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# Reviews

## *An Emblematic American*

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**The Critical Legacy of Irving Babbitt**, by George A. Panichas. *Wilmington, Delaware: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1999. 235 pp. \$24.95.*

I have seen only three portraits of Irving Babbitt. The first was the photograph reproduced in the 1979 Liberty Press edition of *Democracy and Leadership*, which I first saw in a Swedish Encyclopaedia. This, I imagined, was of Babbitt the vigorous scholar in mid-career. The second portrait was the one on the cover of *Irving Babbitt in Our Time*, edited by George Panichas and Claes G. Ryn in 1986. Here was the senior scholar, with the authority, dignity and elegance of an urbane patrician. The third portrait, one which I had never seen before, is the photograph in this new book by Panichas. It shows the tired, although in no way broken, old fighter, probably in ill health.

Babbitt always had to fight. The course which he embraced as a young man, and to which he stuck with an impressive and uncompro-

mising tenacity, quickly brought him into conflict with representatives of most of the major trends of his age.

Although formulated within a broadly modern context and by no means in total opposition to it, Babbitt's humanism is of a conservative and classicist variety, turning sharply against some of the basic philosophic and cultural presuppositions of modernity. But Babbitt is no reactionary; he does not urge a return to premodern society. He invokes and mobilizes the Greek and Roman classics, as well as Buddha and Confucius, *within* modernity, as a necessary corrective and counterbalance in the face of potentially disastrous developments. It is to the philosophical and humanistic classics of antiquity rather than to the medieval Christian authorities that he turns, although he opposes clas-

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sical rationalism, although he places Jesus Christ among the ethical voluntarists whom he praises, and although, while not himself emphasizing it in his scholarship, he accepts a theological and transcendent horizon beyond ethics.

Babbitt's defense of modernity is qualified: he accepts only a certain kind of humanism, only a certain kind of liberalism, only a certain kind of democracy. He respects modernity's confidence in the ability of humanity to reach insight into ethical universality and the concrete ethical life without recourse to a specific, institutional religious authority. But the substantively most indispensable sources are still the greater and older historical traditions of mankind. The political, legal, scientific and technical innovations of modernity are acceptable only within the framework of those ethical and cultural traditions. The central humanistic orientation and ethical substance are not themselves products of modernity. That which is specific to modernity and also valid is compatible with the older insights into the ethical nature and predicament of man, i.e., it consists of partial and, in some cases, even peripheral truth. Most of Babbitt's writing concerns the problematic nature of modernity, not its higher possibilities, which he nevertheless clearly recognizes.

A humanist and a Harvard professor, Babbitt turned against major features of modern society and the modern university. The positivistic idea of research, as inspired by the

natural sciences, was, according to Babbitt, foreign to the study of humanistic culture and insight. Neither was the truth about man and society for him something that lies ahead of us largely undiscovered, waiting to be explored by new generations of researchers technically trained in the methods of empiricism. Yet Babbitt was in no way a dogmatic, ossified traditionalist. He was a creative traditionalist: he encouraged renewed expressions of imaginative vision, and he was, I believe, open, in principle at least, to the possibility of a deepening and an expansion of humane knowledge. But in its basic outlines, humanistic and political truth was for him already available, behind us so to speak, as timeless insights waiting to be rediscovered and re-articulated.

In his writing about the American college, Babbitt advocated the patient and protracted study of the classics, of the great moral and literary traditions of mankind. He also argued that they should be concretely assimilated in the life and person of the humanist through strenuous inner effort. Opposing what he called false liberal democracy and its kind of university, Babbitt advocated classically based humanism and concrete moral example. Lowering us into some of the darkest reaches of the cave, our century has richly confirmed Babbitt's analyses and fears: it has spawned the liberal anti-order, now dissolving further into the anarchy of postmodern relativism, and the

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burgeoning new tyranny of political correctness, forces held together only by technological capitalism, and the brutal counter-order of communism and fascism, systematically killing not only the philosophers, but, by the millions, those with dissenting and only slightly more adequate interpretations of the shadows on the wall.

