
From 'Inner Check' to 'Bank Check': Post-Babbitt Literary Criticism

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For some of his admirers, Irving Babbitt is a major political thinker; for others he is the embodiment of higher culture, an exemplary literary scholar, or the outstanding model for American humanism. In what follows I shall not attempt to develop these categories. Rather, I shall concentrate on four themes in Babbitt's writings that are relevant today to the discipline of comparative literature as well as to related disciplines for which the study of literature may be more important than is generally recognized, whether or not these themes have been reflected in recent critical texts. The first of these themes was outlined by Babbitt in the introduction to his *Democracy and Leadership*: "the economic problem will be found to run into the political problem, the political problem in turn into the philosophical problem, and the philosophical problem itself to be almost indissolubly bound up at last with the religious problem."¹ I cannot understand why Babbitt did not add to this formula "the aesthetic problem," which would have conformed to his own practice and to that of comparative literature. It may be that he doubted the legitimacy of formal aesthetics as an academic discipline, having labeled it in his *Rousseau and Romanticism* a "nightmare subject."² Next I shall emphasize high standards in education, as treated in *Literature and the American*

¹ Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Boston, 1924), 1; hereinafter referred to in the text as "DL."

² Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New York, 1919), 207; hereinafter referred to in the text as "RR."

College.³ Third, and even more crucial, is the need of standards in individual thought and behavior, which Babbitt treats in connection with his well-known concept of the “inner check” as elaborated both in *Democracy and Leadership* and *Rousseau and Romanticism*. The fourth theme particularly relevant to our times is scattered throughout Babbitt’s writings, that of viewing life in America and the West in the light of comparable relationships in Asian philosophy and experience.

In 1960 the Irving Babbitt Chair of Comparative Literature was established at Harvard University. Although there may be some debate as to whether 1960 still can be described as belonging to the modern era, the existence of this chair should in itself make it germane to inquire into the extent to which Babbitt’s principles are still pertinent. In an address accepting appointment to the chair, Harry Levin held that criticism that extends to culture in general is superior to criticism narrowly confined to literary history and that Babbitt’s thought clearly belongs to the former category, in the main designed to reflect on contemporary culture. Regarding higher education, Levin was cautiously optimistic, reporting that the trend in universities on the graduate level was away from the technical philology unrelated to the needs of contemporary culture that had been long decried by Babbitt.⁴ He perceptively praised Babbitt’s “insistence that an enlightened world view must come to terms with Asiatic thought,” an attitude even more vital now than in 1960. In connection with international relations, Levin quoted Babbitt’s warning that increased democratization among rival nations will not in itself curb “our growing unpopularity abroad,” together with his comment on domestic social problems that token philanthropies, presumably including token political reforms, are no substitute for genuine spiritual liberalization in high places (GC, 325). He refers to Babbitt’s Swedish “expositor” Folke Leander, but does not mention others, for example, in France or China, of whom he must also have been aware. Although recognizing Babbitt’s respect for the ancients, Levin drew attention to his self-description as “a modern of moderns,” as “positive,” “empirical,” and “experimental.” Despite

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prescience.*

³ Babbitt, *Literature and the American College* (Boston, 1908); hereinafter referred to in the text as “LAC.”

⁴ Levin, *Grounds for Comparison* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), 325; hereinafter referred to in the text as “GC.”

Babbitt's use of such terms, Levin interpreted his humanism as an impulse away from base nature in favor of life's spiritual dimension. Citing Babbitt's phrase borrowed from Emerson, "Law for man, and law for thing," and his advocacy of an "inner check" on desire and behavior, Levin says, "his concept of an inner check, or higher will, approximates what Protestants would call conscience, and Freudians would term the superego." Levin suggests that Babbitt's habit of meditating, derived partly from oriental sources, had at least as great an influence on his spiritual life as the concept of the inner check (GC, 338). Babbitt himself had defined the inner check in terms of Diderot's "civil war in the cave" between "a natural overexpansive will and a specifically human will to refrain." The imagination "holds the balance of power between the higher and lower nature of man" (DL, 10). Levin also discerned in Babbitt a drift toward scepticism, if not quite agnosticism, in regard to formal religion, and attributed the tendency to his humanism. As for ethical and aesthetic standards, however, Levin had no difficulty in placing Babbitt unequivocally on the conservative side. In his political opinions, Levin discovered a compromise between the extreme positions of the period. "Like most of our respectable conservatives, he thought of himself as a genuine liberal" (GC, 340).

