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1. The Civilized Mind

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The ancient Alexandrians enjoyed making lists of The Seven Sages, selecting wise men regarded as the most important thinkers of the ancient world. Perhaps they did it in the spirit of sports fans today, imagining all-star teams or hall-of-fame heroes. The ancient lists varied, but some names—notably Solon and Thales—appeared on virtually all of them. In our time, the reputation of Benjamin Nelson has a way of inspiring similar lists. Mention his name in some academic circles, or among some publishers and editors, and you will hear him exalted and compared with the great. One social scientist refers to him as one of the four greatest intellects of his time. An anthropologist says that Nelson "was one of the most important generative minds of the twentieth century." Talcott Parsons wrote in a letter to Marie Coleman Nelson, "The more I think about his work and my association with him, the more I feel that Ben was one of the notable figures in his generation. He certainly contributed greatly to the enrichment of my professional life over a considerable period of years. I shall always treasure the memory of my association with him." Another prominent sociologist and a well-known philosopher both observed that Nelson was the only person they knew who could have been another Durkheim or Weber. A distinguished historian writes, "his influence was so comprehensive and continuous that it seems to be alive and potently operating quite apart from the personal destiny of its subject."

Nelson's personal influence remains no less important than his intellectual stature. He never wanted a pedestal, but insisted on standing in the midst of us. We all knew him as "Ben." Our feelings about him continued to mix intimate friendship with the highest respect for the breadth and depth of his learning and for the power of his mind. We took his presence for granted as long as he stayed part of our familiar, everyday experience. Yet, we felt his greatness and knew him as a paradigm for the life of the mind.
Ben stays with many of us in the memory of walks and talks that were transformed by the power of his historical imagination. To walk with Ben was to step into a timeless time of everywhen and to share his vision of “the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous and the noncontemporaneity of the contemporaneous.” The business of life was a series of interruptions in a conversation started years ago. If he made a visit to our city and we met him at the airport, between the moment we picked up his luggage and the time we reached the parking lot, we were deep in the 14th century.

Strolling with him in the streets of New York or Chicago or in Harvard Square changed our experience of urban life, making us perceive in a new way the rhythm and flow of the city. Sometimes, after a late seminar and extended conversation at the New School for Social Research, on the uptown bus to his old apartment in the upper west side of Manhattan, he would show us that late at night the bus changed into a droshky plunging through the streets. Under his gaze, the faces of the passengers—few at that hour—transformed into characters out of Dostoevsky. If we rode the subway with him in the morning, he would buy the New York Times, and we might hear a lecture on the meaning and history of “news.” Ben cherished but transcended his early experience as a journalist. For him, information about recent events published in the morning paper was never “news” in the sense of a superficial, ephemeral report. He was fond of the word “tidings,” which is larger than “news.” Information about things that occur in time. Tidings are manifestations, reflecting the deeper rhythms of human thought and action. As a reader of newspapers, Ben remained to the end of his days, an “Abelard of the New York Times”—a distinction, we shall see, conferred early in his career.

For some of us, he stood for what he called “Free Social Science”; for others, intellectual and cultural history; for still others, the unity of the sciences. These interests only begin to name what he represents: medieval history; social theory; the culture of economic institutions; the interrelationships of literature, drama, and social life; psychoanalysis and culture; the significance of Weber, Durkheim, and Freud; the origins of the modern world; comparative studies of many kinds: religions, theologies, sciences, civilization patterns, structures of consciousness. . . . His work teems with perspectives and “fields,” but identifying them does not do justice to the unities in his writing. In his last years, he worked toward establishing foundations for the independent study of comparative civilizations, and also toward transforming sociology through a perspective he drew from the histories of civilizations.