George Panichas's new book summarizes and documents his contribution to the rediscovery and reappraisal of Babbitt that has been going on over the last decades. It also acknowledges and discusses the contributions of others, reprinting, as it does, Panichas's review essays on Claes G. Ryn's *Will, Imagination and Reason* (1986) and Milton Hindus's *Irving Babbitt, Literature, and the Democratic Culture* (1994). All of the essays brought together in this volume have been printed before, some even twice before and in Panichas's own books, but the importance of their subject is a good reason for making them available in a separate single volume.

Europeans have long regarded America as representing little more than the threat of a desolate mass-culture, a culture that they condemn but to which they simultaneously yield by accepting its products. America's present influence in the world being what it is, there is no sign of change. The brand of conservatism offered by populist, fundamentalist, televised Christianity, appears to Europeans, including most Christians, an unbelievable monstrosity. Many are aware, of

course, of the United States as the country of advanced science, and some hail its rich historical and literary scholarship. But all too few are aware that there is in the United States also an advanced humanistic culture of the classical type, a truly cultural conservatism, a mature intellectual defense of higher values and historical consciousness, a culture that is also open towards genuine religiosity.

More and more, educated and cultured Europeans recognize Irving Babbitt as an emblem of this almost hidden and all too easily ignored side of American culture. They even have reason to be envious of what he represents. This is not to say that European culture has wholly drowned in the Atlantic wave of popular culture. Considerable residues of high culture do remain, and some Europeans are, upon arrival in the United States, still shocked by certain surface appearances. But in Europe intellectual life, public debate, literary criticism, the whole tenor of cultural life are, on the whole, devoid of real, living inspiration from the European counterparts of Irving Babbitt. There are in Europe few voices such as that of George Panichas, and those that do exist play a rather marginal role. Scholars like Panichas—who build on the rich heritage of Babbitt and similar thinkers and writers, speak out on the central principles of morality and moral character, on the higher values and purposes of art and literature, on the true function of criti-

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cism, and on the moral goal of education, and who do so with clarity and self-assurance—are, unfortunately, rare in Europe. Europeans who could be regarded as close to the views of a Panichas, but who do not speak out and do not get their message across, would perhaps defend themselves by saying that the best of American conservatism, though undeniably on a high cultural and intellectual level, is somewhat jarring to them. Even eloquent, stylistically elegant, and intellectually advanced writing on subjects like moral order and the values of the Good, the Beautiful, the True, and the Holy make such Europeans uncomfortable. This is especially true perhaps in literary studies and criticism. In Europe it would be hard to find writing like Panichas's defense of Babbitt's principles in the chapter "The Critical Mission," a kind of manifesto of literary criticism that is reprinted in this volume.

Even those Europeans who are most sympathetic towards American writers like Panichas—or towards Russell Kirk or Richard Weaver, for instance—are too steeped in skepticism. When there is a need to balance certain aspects of the global politics of American liberalism, that skepticism is no doubt healthy. But when the issue is affirming and defending the most basic moral and other values, it threatens to degenerate into a tired and relativistic indifference. Although Europe has a much more developed general historical con-

sciousness, there is, strangely enough, at least in some countries, a wider gulf than in America between the present and the past, that is, the present and the past as a living tradition animated by thinkers such as Babbitt. The clear and forceful language of classical humanism and, to give another example, of classical metaphysical idealism, seems to Europeans stuffy for some reason, awkward, alien. And since the full range of the concepts, values, insights, and ideals of the great traditions of the West are thus simply not available or are at least not credibly and naturally expressed, the analysis of and the ability to deal with the maladies of modernity and postmodernity are severely, indeed disastrously, limited.

