
Reviews

The Road Not Taken

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Irving Babbitt, Literature, and the Democratic Culture, by Milton Hindus. *New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1994. xiii + 135 pp. \$29.95 cloth.*

The Higher Learning in America, by Robert Maynard Hutchins. New introduction by Harry S. Ashmore. *New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1995. xxxii + 119 pp. \$17.95 paper.*

In the introduction to this, his fifteenth book, Milton Hindus, a founding member of the Brandeis University faculty, explains that he has two main purposes. First, by elucidating some of Babbitt's principal ideas and personal qualities, Hindus seeks to explain the greatness that has made Babbitt (1865-1933) for him a subject of continuing fascination as well as a career-long literary mentor. The author's second, and related, intention is to enter imaginatively into the Babbittian spirit and, from that elevated vantage point, to view certain social, literary, and educational issues—issues that are even more urgent in our own time than in Babbitt's—as the sage himself “would have seen them.”

As befits the distinguished critic of literary and public affairs that he is,

Hindus succeeds in both attempts. He provides for those new to Babbitt an excellent short introduction to his life and to many of the concepts for which he is best known: the “inner check” or “higher will,” the “idyllic imagination” or “sham spirituality,” the contrasting “law for man” and “law for thing,” to mention a few. At the same time, Hindus offers so many original and penetrating observations that the book also will prove valuable to established Babbitt scholars.

Babbitt saw the world about him driven by two powerful tendencies that he called Rousseauism and Baconianism. The first, popularized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, holds that men and women naturally have sympathetic feelings toward their fellows; hence, all

that is needed for good to emerge is for people to give free vent to their impulses. If corruption is evident, according to this view, its source must be sought not in the hearts of individual men and women but in social and political institutions. The second tendency, of which a progenitor was Francis Bacon, is the belief that, by applying to man and society the techniques of the natural sciences, human life can be made better and better. Though superficially poles apart, according to Babbitt, the Rousseauistic sentimentalist and the "hard-headed" Baconian are, at the most essential point, alike: Both place the primary locus of moral struggle *outside* the individual.

Against Rousseau's new dualism that posits the "good" individual *versus* "wicked" society, writes Hindus, Babbitt invokes an older dualism that affirms a struggle between good and evil within the individual. But though the latter is common to Christianity and other traditional doctrines, both religious and humane, Babbitt—writing for an age that was increasingly critical and leery of accepting affirmations on faith—stresses that the presence of this inner moral struggle is knowable not only through tradition but also as a matter of mundane personal experience.

Thus, citing Walter Lippmann's observation that the modern man has tended to lose with the older dualism the belief "that 'there is an immortal essence, presiding like a king over his appetites,'" Babbitt comments:

This immortal essence of which Mr. Lippmann speaks is, judged experimentally and by its fruits, a

higher will. But why leave the affirmation of such a will to the pure traditionalist? Why not affirm it as a psychological fact, one of the immediate data of consciousness, a perception so primordial that, compared with it, the denial of man's moral freedom by the determinist is only a metaphysical dream.

Babbitt, an admirer of Edmund Burke, agrees with Burke's dictum that "Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. . . . men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters." For Babbitt, like Burke, both the individual and society attain true freedom (as well as peace, community, meaning, *et cetera*) in proportion to the strength of the controlling power at the heart of their being. Both thinkers recognize this controlling power or will-to-refrain as an aspect of inward experience (hence the term *inner check*) that also transcends the individual and is, in Babbitt's words, "ultimately divine."

Hindus notes that, while Babbitt regarded the romantic view of life exemplified by Rousseau "as fallaciously one-sided, he saw in its one-sidedness a reaction against the equally fallacious version of [rigid, dogmatic, and lifeless] classicism which had preceded it." Similarly, Babbitt saw in the philosopher Henri Bergson's view of life as comprising only change, impermanence, the fleeting, the flux, an equally one-sided and fallacious reaction to an unimaginative and heavy-handed traditionalism. Those who emphasize only

change or only unity are both wrong, according to Babbitt, inasmuch as life, as it is actually experienced, is a "oneness that is always changing." As the unchanging power by which men and women order the ever-changing circumstances of their lives, the inner check is "the unity at the heart of change." Because its constant aspiration is to balance opposing passions in the service of the intrinsically good solution, the inner check has much in common with Aristotle's doctrine of the mean in Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