His authorship as a whole is beginning to attract attention in Europe as well as in the United States. In 1977, the year he died, Der Ursprung der
**THE CIVILIZED MIND**


Over a wide range of scholarship, his influence continues to manifest itself, as three recent examples from sociology, philosophy, and literature will show. Guenther Roth and Wolfgang Schluchter dedicate their book on Max Weber to the memory of Benjamin Nelson. Alan Donagan writes in the preface to his book on moral theory that “Benjamin N. Nelson, then a colleague at Minnesota, introduced me to moral theology and to the history of casuistry in Christianity.” And in an extensive literary essay on *The Merchant of Venice*, Marc Shell acknowledges his debt to Nelson’s book, *The Idea of Usury*.1

Many thinkers change and grow by shedding their previous interests, but Nelson did not live that way. On the contrary, he deepened, widened, and enriched his intellectual matrix to expand the meaning and value of his early thoughts. A sketch of his academic biography reveals the steady development of early interests within an evolving cognitive framework.

Born in New York City in 1911, he was graduated from De Witt Clinton High School in 1927 and entered City College, where he did no distinguished work until his junior year. Public speaking stands out as his best field—until the “eleventh hour,” when he discovered intellectual history in his senior year. Until then, he put all his energies into public speaking and into student journalism. The CCNY yearbook reveals him deeply involved in the work of the newspaper all of his college years. In addition, he served as a student correspondent for the *New York Times*, covering topics of religion and taking a special interest in sermons. He visited churches throughout the city, and especially liked to hear Roman Catholic sermons. He managed the varsity debating team, served on the student council, helped to organize social events such as “class night,” enjoyed a reputation as an excellent dancer, and was voted the “most sophisticated” member of the senior class. He joined his friends in memorable protests against a notoriously reactionary college administration.

In his junior year, he studied philosophy, enrolling in two classes with Morris Cohen, but never completed the work for those courses. In the autobiographical essay included as Number 3 in this volume, Nelson tells us that Cohen’s philosophy of law course initiated the “first decisive steps” on his journey of the mind. Still, Taylor Stoehr—the biographer and editor of Paul Goodman, who has studied lives and works of Goodman’s circle of friends—detects another inspiration as well. In the fall of 1930, Ben enrolled in the first history class to excite him: a serious
course in intellectual history offered by Walther Brandt, called History of the Renaissance, which included Paul Goodman and Lewis Feuer as fellow students. He helped to reestablish a moribund organization called "Phrenocosmia," which turned into a small group of serious undergraduates who read philosophical papers to one another. Microcosm, the college yearbook, which assigned a motto to each member of the graduating class, named Benjamin Nelson: "Abelard—of the New York Times." As we have already observed, even at the end of his life the epithet remained wise and appropriate.

He left City College already at work on the subject of usury, suggested, he tells us, by a chapter in W. J. Ashley's work on economic history. He went to Columbia to study history, where he completed both graduate degrees with both the thesis and the dissertation exploring medieval attitudes toward usury, campaigns against it, and programs of restitution for ill-gotten gains from usury. He read everything, ferreted out the most inaccessible sources, collected arcane documents such as original medieval bills of lading, and made himself a specialist—without doubt one of the world's leading authorities on the history of usury. His Ph.D. dissertation is the definitive work on restitution for usury in the Middle Ages, but it is immense, remaining unpublished in the Columbia University archives. Charles Trinkaus, an historian and an old friend of his, believes that "Ben's finest scholarship was contained in those typescript volumes." Since Columbia will not grant a doctoral degree unless the dissertation is published, Ben decided to publish a shorter book—but it turned out to be another study: not on the restitution for usury, but The Idea of Usury. This volume, published in 1949, shows that he was not merely a specialist, but a thinker for whom the putative boundaries of the social sciences were not barriers. He remained a historian, giving contextual explanations, yet went beyond history by finding explanations for the context that illuminated the subject. In the epilogue to The Idea of Usury, he tells us how, "at the eleventh hour," the larger framework grew clear in his mind.

Though he entered graduate school in 1931, Nelson's first publication waited until 1944, and the first work on a subject beyond usury did not appear until 1951. Where was Ben during this latency period? His old friends would probably reply, "In the stacks."

But he loved to be interrupted—to be fetched out of the library stacks for coffee and conversation. In the 1930s, Paul Goodman, Mike Liben, and Gene Thumin would seek him out regularly, and together they made up the core of a "Saturday night club," a durable group ranging from a dozen to sixty people, who assembled every week for serious discussion and for relaxation. Ben still loved to dance. He also wrote a music column. On Sundays, right through the middle of the 1930s, Ben and a few friends...
could often be found in the Goodman household, where Alice, Paul's sister, made dinner for them.