Levin explored stridency of Babbitt's opponents.

Levin took notice of the stridency of Babbitt's contemporary opponents, explaining it as due to a separation between the profession of letters in journalism and that in the halls of learning. "Babbitt became a bugbear for the bohemians, an advocate of the dead against the living, the arch-reactionary who comes out flatly against everything that matters" (GC, 324). Babbitt himself admitted that his style of criticism consisted in pointing out faults rather than beauties (DL, 24). Levin suggested that much of the furor stirred up against him was generated not so much by conflict between divergent criteria for literary excellence as by Babbitt's insistence that the critic have the encyclopedic knowledge and mental agility to defend his opinions. The contentions between journalists and professors came to a head when the humanists acquired a forum of their own, *The Bookman*, and Babbitt engaged in a public debate with two luminaries of the other side, whose "easy-going" attitude won over the audience (GC, 339). It may be that, since this intellectual dispute was given extensive publicity in the press, Levin did not feel called upon to raise the issue of

high standards in education. He does reflect Babbitt's insistence on mature scholarly preparation, however, in a broad description of comparative literature, a discipline that Babbitt helped pioneer in the United States. "Given the limitations that languages sooner or later lay down, no one could presume to take all of letters for his province: one simply tries to counteract one's innate provinciality, and to obtain a more objective view of what one may know, by relevant comparisons with whatever one can learn" (GC, 345).

In what has been labeled "the cultural crisis of modernity," a crisis greatly exacerbated in what some critics now represent as "postmodernity," Levin describes Babbitt as being completely in accord with Matthew Arnold on the meaning of culture. In Levin's words, "Culture—for both critics—was a certain type of education, admittedly the best, and nearly everything else was anarchy. But culture, so defined, has meanwhile almost withered away; while anarchy, in need of redefinition, has organized itself and set up vast multicultures of its own" (CG, 340). Although a superbly accurate prognosis of postmodern multiculturalism, Levin's view may be overly pessimistic. Humanism continues to exist, and it may eventually bring cultural anarchy under control. Although Babbitt and humanism are not in the critical mainstream today, they may still exert considerable influence in the future. Levin seems to point in this direction. He follows Babbitt in granting that the innovator may ask the right questions even though he may give the wrong answers (CG, 341). The traditionalist may sometimes seem to be giving the right answers to questions no longer moot and may by doing so bring about the reconsideration and broader formulation of these questions. This is certainly a contribution that Babbitt's thought will continue to make in the years ahead.

Babbitt remains relevant.

Another distinguished comparatist René Wellek in volume six of his *History of Modern Criticism*, published in 1986, attempted to separate Babbitt's literary criticism from the philosophy of neohumanism on the grounds that "the issues then debated, though as unresolved as ever, are now discussed in other terms, rarely with reference to the slogans of the humanists: one does not encounter the phrase 'inner check' or the contrast between 'humanism and humanitarianism,' and even 'classicism versus romanticism' is not an issue except in historical contexts."⁵ There is

Wellek's view of Babbitt too narrow and literalistic.

⁵ Wellek, *History of Modern Criticism*, Vol. 6: *American Criticism, 1900–1950* (New Haven, 1986), 17; hereinafter referred to in the text as "HMC."