As a quality of will or active power, the inner check—as well as its opposite, man's ordinary self or lower will—is present to some degree even in persons, societies, and eras in which opposing tendencies predominate. "[I]n an age as well as an individual," writes Babbitt in *Literature and the American College*, "there are generally elements, often important elements, that run counter to the main tendency." For that reason, Hindus observes, Babbitt stresses that in criticism the ability to discern and to judge in relation to the "main tendency" is crucial:

The feeling for *the main tendency* becomes a criterion for the judgment of men, forms, and ideas. Emerson, for instance, according to Babbitt (despite the side of his work which recalls Rousseau to mind) "remains an important witness to certain truths of the spirit in an age of scientific materialism. His judgment of his own time is likely to be definitive

Things are in the saddle
And ride mankind.

Man himself and the products of his spirit—language and literature—are treated not as having a law of their own, but as things, as entirely subject to the same methods that have won for science such triumphs over phenomenal nature.

The evasion of the "law for man" in deference to the twin idols of scientific and emotional excess is even more prevalent in our own time than in Babbitt's. For that reason such Babbittian themes as restraint, inner check, higher will, proportion, decorum, humility, and measure remain potent remedies for the ills of contemporary society. In the present volume, Hindus, combining with deft touch the theory and artistry of a skilled physician, applies those remedies to the perilous state of our Republic at the close of the twentieth century.

Addressing the narrowly political situation in an essay entitled "The Future of Democracy in the United States," Hindus sees the best guarantee of freedom from despotism in the division of powers among the legislative, executive, and the judicial branches and in the system of states' rights or federalism set forth in the Constitution by the Framers. The Constitution's most glaring institutional flaw, in Hindus's judgment, is its failure to place sufficient checks on the Supreme Court—a deficiency he would correct by, at the very least, establishing term limits for the judiciary. But, though Hindus does not say it here, institutional checks are in truth merely outward and derivative manifestations of the inner check. If the main tendency of society is at war with the spirit of self-restraint, then no paper constitution or body of positive law—were it so voluminous as the

Encyclopaedia Britannica or even the ever-burgeoning *Code of Federal Regulations*—will be conducive to the liberty or safety of a people. At bottom the most urgent threats to America's future are not political but cultural and moral.

In the essay "Literature and the Democratic Culture" Hindus cites this passage from Babbitt's 1908 book *Literature and the American College*:

Spinoza says that a man should constantly keep before his eyes a sort of exemplar of human nature (*idea hominis, tamquam naturae hominis exemplar*). He should, in other words, have a humane standard to which he may defer, and which will not proscribe originality, but will help him to discriminate between what is original and what is merely freakish and abnormal in himself and others. Now this humane standard may be gained by a few through philosophical insight, but in most cases it will be attained, if at all, by a knowledge of good literature—by a familiarity with that golden chain of masterpieces which links together the more permanent experience of the race; books which so agree in essentials that they seem, as Emerson puts it, to be the work of one all-seeing, all-hearing gentleman.

Another American who espoused the preeminent role of great literature in shaping the good society, according to Hindus, was the mature Walt Whitman. Hindus notes that in *Democratic Vistas*—in marked contrast to Whitman's scathing dismissal of the literary legacy of the past in his earlier *Song of Myself*—Whitman "concludes

that the dominating role of literature is clear, that its importance exceeds that of all the other arts put together, and that it has become 'the only general means of morally influencing the world.' " Whitman recognizes that most of what is written does not attain the level of true literature. "[A] nation," he writes, "may hold and circulate rivers and oceans of very readable print, journals, magazines, novels, library books, 'poetry,' etc. . . . hundreds of new volumes annually composed and brought out here . . . and yet, all the while, the said nation, land, strictly speaking, *may possess no literature at all.*" Whitman describes genuine literature as "a few immortal compositions, small in size, [that] . . . tie and touch forever the old, new body, and the old, new soul!" As examples he lists "what we call Old and New Testament, Homer, Aeschylus, Plato, Juvenal, etc."