They referred to his studies as "The Brother and the Other," and Taylor Stoehr suggests that this close circle of friends was the social matrix for one of Ben's major ideas. Marie Coleman Nelson calls attention to the centrality of the fraternal relationships in Ben's family as well, and the informal fraternity of his personal circle during the years at CCNY and Columbia may have helped to shape the theoretical constructs in The Idea of Usury. Not to speak of his later ideas about the historical importance of sworn bands of brothers in cities and civilizations, as well as his keen interest in comparative histories of fraternization.

His friends marvelled at the range and intensity of his scholarly interests. Meyer Reinhold, the classical historian, recalls one occasion when a group of friends at Columbia were having lunch, expecting Ben to join them, and he came in excited and breathless. He explained his late arrival by saying, "I could not put down the new History of Amsterdam that just came into the library. It's a splendid work." Someone asked if it were a brief monograph, and Ben replied casually, "No. It's in twenty volumes."

Nelson received the M.A. in 1933 and the Ph.D. in 1944, both from Columbia University and both in history. From 1935 to 1944 he worked as a part-time history instructor in CCNY and in other municipal colleges. In 1945 he married Eleanor Rackow, and left New York for an appointment as Assistant Professor of History and Social Sciences in the College of the University of Chicago, where he taught for three years in the general social science program. In 1948 he moved to Minneapolis to work as Co-chairman of the interdisciplinary Social Science Program and as chairman of the European Heritage Sequence in the Humanities Program at the University of Minnesota. The years at Chicago and Minnesota were the middle epoch of his intellectual life. No longer identified as a specialist in the history of usury, he distinguished himself as a "free social scientist" who made history the matrix of generalizations. In the period 1950–54, three crucial works appeared: "The Moralities of Thought and the Logics of Action"; "The Future of Illusions"; and the interdisciplinary textbook, Personality—Work—Community, put together by Donald Calhoun, Arthur Naftalin, Benjamin Nelson, Andreas Papandreou, and Mulford Q. Sibley, with the assistance of the junior faculty in the Social Science Program.

Sibley remained at Minnesota teaching political theory; Calhoun moved to Miami, where he teaches sociology; Naftalin served as Mayor of Minneapolis; and in 1981 Papandreou was elected Prime Minister of Greece. Given the political, intellectual, and personality differences in this team, one marvels that they ever managed to work together, but they
organized a profound, imaginative, wide-ranging selection of readings, wrote an important original text to go with them, and administered an exciting teaching program. Junior members of the Minnesota social-science faculty shaped in that crucible, helping to assemble the book and teach the classes, testify with pleasure three decades later that working in the program turned out to be one of the most important formative experiences of their intellectual lives. David Copperman, his assistant, remembers Nelson's remarkable style of teaching. In the course on "Personality," he refused to introduce technical terms such as "Oedipus complex." Instead, he would begin a class by leaning over confidentially and, in a dramatic stage whisper, ask: "Does anyone here have a mother? And a father? . . ."

In those years at Minnesota, the campus simmered in heuristic energy. The spirit of the place conjured a community of inquirers who shared in imagination an adventure in common with the wealthy young men of ancient Athens, who had spent sleepless nights following the argument where it led, as well as with the young beggars of medieval Europe, who had lived in rags, on crusts of bread while they plundered the universities of wisdom. Nelson stood at the center of energy storms, lecturing, quarreling, debating, tirelessly persuasive, sharing his learning which seemed to have no limits. He had a way of engaging the minds of advanced graduate students from many different departments, meeting regularly, conversing with them as peers, and pursuing a subject intensely with them for months and years.