“little point” in rehearsing the debate between humanists and their opponents, Wellek argued. “It would give them a false importance and distort the historical perspective. Anyhow, the movement collapsed under the impact of the Depression and the rise of Marxist criticism. Its social conservatism and its enmity toward recent literary trends ensured its demise.” Here Wellek’s perspective is overly literal. The terms “inner check” and “humanism” may have faded from common use, though a resurgence of scholarly interest in Babbitt and the New Humanism has been underway for more than two decades, but the need for defining standards in ethics and culture is perhaps more urgent than ever, not to speak of placing some control on the almost endemic fascination for the contemporary over the past.

Term
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elusive.

Wellek asserted that, in his published writings, “Babbitt never tangled with recent or even ‘modern’ literature apart from a few slighting allusions” and that he “indulged in an imperceptive wholesale condemnation of the whole modern world and modern literature”(HMC, 197). The term “modern” has always been somewhat elusive, perhaps one of the reasons that Wellek pointed out that Babbitt’s *The Masters of Modern French Criticism* is devoted to the nineteenth century while at the same time categorizing it as Babbitt’s “best organized and most equitable book” (HMC, 20). Levin had previously indicated that Babbitt described himself as “a modern of moderns” and that “his whole endeavor with the past was to live in the present, to learn and teach the lessons of history” (GC, 336). Babbitt did not always use “modern” in a strictly chronological sense. In the introduction to *Rousseau and Romanticism* he noted that the word does not always refer to that which is most recent, and he supplied as his own definition of the modern spirit, “the positive and critical spirit, the spirit that refuses to take things on authority” (RR, xi). Wellek may be right that *The Masters of Modern French Criticism* is Babbitt’s best work from a purely literary perspective, but in regard to humanistic content *Democracy and Leadership*, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, and *On Being Creative*⁶ are surely more important.

Wellek refrained from classifying Babbitt as “simply an American Brunetière” or, in Spingarn’s phrase, “a Brunetière speaking English” (HMC, 62) because of a number of divergencies between

⁶ Babbitt, *On Being Creative* (Boston, 1932).

the French critic and Babbitt, particularly the former's theories of biology and literary history, his return to the Catholic Church, and his combination of "naturalistic pessimism" and "stoic bleakness" (HMC, 21). On Babbitt's literary background, one cannot fault Wellek's perceptions, for example, that Matthew Arnold and Sainte-Beuve were "his most influential models." But Wellek was off the mark in rather disdainfully terming him an "American republican," as distinguished from one from France, and a Protestant, even though admitting in the same sentence that Babbitt was far "from subscribing to any definite Protestant or even Christian creed" (HMC, 22). Just as Babbitt failed to define adequately what he meant when describing himself as a positivist, Wellek falls short of providing a precise meaning when referring to Babbitt's "commonplace surface" as covering "a continuum of a deep melancholy, of skepticism and agnosticism or what he calls 'positivism,' a strong sense of man's ignorance in a mysterious universe," which makes Babbitt distrust apodictic science and the epistemology and rational metaphysics of technical philosophy. Wellek likewise traces the term "inner check" back to Emerson through two of Babbitt's contemporaries without conclusively clarifying its meaning as either innate moral sense or consciously developed will power. He goes no further than summarizing Babbitt's purpose as combining "what seems an ethical rigorism, even asceticism and renunciation, with a glimpse, a hesitant intuition, of the realm of the divine beyond and above reason" (HMC, 27). This is as vague as anything in Babbitt. Citing Austin Warren, however, Wellek concludes that Babbitt "must be described as a Buddhist who, without joining in ritual, shared the agnostic, even atheistic view of Buddha with a sense of the world's illusion" (HMC, 27). This is all that Wellek says about Babbitt's ties with Asia. In keeping with his opinion that literary criticism is what Babbitt does best, Wellek defends him against the virulent charges of "didacticism, obtuseness, and lack of aesthetic sense." He explains these presumed excesses in Babbitt's style as growing out of his "passionate concern for ideas living, misleading, and corrupting today and by the classroom situation" to which his books were originally addressed. "He wanted to shock and cure, to make students and readers see the practical consequences of preposterous statements and subvert the easy-going historicism of the time" (HMC, 23). Wellek's own prejudice is revealed in his reference to "histori-

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cism," a scholarly method of the period opposed to that of aesthetic analysis, which Wellek favored. This appears in his concluding paragraph: "As a *literary* critic Babbitt shows his limitations in aesthetic sensibility and ordinary curiosity. He also was primarily a moralist. But he was, it must be stressed, a forceful and learned historian of ideas: of critical, moral, and political ideas" (HMC, 35).

