and servile nincompoop to the Presidency — why, it cost only twenty-five thousand dollars to elect old Jim Buchanan, who was, at that, a man of ability and a gentleman, far and away ahead of any Presidential timber in our present public life. All these things are bad, certainly they are bad, but the question, after all, is, What else can you expect? Obviously nothing else can be expected until our society transforms itself; and until Jones transforms himself and demands his natural rights, this will never happen.

V

Probably Jones will take the easiest way with the newer patriotism, as he did with the earlier. Probably he will ac-

cept the American Dream and all the rest of it, as convenient to believe; after all, he has a good deal on his mind, what with a business to run, a wife to support, a lot of gadgets to take up his spare time, bridge to play, a car, a radio—yes, probably the American Dream will do well enough to justify the spiritual destitution in which he spends his life. How animating it would be, though, if instead of this, Jones should suddenly say to the fuglemen of the newer patriotism, “Before I take stock in that high-pressure Americanism of yours, I will have to be shown. Society must take a different tone towards me. I am sick of being treated as if work and money, grub and gadgets, were all there is to life. I am something more than a well-conditioned animal. Take notice, I was created in the image of God, by thunder, a spiritual being, and before I believe what you say, America has got to show some discernment and respect for the things of the spirit—not patronage, you understand, but deep and humble respect. I don’t know so much about those things myself, but I have a right to know them better and to make them mine, and say what you please, a society that wet-blankets me out of that right is simply not a civilized society. So put that in your pipe and smoke it.”

If Jones should transform himself to the point of firing off a few broadsides like that, our society would not be long about transforming itself and finding itself several steps nearer the realization of an American dream that is really worth dreaming. The ghost of Stendhal would take a look at Jones’s face, and decide that the “source of sensibility,” the well-spring of human happiness, so long dried up, had begun to flow in a surprising fashion. But, for the reasons given, this is too much to expect of Jones; he is too cluttered and dishevelled. The most that can be expected of him now—and in his circumstances it is a great deal, it is enough—is that as he sits by his fireside and reads our newer perfectionist-patriotic literature, he will recall Governor Smith’s shrewd atticism, and gently murmur, “*Boloney!*”