At Minnesota, he revealed the qualities that Edmund Leites memorialized almost three decades later, after Nelson's death:

He was personally difficult, but what a generous mind! He was always ready to give intellectually. In a deep way he really believed, as few do, in the community of thinkers: he felt most comfortable in that setting and did much to make it real. And there was so much to be generous about! I signal two features of his intellectual character: first, it was dialectical; he sought to find the truth in the opposing view, which would complement the truth already known. So, to historians, he spoke as a sociologist and psychologist; to sociologists, as a historian; to theologians, as a historian and sociologist; and to social scientists in general, as a theologian of sorts. To Protestants, he could speak as a Catholic, so much so that Daniel Day Williams, of Union Theological Seminary, once angrily told Ben that he ought to receive the red hat from the Pope, he had done so much for the Roman Church. Some thought he had a Jesuit formation (we who knew of his early years on Tiffany Street in the Bronx knew better). To Catholics, he could speak as a Protestant; to Christians in general, as a Jew; and to Jews, as a Christian.2
In November 1950, a symposium which Nelson later referred to as "Conflict in the Social Order" occupied everyone's attention. It generated unforgettable excitement, and for each session over a three-day period, the lecture hall filled with crowds standing in the aisles while people outside strained to get near the room. Cooperman, who was a graduate student at the time, recalls the charged atmosphere in the hall, the "white-hot attention" focused on the speakers, the hushed standing audience, the intense exchange of question and answer after the lectures. The crowd refused to leave, and when the custodians finally managed to clear them out and close the hall, throngs drifted to cafés and other places that would hold them to continue discussion far into the night. At first, the series dwelled on the events and prospects of the Cold War, but the lectures and discussions moved to larger problems in war and peace, to the great political issues, to perennial questions of philosophy, and to the histories of civilizations. Nelson presented his paper, "The Moralties of Thought and the Logics of Action."

This paper raised Nelson's interest in casuistry to a new level of generalization, beyond the subject of usury, and he never ceased exploring the relationship between "rational analysis and moral activity." The processes by which humans struggled with the predicaments of social life, and in the West the progressive rationalization in the logics of decision, he remained convinced, linked science, social science, the humanities, and the moral life. A concise article on "Casuistry" by Nelson was included in the Encyclopaedia Britannica in 1963. The last paper he ever wrote—never delivered but prepared for the conference at Freiburg—concluded with reflections on the importance of formal casuistry for Western jurisprudence and moral theology.

In the "Conflict" symposium at Minnesota, Nelson delivered another paper, subsequently published as "The Future of Illusions" by the journal, Psychoanalysis, in 1954, reprinted in the Columbia University textbook, Man in Contemporary Society, Vol. 2, and in two more anthologies afterward. In this essay, he explored some collective dreams and irrational myths, offering his "historic reveries" to warn that fantasies emerging from the psychomoral disintegration of communities, nations, and societies will continue to threaten the world with violence "until the peoples of the world manage to discover new ways of defining their expectations and scaling their values." The social delusions he traced with erudite alarm grew out of deep convulsions caused by "the evident incapacity of our society to achieve patterns of integration which artfully orchestrate the multitude of conflicting wants, needs, and interests which men and groups in the modern world have come to experience." The remaining alternatives seemed to be anomic disorder or totalitarian control. He explained:
The patterns of integration which once appeared to have afforded a tolerable measure of consensus or stability have evidently collapsed and men seek in the midst of violence to fabricate new ones. Since society cannot function without the presence of spirit, men will insist on collectively worshipping idols rather than suffer the agonies of rootlessness and despair. Where subtle and satisfying forms of organic solidarity are unavailable, men will seek to escape chaos by adopting or imposing the yoke of mechanism.

He argued that strenuous efforts were needed to discover "new ways of living without a surfeit of delusion." In East and West humans would have to "live meaningful lives, without continually embracing overmastering myths which drive them on relentlessly to the achievement of unobtainable goals." He concluded:

Humanity has no chance to endure if society will not learn in this eleventh hour to become humane—to build fit habitations for humans—that is, natural persons, neither demons nor angels, but men with all their perfections and imperfections, wedded to time but not lost to eternity.

In this paper, he suggested that inquirers might proceed in the spirit of Freud to look for the source of deeprooted delusion "in the nuclear experiences of men when they were children in the bosoms of their families." His publications in the 1950s reveal a profound, abiding interest in the writings of Sigmund Freud, and he launched a program to extend Freudian perspectives in the social sciences. After the new journal, *Psychoanalysis*, published "The Future of Illusions" in 1954, he continued writing about the work of Freud and the psychoanalytic movement, producing at least two dozen essays or reviews on the subject.