Levin and Wellek balance each other. The former in the spirit of a humanist treated Babbitt as a personage, for example, revealing his relations with his father and introducing economic and social aspects of literature in conformity with Babbitt's principle that these aspects are interrelated. Wellek, however, confined himself largely to literary texts and aesthetic considerations, more narrowly understood. Paradoxically, the majority of critics and scholars who write about Babbitt today belong to academic disciplines devoted to social, political, and philosophical ideas rather than to those associated primarily with literature and language. Since neither Levin nor Wellek brought up the topic of standards, I shall make a few remarks of my own on Babbitt's opinions concerning education. We should be cautious, however, about comparing social and cultural conditions in 1920 with those of today. Problems in the two periods are not exactly equivalent, although closely related. As a distinguished modern disciple of Babbitt remarks, "If the America of the twenties and thirties was antagonistic to Babbitt," the America of subsequent periods is "inevitably more antagonistic."⁷

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specialization.*

Babbitt felt it necessary to warn against "overindulgence in one subject." Before engaging in specialization, the student should obtain a general knowledge of his subject; he should "become a well-read man (in the old-fashioned sense of the term) to have a thorough knowledge and imaginative appreciation of what is really worth while in the literature of the past" (LAC, 108-09). Undergraduate training should consist in "the mainstream of learning for the perpetuation of culture" and graduate training be for "the advancement of learning" (LAC, 102). Babbitt also spoke out against a "cheap contemporaneousness," a characteristic linked to the idea of progress, which is even more endemic in current society than

⁷ George A. Panichas, *The Critical Legacy of Irving Babbitt* (Wilmington, Del., 1999), 15.

in the early twentieth century. His distrust of encyclopedia-type learning could be applied to excessive reliance upon technology such as the computer and its adjuncts: "The full ambition of a scholar of this type is first to absorb an encyclopedia and then to make a contribution to knowledge that will deserve a place in some future encyclopedia. But in practice the two parts of this ideal—breadth and thoroughness—have been found to be incompatible" (LAC, 42). We should not, Babbitt cautioned, assume that the purpose of "whirling machinery" is "merely to serve as point of departure for a still intenser activity" (LAC, 262). He applies his concept of the inner check to the curriculum, appealing to a "humane principle of restraint, or what amounts to the same thing, . . . a true principle of restraint" (LAC, 52). If the freedom of the elective system is carried too far, "the wisdom of the ages is to be naught compared with the inclination of a sophomore" (LAC, 47).

Today one of the greatest problems facing public education is that of students who are promoted from one grade to a higher one without attaining the competence required for the advancement. In Babbitt's day, when the problem was largely confined to higher education, he opposed the tendency of lowering "the standard of the institution rather than inflict an apparent hardship on an individual." The true democratic spirit consists of "a fair field and no favors, and then the more severe and selective it is in its requirements the better" (LAC, 78). Growth in academia should not be confused with mere expansion in the student body; it is more important to measure achievements than numbers (LAC, 104).

Babbitt did not shrink from advocating high academic standards that both then and today might be called elitism, but that are now more necessary than ever. Following John Adams, he insisted that all people do not have equal talents—a principle seldom denied even by the most egalitarian theories. "Genuine justice seems to demand that men should be judged not by their intentions or endeavors, but by their actual performance" (DL, 202). Elitism, moreover, is highly practical, allowing the quality of a person's work to determine his place in society. The contrary doctrine of "natural equality" as set forth in the Declaration of Independence has actually "led to monstrous inequalities, and, with the decline of traditional standards, to the rise of a raw plutocracy" (DL, 204).