Babbitt's manner is clearly influenced by his historical and local context. Although many American thinkers continued to embrace traditional European ideas and turned against American modernism and neoterism, the vigorous, young, and expanding nation, having quickly risen to the status of a great power, could not shun its own distinct language of didacticism and edification. Panichas, following in Babbitt's footsteps, correctly notes the qualities that make Babbitt a teacher and a preacher. This "lay preacher to Americans" possessed an "innately Protestant sensibility"—"had he not become a teacher, he would have made an excellent theologian." He "possessed conviction and determination, as well as zest and militancy, seldom seen in the aca-

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demic world." His "didactic tone" was "severe, magistrative, uncompromising, urgent—inescapably repetitive, as it must always be in the teaching process." His style was "a call to action, a missionary style." Panichas sees behind all this mainly Babbitt's heroic concern with "the survival of humane civilization." This explanation does not, however, exclude another, one that emphasizes the distinctly American way in which Babbitt went about his mission. Babbitt turned indeed against the kind of puritanism that was represented by a Woodrow Wilson. Yet he was himself shaped by American puritanism at the opposite end of its broad spectrum. As is quite clear from Panichas's presentation, Babbitt, though turning against some of the romantic excesses of Ralph Waldo Emerson, in some respects also admired and even followed that other great American lay preacher.

Ever since the Romans managed by a tremendous, conscious effort to take over and plant in their own soil at least parts of the advanced culture of the Hellenes, and ever since the spread of Christianity up to the establishment or consolidation of the modern nation-states, it has been this spirit—the spirit of teaching, preaching, and uplift—that has built European culture also. The Americans brought European culture to the new continent, but the efforts needed to maintain culture under the new conditions and under the enormous expansion of the country recall the original, the ar-

chetypal situation of the work of culture. In Europe, the fact that such work was successfully accomplished at an earlier stage makes the nature of the process dangerously easy to forget. The relative proximity in time of the American effort explains some of the differences in cultural climate. When the edifice is threatened or becoming fragile, cultural conservatism is all the more necessary. True culture is a constant fight against barbarism; to think that it can be once and for all successfully achieved is the unmistakable sign of decadence. Cultural dissolution in the form of skepticism, sophistry, relativism, and nihilism will soon follow. And then, the work of culture will have to be started all over again. In her present hour of need, Europe should harken to such American voices as Babbitt, Kirk, and Panichas. They are not only voices of cultural reestablishment, I believe, but also to some extent voices of an original, pioneering, frontier *establishment* of culture.

In the United States there are still cultural critics with the kind of moral, metaphysical and axiological clarity, sharpness, consistency, weight and stylistic grace that has been missing in Europe in the second half of the twentieth century. If someone were to object that to a great extent it was European intellectuals, exiled during the war, who gave the needed momentum to American cultural conservatism, this only confirms the congeniality, or indeed the identity, of the best of American and European culture.

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The hospitality, encouragement, recognition, and high-quality following that such thinkers found in the United States, proves the point I am here trying to make. In Europe, postwar intellectuals were with few exceptions either incurably blind liberal positivists, communist fellow-travelers, or tired cynics. European cultural conservatives never seemed to achieve the same depth and clarity of understanding as did their counterparts in America. Consequently, as is lamentably clear today, they do not have the same staying-power. Without a firm grasp of the timeless mission of culture there can be no realistic clear-sightedness without resignation.

To well-meaning but weak European defenders of traditional culture who are not wholly lost in the *cul-de-sac* of radical modernism or postmodernism and not too damaged or bewildered by their illusions, the writings of Irving Babbitt and his heirs in the humanistic tradition, forming the highest expression of American intellectual culture, must soon surely appear as a refreshing tonic and as a powerful antidote against the sickly apathy of decadence that they truly are. Such Europeans may here discover what America is and always has been in its finest traditions: a true extension, continuation and variation of Europe and European culture. To the extent that even the more sophisticated upholders of high culture in Europe are under the influence of ideology and modernist thinking, they need the kind of unabashed,

principled reinforcement that they will here find. A reinvigorated Babbittian humanism may assist them in the tardy reconsideration and rehabilitation of their own large number of similar thinkers from the not too distant past. If, for the foreseeable future, it is the destiny of Europe, and the rest of the world, to be more or less Americanized, Europeans and others should at least have the dignity and taste to choose to be Americanized by the America that is worthy of admiration and respect.