Later, the meaning of Freud changed in Nelson's writing. Instead of understanding the psyche as a compound of instinctual drives and family experiences, Nelson thought of it as an intricate synthesis of cultural, societal, and personal elements, as well as the precipitate of historical experiences. An analysis of the mind, he believed, lays bare some of the central moral dilemmas of Western civilization. He opposed invariant, universal concepts of personality, frequently arguing that "ego" was not the same in all times and places. He preferred a comparative historical perspective. He wanted to write about psyches, selves, and persons in a way that revealed their genesis within historical processes. The matrix of the family, then, remained too limited for his growing perspective. As he observed in 1965, "stereotyped applications of Freudian principles of
symbolism and metapsychology are now increasingly felt to have brought us to an impasse." Freud’s work, he believed, should be used to unravel the symbolic structures of consciousness and conscience, and to lead the way to a depth-historical phenomenology of minds in their sociocultural settings.

Nelson preferred to see individual pathologies in the larger setting of cultural malaise, and he wanted to find the structural determinants of identity crises and the social causes of anomie. The essay in which he develops a scheme for working in this manner, "Actors, Directors, Roles, Cues, Meanings, Identities" (1964) appears in On the Roads to Modernity, ed. by Huff. In that essay, he concluded:

The way forward seems to require the recovery of certain lost accents of Durkheim’s original design which had connected anomie suicide with lacks of integration within as well as among the central coordinating systems—the cultural, social, and personality systems. In this spirit we found ourselves construing cultures as dramatic designs, defensive elaborations, directive systems and symbol economies, (p. 31).

Cultures were to be understood as symbolic designs, coordinating systems that organized what to perceive, to feel, to do, to believe, to wonder at, to emulate. Alienation and anomie reigned when these frames of existence, expression, and reference went out of phase. Then rhyme and reason vanished from the world.

The first half of the 1950s was a transitional period: his first marriage ended in 1951, he moved to New York City to deal with medical problems, then taught for a year in the Contemporary Civilization program at Columbia, and returned briefly to Minnesota, where interdisciplinary social science continued perilously, under siege by the conventional departments. 1956; his 45th year, inaugurated his epoch of settled maturity—the last two decades of his life. He returned to New York permanently, taking a post that for the first time formally identified him as a sociologist, although he always retained a connection to history on the one hand and to interdisciplinary studies on the other hand. From 1956 to 1959 at Hofstra University he worked as Professor of History and Sociology, Chairman of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, as well as Chairman of the graduate program in integrated sciences. Then for the next six years: Professor of Sociology and History, and Chairman of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, State University of New York at Stony Brook. In 1966 he moved to the position he occupied until his death: Professor of Sociology and History in the Graduate
Faculty of the New School for Social Research, as well as the Director of a unit in the interdisciplinary program offering the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies.

In 1959, he married Marie Coleman, editor of the journal *Psychoanalysis*, and one of the inner circle of the National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis, an organization of medical and nonmedical psychoanalysts which had originally formed under the leadership of Theodor Reik. Their literary partnership began in 1957, when they wrote an essay on "paradigmatic psychotherapy." Ben remained an advisory editor of *Psychoanalysis*, which later acquired *The Psychoanalytic Review* and continued publication under this title. He organized a feature called "Adventures in Ideas," and edited or helped to edit a number of special issues of the journal. Altogether, he edited around ten volumes relevant to psychoanalysis or the significance of Freud, produced by *Psychoanalysis* and other publishers.

The late 1950s then found him established in the pattern of his most productive years: carrying editorial responsibilities for the journal as well as for publishers such as Meridian and Harper, illuminating the work of great writers, teaching sociology, administering academic programs, and writing extensively in a way that preserved the inherent connections of sociology, history, psychoanalysis, religion, and all the sciences that explored human thought and action. He was co-founder and, for many years, Senior Advisory Editor of the Harper Torchbooks, as well as Editor of two series of books: The Library of Religion and Culture as well as Researches in the Social, Cultural and Behavioral Sciences.