Babbitt insisted that humanism "implies doctrine and disci-

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pline, and is applicable not to men in general but only to a select few,—it is, in short, aristocratic and not democratic in its implication” (LAC, 3). Babbitt did not specify whether he was setting a goal for all society or even for the university or the academic community in general. Elsewhere he declared himself on the subject of human rights, but he left open the question of whether a system of academic elitism can exist within a structure of social democracy. I personally believe that it can, but not by blending or attempting to amalgamate the two as concordant. Elitism may harmonize with equality of opportunity, for example, in the military. Babbitt wanted no great distinctions in higher education based on wealth or social rank. He noted the “real snobbishness” that arose from “athletic prowess.” The athlete’s struggle to win at any cost, Babbitt saw paralleled in the business world (LAC, 76). He connected literary and educational standards to the handling of ideas and related them to something higher than one’s own temperament (LAC, 144), but he was reluctant to idealize specific concrete formations of norms, whether political laws and constitutions, religious scriptures, textual canons, or Matthew Arnold’s notion of the best that has been thought and said. He did affirm that a carefully selected group of classical and modern authors “may be regarded as the fixed stars of literature” (LAC, 194) but did not specify how this canon should be compiled. He did, however, seem to accept the *consensus gentium* (the consensus of the race [lit. peoples/tribes]) even though the concept might seem to clash with his emphasis on individuality. The curriculum, he affirmed, should “reflect in some measure the total measure of the race as to the things that have been found to be permanently important to its essential nature” (LAC, 85). Although taken together these principles appear to be at odds with each other, they represented for Babbitt examples of the humanist’s ability to “combine opposite extremes and occupy all the space between them” (LAC, 233; see also 196). In his own practice, when he seems to point toward a compromise between extremes, he usually prefers one while respecting the virtues of the other. He even grants that a person who has been “sufficiently fortified in his sense of values may profit greatly by what we have defined as Rousseauism” (LAC, 196). We may see a prime example of Babbitt’s ability at reconciling disparate points of view in his analysis of the potential weaknesses of his own scholarly discipline: “comparative literature may become

positively pernicious if it is allowed to divert undergraduates from gaining a first-hand acquaintance with the great classics, to a study of interrelationships and interdependencies either of individual authors or of national literatures. Besides, there is no necessary connection between an author's historical influence and significance and his true worth" (LAC, 124-25). The latter sentence may seem to represent a denial of the *consensus gentium*, but the context of Babbitt's discussion shows that it is not.

Addressing one of the hazards in what now passes for multiculturalism—that the personal values of a single individual or a narrow group might come to be erected into a standard for society in general—Babbitt issued a warning against the view that irreconcilable oppositions can be harmonized through expansive sympathy rather than through moral restraint: a view he attributed to Rousseau and Herder, two thinkers of the Romantic Period. Rousseau taught that "every man is to cultivate his own originality to the utmost, and then sympathize with other men who do likewise. According to Herder every nation is to cultivate to the utmost its own national genius, and then as an offset to this self-assertion, have a comprehensive sympathy for other national originalities. Nationalism is to be tempered by internationalism" (LAC, 186). Babbitt rejected this reasoning as "chimerical." He insisted that "the whole notion that the diverse and clashing egoisms either of individuals or nationalities will have a sufficient counterpoise in sympathy alone, or in sympathy reinforced by an 'enlightened self-interest,' may very well turn out to be—as someone said of the ten commandments—an iridescent dream" (LAC, 187).