That admirable America, of course, may soon begin to seem as different from the globalized techno-capitalistic mass culture of our time as does every other old culture of humanity. Western civilization, which had its sources in the classical and Christian traditions, supplemented or diversified by different national characteristics and by the partial truths of the modern world that were not incompatible with the foundational traditions, may soon be as foreign to the tenor of homogenous mass-democracy as are the traditional Indian, Chinese, or other civilizations of mankind. And throughout his career, Irving Babbitt referred to the parallels to Western religion and the ethical humanism of true classicism that could be found in Buddhism and Confucianism. It is not so surprising that Babbitt was recognized as a great sage in China and even as a saint in India. Already at the turn of the century, Babbitt pitted against the radical forms of Western modernity

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a universal, traditional wisdom, which, despite the diversity of the old cultures of humanity, was common to them all: there was a unity in the diversity.

Babbitt tried to formulate an "ecumenical" position with regard to ethical dualism and the moral conscience that unites different cultures and religions, doing so while staying short of dogmatic and doctrinal differences. His effort was quite different from the dominant pseudo-idealistic and sentimental-moralistic internationalism of his age. Babbitt's quest for unifying features was on an altogether higher ethical, intellectual, and cultural level. He elaborated many of the insights that constitute a common wisdom and a basis of harmony among cultures and societies. Babbitt renewed in the United States the special conservative understanding of how different cultures may express their genuine values in different ways, an understanding that demands deep historical imagination and discernment and is antithetical to ideological abstraction.

In several essays Panichas addresses the disputed question of Babbitt's relation to religion, and one of them, "Babbitt and Religion" (which was previously published in *Irving Babbitt in Our Time*), is exclusively devoted to this topic. Panichas shows that Babbitt's humanism was not at all as foreign to religion as has often been alleged because of certain statements by Paul Elmer More and because of the criticism of Babbitt by orthodox Christian con-

verts like T. S. Eliot and Allen Tate. There can be little doubt that Babbitt was indeed open to a dimension of religious transcendence, a dimension of "meditation" opening up beyond the horizon of "mediation" within which classical humanistic culture moved and on which he himself for clearly stated reasons normally chose to concentrate.

Babbitt's position was far from the secular humanist reinterpretation of religion in that he was building on the classical and Christian ethical heritage, whereas contemporary liberal theology was to a great extent erected on the basis of modern rationalism and sentimentalism. Babbitt has this much in common with liberal theology (and with much of nineteenth-century metaphysical idealism) that he was skeptical also towards orthodox dogmatism, literalism, etc.—but he considered these to be, *mutatis mutandis*, quite as much expressions of rationalism and sentimentalism. In his own work Babbitt emphasized the level of ethical mediation, but he regarded it as related to and situated on the same ascending non-naturalistic path as religious meditation. Discerning and elaborating an ecumenical wisdom in this manner, Babbitt set forth a formula of qualified pluralism for understanding among the great religious traditions. The world of today can hardly do without that formula.

It may, however, be possible to go beyond a shared moral consciousness toward certain common metaphysical principles that can fortify

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such a qualified pluralism—for instance, with regard to the question of personal and impersonal aspects of God. By a phenomenological approach Keith Ward has shown that a similar “dual-aspect” view is present in all of the major religious traditions. As a personalist, I find in Babbitt a deficient understanding of individuality and of the individual, personal aspect of not only moral but spiritual and religious life that seems to follow from his classicism. Babbitt turned against the onesided rationalism of classical philosophy, but despite his emphasis on the need for concrete moral example and his defence of what he calls true liberalism, he did not sufficiently rise above the classical generalism. In my view, Panichas shares this partial onesidedness. Again and again, Panichas stresses the “One” and “the universal center.” Because of the lower, immoral, or barbarous expressions of individuality, he somewhat underestimates differentiated individuality in its higher forms. Panichas does so not only in his moral and aesthetical outlook, but he seems to share Babbitt’s skepticism of the Christian, and especially the Augustinian, understanding of spiritual personality and of the personal relationship between God and the individual soul.