In 1958, he published his first essay explicitly on the subject of civilization, in collaboration with Charles Trinkaus. Their joint essay, originally read to the Columbia University Seminar on the Renaissance, appeared as the introduction to the Harper Torchback edition of Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. It concludes with a statement that links history with the dynamics of selfhood:

Western man has irrevocably been cast out—has cast himself out—of a childlike world of enchantment and undividedness. Since the days of his exile (or was it withdrawal?) he has been wandering the world. Wherever he goes he is readily recognized since he bears a burden for everyone to see—the burden of selfhood. The ego is at once his sign of Cain and his crown of glory.

To seek to put off this burden by whatever device is to wish to reverse the irreversible. Everyman must stumble forward through unending labyrinths without ever finding a quiet haven or a journey's end. So to devise as not to be convulsed from within or
from without by the fateful heritage of selfhood; so to invest the
ambiguous legacy as not to engender spiritual chaos or "mechanical
petrifaction"—these are the grim mandates which were once laid
upon the men of the Renaissance and which are now laid upon us
who are their heirs.

The heirs of the Renaissance received another legacy as well. In
addresses delivered around this time, Nelson urged that the multiple
crises of our time demanded a movement of renewal. Scholars, he felt,
have the special responsibility of pursuing "what the great historian
Jacob Burckhardt once ascribed to the Italian Renaissance: the rediscovery
of man, nature, and the world."

In 1962, in a brief comment on an article by Edward Grant, "Hypotheses
in Late Medieval and Early Modern Physics," written in Daedalus, Nelson
published for the first time a line of inquiry that extended to the history of
science his work on casuistry. He suggested that western religion was the
historical matrix of modern science. The pioneers were seeking new
foundations of knowledge and belief, he argued, and the basis of scientific
inquiry—including the idea of probability—did not grow out of cosmology
or physics, but developed from moral theory and philosophy. The
dialectic of moral decision had worked out rules and procedures for
testing and interpreting all kinds of knowledge and belief. "Without
exception, all the originators of modern science and philosophy were
intent on establishing (subjective) certitudes on the basis of (objective)
certainties, moral and physical as well as mathematical, and in overthrowing
the probabilist 'conjecturalism' of the learned." In 1965 and 1967 he
expanded the investigation in two essays on the origins of modern
science which appear in Part III of the volume edited by Huff. In the
1970s, the line of inquiry took its final form as a comparative differential
investigation of sciences in the context of their civilizations. Here once
again he found support in the classic studies of Max Weber but went
further to explore the work of Joseph Needham.

Ceaseless reflection on the work of Weber caused changes in Nelson's
thinking. In 1964, exactly a decade after "The Future of Illusions" first
appeared in print, he published a brief statement, "In Defense of Max
Weber," in Encounter, the first of about twenty essays he was to write
explicitly about Weber's authorship. From about this time, the spirit of
Max Weber pervaded his work. Though he never lost interest in Freud,
Weber replaced him as the writer who dominated Nelson's intellectual
life. Yet he insisted that Weber should be linked with the work of some
other significant writers: notably, the legal historian, Henry Sumner
Maine, and the French sociologists, Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss.
In the 1970s, Nelson's scholarly interests converged in working out civilization analysis, a discipline that would seek the common ground of the humanities and the social sciences in studying symbolic designs of the largest scale as active forces in their social settings.

In the spring of 1977, Nelson occupied his last academic post. He returned to Minnesota after two decades, as a Visiting Professor. In letters he reported that he "had a wonderful time in Minnesota," and that it was an occasion of "very warm reunion." Before returning to New York, he gave a public lecture on "The New Science of Civilizational Analysis: Vico, Mauss, Weber, and Today."

In the past he had often mentioned mandates and legacies from the Middle Ages and from the Renaissance. Now, in conversations with Peter Petzling, he clarified his latest interests and made suggestions we may interpret as a mandate and legacy to us.

He still spoke of great rationales and symbolic guidance systems, but wanted to inspire scholars and teams of workers to carry out research of an empirical nature—to discover how people actually do live, act, and think in the context of civilization patterns. He called the inquiry "the historical phenomenologies of experience and expression."