*Egoisms
cannot be
reconciled.*

An examination like Babbitt's of fundamental principles of pedagogy, literature, philosophy, and social relations is what we might expect from subsequent occupants of distinguished chairs of comparative literature in major American universities, but the reverse is true. The Irving Babbitt Chair of Comparative Literature at Harvard has recently passed to the former director of Harvard's Center for the Study of Money and Culture, Marc Shell, who describes himself as a specialist in the literature of economics. He has published books arguing that the physical appearance of money is an inherent component of literary study and others arguing that what he calls "metaphorical incest" (his term for universal love) is closely related to Christian doctrine and that soci-

ety would profit if metaphorical incest were developed into actual physical incest on a wide scale. Although in these books he treats a number of literary masters, sometimes at great length, his object is not to illustrate aesthetic or humanistic values, but to demonstrate his peculiar theses concerning money and incest. To do this he depends on theorists like Foucault who maintain that language may have an autonomous existence independent of the material world. In a quasi-historical analysis of literary works dealing with language, *The Economy of Literature*, Shell provides a series of illustrations of Aristotle's observation that animals and plants, like human beings, reproduce their likenesses, while metals do not, unless they are transformed into coins (which, however, is not a self-induced process). He also cites Kant's affirmation of the resemblance between books and money as the most efficient means of human intercommunication.⁸ Despite considerable theoretical confusion between the sign (the coin) and the signified (the idea that it presumably suggests) or, in the reverse relationship between aspects of the material world and their symbols, the book represents a reasonably satisfactory example of the method of history of ideas applied to money as a topos in literature. In a tangentially related book *Art and Money*,⁹ Shell studies the connection of monetary values to works of art in order to show "how money becomes (or is) artwork and how artwork comes to assume some of the characteristics of money." This is a subject that probably would have been anathema to Babbitt, and it is hard to see that it has much relationship to literature of any kind.

Shell seems unaware of a highly relevant development of the device of combining literature and money, that is, the fictional genre of personifying an actual piece of money, coin or species, and allowing it to observe and comment upon the character and behavior of the human beings it encounters. Joseph Addison, whom Shell cites several times for his *Dialogues upon the Usefulness of Ancient Metals*, wrote a separate essay for his periodical, *The Tatler* [No. 427], in which he narrates the reminiscences of a shilling born in Peru and transported to London by Sir Francis Drake. Charles Johnstone in his *Chrysal or the Adventures of a Guinea* (1760-

⁸ Shell, *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore, 1978), 9.

⁹ Shell, *Art and Money* (Chicago, 1995).

1765) covered the dark side of every part of European society by means of a coin's passing through the hands of the representatives of twenty professions. The catalog of the British Library lists a dozen or more similar monetary personifications beginning with "History of" in their titles. In France, Samuel Isarn published in 1660 *Le Louis d'or a Mademoiselle Scudéry* describing the peregrinations of a golden nugget transformed into a coin during the reign of Alexander the Great, subsequently melted down and changed to statuary or jewelry a number of times, and finally returning to the shape of a coin. Shortly before World War II, Marguerite Yourcenar published an anti-Fascist novel *Dernier de rève*, 1934, 1939, describing the travels and observations of a ten-lire coin, "the symbol of contact between human beings, immersed each one in his own fashion, in his own passions and his intrinsic solitude."¹⁰

Shell's theories of monetary reproduction may be compared to other odd theories of human reproduction in his *The End of Kinship*, an attempt to prove that metaphorical incest or universal siblinghood has always existed in human relationships and that society would benefit if physical incest on the universal level were also adopted.¹¹ His argument is based to a large extent on Christian theology with its doctrine of the Trinity and its holy orders of fathers, brothers and sisters. He quotes from the Gospels, "All ye are brothers" (Matt 23:8), but does not indicate that "All Men Are Brothers" is also a concept of Confucianism, used by Pearl Buck as the title of her translation of a Chinese classic. Shell's thesis is illogical since physical sexual relations between members of a closely knit family is not congruent, even metaphorically, with everyone loving everyone else equally, the meaning of universal siblinghood. If the notion were applied literally, moreover, it would bring an end to all Christian missionary activity, for if we were actually siblings in the theological sense, there would remain no outsiders to bring into the family. More than half of Shell's text is devoted to explication of physical incest in a single play of Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, but even if he could prove that all of Shakespeare's plays mirror the theme of universal siblinghood, it would be no justification for arguing that such an institu-

"Universal siblinghood" connected with incest.