In the essay on Babbitt and Simone Weil, Panichas stresses their common and quite valid repudiation of eccentric artists who promote an indiscriminate cult of personality, but the revulsion for such expressions of individual personal-

ity unfortunately carries over into their view of the spiritual life, as in this formulation from Weil’s essay “Beyond Personalism,” endorsed by Panichas: “The man for whom the development of personality is all that counts has totally lost all sense of the sacred. So far from its being his person, what is sacred in a human being is the impersonal in him.” It may be retorted that what is sacred is the person—even if the development of personhood is certainly not all that counts—in that the person is what God loves and what loves God. Without persons, without relationship, there can be no love. What Weil does not see is that for St. Augustine there is a decisive distinction between the higher and the lower personality: the higher one, the true one, develops *caritas*, which is sacred, whereas the lower, false one develops *cupiditas*. Also, she fails to see that personality in God does not have to mean limitation or entail what Babbitt, referring to the same notion in Augustine, calls a “tremendous spiritual romanticism.” Weil’s predilection for the impersonalistic spirituality that she considers the exclusive characteristic of the Upanishads—a predilection that is closer to the young Paul Elmer More than to Babbitt—is of course consistent with this view. In my understanding this impersonalism is rather a typical product of a modern age influenced by a romantic monism, looking to Shankara’s onesided monistic interpretation of the Upanishads and the Vedanta

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Sutras, but ignoring the sophisticated theistic and "personalistic" interpretations of the same scriptures and the same tradition by Ramanuja and the subsequent representatives of the theistic "schools" of India. If Panichas is right that Babbitt has been wrongly portrayed by some critics as indifferent or hostile to religion and that Babbitt actually affirmed religion, though in a non-dogmatic, ecumenical form, it nevertheless seems clear that the transcendent dimension of "meditation" that he did accept was much closer to the Buddhistic Void or the impersonal One than to the Godhead of theism. Babbitt had a real interest in and wrote extensively on religion—but as he understood it.

It could be said of Panichas's comparison of Babbitt and Weil, no less than of his comparison of Babbitt and Richard Weaver (when he considers editions of the former's *Character and Culture* and the latter's *Visions of Order*), that instead of focusing mainly on the similarities between these thinkers, Panichas could, with good reason, have equally emphasized the interesting *differences* between them, differences that do not necessarily suggest incompatibility and quite often suggest complementarity. In the essay on Babbitt and Weil the charm of the juxtaposition springs from the striking dissimilarity of the two personalities, not least when their ideas converge.

The personalistic criticism here offered does not concern the margins of Babbitt's work or that of

Panichas, but there is still ample room for praise. Even from a personalistic perspective, work of their type will remain central and decisive in the effort to renew and reconstruct the culture of humanism in the West. Babbittian humanism will for personalism always be a necessary, if partial, truth. It is an indispensable discipline, applied to unqualified, natural individuality, that weeds out and prunes forms of lower individualism and guards personalism against degeneration and lack of moral discernment. Some strands of contemporary personalism stand in desperate need of such discipline.

This criticism calls only for a supplement derived from the philosophy of higher, spiritual personal individuality, an element present already in St. Augustine as well as in ancient India, but also in the higher forms of modern romanticism and modern personal idealism. Folke Leander, introducing the concept of "higher romanticism," started the work of completing Babbitt's analysis by combining it with some of the insights of modern idealism in general as expounded by Benedetto Croce, providing, among other things, a deeper philosophical basis for the "true liberalism" of which Babbitt speaks and which has much in common with a Burkean conservatism. With regard to the question of individuality, Leander cites the leading Swedish personal idealist, Erik Gustaf Geijer, thereby moving in the direction of the kind of supplement that I am advocating.

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While the Crocean development has been pursued, and achieved, in the work of Claes G. Ryn, who has also written extensively on the possibility of uniquely individualistic manifestations of universality, the strictly personalistic philosophical effort remains to be attempted. But even that effort will have to fight the aberrations of lower individualism, of

atomism, egotism, narcissism, barbarity. There will remain the need for the kind of understanding and defense of the basic, transpersonal outlines of true culture, educational discipline, classical humanism, universal values, and moral order that Panichas, in this exegesis of Babbitt and elsewhere, displays with such admirable force.

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