He had occasionally mentioned a social metaphysics of space and movement, but the notion begins to clarify and to grow more tangible. Nelson and Petzling glimpsed the beginnings of a line of inquiry. How—in the perspective of civilizations—does space get shaped and movement patterned according to symbolic guidance systems? Can the figuration of space and movement be codified and examined in their relation to rationales?

He mistrusted the abstractions of philosophical phenomenology and instead kept insisting on the historical phenomenologies of experience and expression. He felt that research of this nature would add evidence to his theoretical scheme, give substance to his program, endowing "civilizational analysis" with more currency in the academic world. Petzling felt that their conversations and the correspondence that followed were full of urgency and the sense of mission.

Ben was also excited about scholarly writing in Germany reinterpreting the life and work of Max Weber, especially the recent controversy about the erotic component—or its suppression—in Weber's thinking. The question leads to the larger issue of the role of eros in civilization. According to Petzling, the discussion raised questions about the rationales of eros and scholarship around the turn of the century in Germany and about the claims to authority of both eros and scholarship.

Ben kept wondering about the deeper meaning of the attacks on Max Weber, not only the political opposition, but the psychocultural critiques.
as well. From a civilizational perspective, he asked, what are the intellectual and emotional foundations of the revisionist movement seeking to reinterpret Weber’s life and work? The issue has large implications, suggesting the possibility of great civilizational changes in the relation between erotic experience and the life of reason.

In the 1950 “Conflict” symposium at Minnesota, Nelson talked about the dynamics of romantic love in Western civilization. The theme remained an abiding interest, and in his last heuristic effort, he was still pursuing the trail of eros in the articulation of rationales. According to Petzling’s impression of Ben’s agenda in the summer of 1977, he intended to contact social scientists in Konstanz and gather responses to Nicolas Sombart’s recent and controversial writing on the erotic dimension in Weber’s work. Then he probably intended to make an inquiry in Freiburg about some of Weber’s unpublished letters. But he never reached Freiburg.

Having delivered his ultimate lecture in Gottlieben in Switzerland, on Lake Constance, at a conference on Max Weber, he was intending to present a paper in Freiburg on Law and Tradition, but in the brief interval between conferences went to Tübingen to visit Friedrich Tenbruck.

Professor Tenbruck described Nelson’s last days in a letter to Marie Nelson, from which the following is extracted:

We met in Gottlieben, Switzerland, for a conference on Max Weber. As usual, Ben’s paper was an impressive performance. The conference kept us busy and excited about Max Weber, sometimes in the company of Talcott Parsons, Reinhard Bendix or Gunther Roth, yet we found time for more personal exchanges. . . . [When he arrived in Tübingen] we put him up in our guest apartment which he knew [from an earlier visit]. . . . Ben was in good health and a lively mood all the time. There was no indication of fatigue. . . . He felt very much at home and enjoyed himself and us. . . .

Some scholars objectify their intellectual personality and substance entirely in their publications. For Ben, his publications were a mere sample of his mind, and that is why they need to be interpreted, and not merely collected. . . . While Ben and I mostly talked very seriously about scholarly matters, our most rewarding conversations went beyond, where the vision that sustains publications reigns. In those days in September, we both had the feeling of an unreserved meeting of the minds and selves. And while we thus felt at one and were even making plans for joint work in the future, none of us had a foreboding that we would never meet again.

On September 17, Mrs. Tenbruck drove him to the station and helped him into the train to Freiburg. He died of a heart attack on the train.
Nelson’s autobiographical essay, “Systems of Spiritual Direction,” included in this volume, tells us how he understood his own spiritual direction. It also shows the connections in his personal intellectual history—linking his eras as a historian, free social scientist, and pioneer in the study of comparative civilizations. The concluding paragraph marks the direction of his last few years.

He left a large community of friends, students, and readers with lives profoundly touched by his work and his personality. Some of the contributors to this memorial volume—as well as some of its readers—will continue in the direction he marked out, advancing Nelson’s program of inquiry. Others will proceed in their own way—some perhaps in directions he never intended or approved—but grateful for his insights, leads, and stimulation.

We treasure his work as we cherished him, and his writing appears in this volume as he liked to live—in the midst of us.

His intellectual life survives as part of our minds.

NOTES