¹⁰ *Oeuvres romanesque*. Ed. Pléiade (Paris, 1982), 162.

¹¹ Shell, *The End of Kinship* (Stanford, 1988).

tion would be beneficial for human society. The theme of incest is a valid one for literary study, but open to criticism when physical incest and universal siblinghood are considered as equivalent. One reviewer of the book reacted with indignation. "In view of so many and such egregious blunders—I have only mentioned the more outstanding of them—I can only wonder how it was that such a book could have been accepted by the readers for the Stanford University Press: they may well be ashamed of themselves! It is hardly even worth my while reviewing such a book at such length, but for the fact that it has not only deceived those readers but is also symptomatic of a widespread disease in modern Shakespeare scholarship, in which fashionable pseudo-psychological interpretations (often in the name of deconstruction) are received as genuine."¹² Since this review is from the pen of a faculty member of a Jesuit University in Tokyo, one might be inclined to dismiss this condemnation as being to some degree based upon prejudice. There is no doubt, however, that Shell's constant word manipulation resembles the far from universally accepted systems of Foucault and Derrida. His concrete methodology is, on the other hand, that of the history of ideas, which provides a tenuous link with *Babbitt*.

Shell quotes from Plato's *Republic* the doctrine of Socrates that the children of Athens must be reeducated and persuaded that their entire fashioning and development had taken place under the earth, which is their mother, and that they must henceforth think of other citizens as brothers born of the earth.¹³ In handling this passage, Shell gives the political theme a religious twist, arguing that there exist two fundamental attitudes toward human society, one calling for universal brotherhood, which he equates with Christianity, and an opposite one upholding a particularist vision based on metaphors of the tribe, which he equates with Judaism. On the basis of this dichotomy, he affirms that the advocates of brotherhood have argued that "only my brothers are human, all others are animals," a conclusion that the particularists refute by their view of multiple tribes or brotherhoods. This is essentially Shell's attempt to apply his theory of universal siblinghood to world politics, but his ingenious word play, no matter

¹² Peter Milward S.J., in *Clio* 21: 1 (1991) 97.

¹³ *The End of Kinship*, 198.

how skillfully buttressed by pages of learned historical annotation, is utterly remote from any of the values represented by Irving Babbitt—moral, political, or literary. Perhaps this is the reason Shell's books have received very few reviews and had only limited influence either in university circles or in the world at large.

Just the opposite is true of the work of Edward Said, University Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. His *Orientalism*, first published in 1978, the same year as Shell's first book on money, has been republished repeatedly in English, has been translated into twenty-five languages, has given rise to the publication of an *Edward Said Reader*, and has raised hotly pursued political and social issues in the global study of literature. Said's notion of Orientalism has three distinct connotations: teaching, writing and research about the Orient; an ontological distinction between Orient and Occident; and the description of an alleged "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."¹⁴ As various critics have observed, the first and third of these categories represent specific activities and behavior, whereas the second consists merely of an alleged mental attitude or state of mind presumably shared by most of Europe and America throughout the last three centuries. These activities and attitudes allegedly reveal that people in the West hold a condescending attitude toward the culture of the Orient while pillaging its material assets. Said's reasoning has done a great deal to inspire related diatribes in literary criticism against neo-colonialism, racism, and globalization. Apart from the logic or illogic of his arguments, a major flaw in his perspective is that after dividing the world into two areas (which, incidentally, is radically different from Shell's approach), he devotes himself entirely to the Arab and Muslim sections of the Orient with no consideration of India and the Far East. Babbitt, on the other hand, paid highly respectful attention to Eastern philosophy and religion as represented by Confucius and Buddha. Said essentially limits himself to the history of the French, British, and American contacts with his selected part of the Orient. He also has published several subsequent books, most of which utilize literary criticism in regard to the current political and cultural disputes between Palestine and Israel.

Said's definition of "Orient" highly selective.

¹⁴ Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin, eds., *The Edward Said Reader* (New York, 2000), 69.

Said professes to be both a humanist and a disciple of Foucault, a duality of antithetical philosophies that cannot be reconciled. What he probably means is that he accepts in some way the moral and aesthetic values of humanism, but writes about them through the agency of the epistemological constructs of Foucault. He defines culture as a concept that includes, as “a refining and elevating element, each society’s reserve of the best that has been known and thought, as Matthew Arnold puts it.” He adds that, “in time, culture comes to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or the state; this differentiates ‘us’ from ‘them.’”¹⁵

Arnold, however, did not break down culture into separate units vying against each other, but considered the best as a world-wide characteristic. This Said seems to recognize in the statement that “all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and monolithic.”¹⁶ Apart from the seeming contradiction between heterogeneous and monolithic, this admission represents a retreat from a simple dualism between West and East. Said retreats even further by admitting the existence of “histories” in the United States that are “narratives of *integration* not separation, the stories of people who had been excluded from the main group but who were now fighting for a place in it.”¹⁷ Associating integration with aggressiveness is completely alien to the spirit of Babbitt and Arnold. Also, according to a more generally accepted conception of American society, the “melting pot” stands for integration. The current multiculturalism stands for voluntary separation.

“Orientalism”
an arbitrary
construct.

Said’s notion of Orientalism has aroused extraordinary enthusiasm throughout much of the Western world, but all of the Chinese-Western scholarship on the topic with which I am acquainted refuses to accept Said as spokesman for the entire East. An example of Chinese rejection is the following statement by Adrian Hsia of McGill University: “With the inclusion of all of Asia and North Africa, the Orient is a conglomerate of different nations and cultures. Therefore, it does not have a definable identity. What do Arabs have in common with Indians or the Chinese and vice versa? The only common denominator is that they are all non-Europeans! It is, therefore, a non-identity. If the Orient is merely a

¹⁵ Ibid., xiii.

¹⁶ Ibid., xxv.

¹⁷ Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: 1993), xxvi.

construct, then Orientalism must logically be a construct too. In addition, how can Orientalists study a non-identity constructed by their culture and remain objective? Can there be real scholarship without objectivity? The answer is obvious.”¹⁸

It will not do, however, to minimize Said’s notion of Orientalism as merely an *idée fixe*. Said’s arguments are primarily political and sociological. Babbitt’s were moral and literary. Of the latter’s four themes explored here, the only one that is relevant to Said’s system is the concept of the interrelationship of politics, philosophy, and religion. But there is nothing in Said comparable to Babbitt’s statement that it is part of his method to put “Confucius behind Aristotle and Buddha behind Christ” (DL, 273) or to Babbitt’s conviction that the inner check is an element in both politics and ethics. Since Said’s literary production exceeds Babbitt’s in quantity, a number of parallels inevitably occur, but Said does not in any way follow Babbitt in systematically exploring the need for maintaining high standards on the various levels of education. Still, my conclusion from comparing Babbitt to two current representatives of comparative literature is not completely gloomy. Although Shell and Said head two of the most prestigious departments of comparative literature in the United States, there is no evidence that their theories in themselves are turning students away from Babbitt or the ideals of humanism. On the contrary, the attraction of Babbitt and the humanism he advocated may be growing. Moreover, many distinguished scholars in disciplines other than comparative literature consider the humanistic study of literature and the arts as integral to the study and well-being of politics and society.

¹⁸ “Sinism: A Paradigm of Perceptionism with Focus on the 19th Century” in *Modern Literature and Literary Theory Revisited*, eds. Francis So and H. Sun (Taipei, Taiwan, 1996), 103.