It "is surely not accidental," Hindus comments, that Whitman "chooses to mention some of the most aristocratic voices of [the] past: Plato, Homer, Aeschylus." For, though initially identifying literature with snobbery, subsequently, Hindus continues, "Whitman reacted against both his own earlier and his country's continual stubborn refusal to recognize the validity (in some form or other) of the aristocratic principle of selection, which affirms, on the simplest level, that though many may be called, few in the end can be chosen. This religious conviction remains the most potent countervailing force against a pernicious leveling tendency in spiritual as in all other fields."

Down the centuries in diverse lands, cultures, and religious traditions, the

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“principle of selection” of which Hindus speaks has been designated by many names reflecting the diverse conditions in which it has manifested itself and performed its sifting and ordering work. Yet, beneath the conflicting terms and at the level of concrete historical reality, the aristocratic principle—when ever it was truly present and not displaced by militarism, oligarchism, or some other *ism* pretending to its name—can be seen in every instance to have been the higher will or inner check described by Babbitt.

For Babbitt the humane man as a general rule “will be the one who has a memory richly stored with what is best in literature, with the sound sense perfectly expressed that is found only in the masters.” It follows that the purpose of any education worthy of the name is to cultivate in students “habits of sound reading and reflection” and to enable them not merely to appreciate the printed word but to distinguish, with the aid of the higher will and imagination as well as reason, the universal and abiding from the ephemeral and idiosyncratic. As Hindus explains in an illuminating passage:

What interests Babbitt in literature most of all are the traces of wisdom discoverable there which may lead not only to an understanding of life, its possibilities, and limitations, but to an intelligent choice among these of the path likely to lead to a happiness, which, rightly understood in the Aristotelian way, is “the end of ends” of human striving. In “the battle of the books”—the struggle between the ancients and moderns—the advantage for Babbitt is clearly on the side of the ancients. But this does not mean that

he admires all of the old masters or even any one of them unreservedly. Friendship to Plato does not exclude an even greater adherence to the truth. Babbitt is not inclined to idolatry even of the great classics. Humanism insists that every claimant to attention be brought before the bar of individual judgment. The ancients have the advantage, because they have been subject to the most ruthless winnowing, not to speak of the hazards of historical accident and destruction. The classics are what humanity has managed most desperately to hold on to, through thick and thin, for all the world as if they were spiritual life-preservers. Babbitt calls them simply members of the highest and best class of literary productions.

Babbitt, who was graduated from Harvard in 1889 and taught there from 1894 to 1933, watched in dismay as what passed for American education increasingly aspired to be all things to all people—a goal that rendered impossible its elevating and unifying mission. Babbitt’s *bête noire* in the educational field was Charles William Eliot, who, as president of Harvard from 1869 to 1909, greatly expanded the elective system. Hindus notes that, when “Eliot recalled the Harvard undergraduates who had been his classmates, he apparently beheld men severely repressed by their Puritan background with little encouragement given to self-expression: ‘Repression of genuine sentiment and emotion is indeed, in this college, carried too far. Reserve is more respectable than any undiscerning communicativeness.’ ” Hindus adds that “Babbitt begins his 1929 essay on President Eliot’s own injurious influence, not only on

Harvard but extending far beyond it, by noting his extreme reaction against his own Puritan background. The 'essential point is his attitude to the problem of evil. . . . The current mode is to disparage Puritanism because of its undue repressiveness and at the same time to overlook how much it repressed that actually needs repression.' "

Hindus observes that the educational quarrel between Babbitt and Eliot was in part that of the humanist *versus* the man of science. (Eliot was a trained chemist.) But more important than Eliot's bias in favor of his own specialty was his sharing in what one of his successors, Nathan Pusey, described as the dominant faith in progress of the nineteenth century. Inevitably, this brought Eliot into conflict with Babbitt, "who never lost sight of the unity at the heart of change and who aimed, in a formulation adopted from Goethe, to bring to bear upon the aberrations of a fleeting present masses of universal history."

As summed up by Babbitt near the end of his life, the problem with the education under Eliot's greatly expanded elective system was that it "had become increasingly miscellaneous and encyclopedic." "It was a mere reflection of the world around it," Hindus writes, "instead of being a criticism and reflection upon that world." Babbitt, he adds, "traces [Eliot's] educational practices . . . back to their assumptions in Rousseau, the Earl of Shaftesbury, and (much later) John Dewey, all of whom shared a belief in the radical goodness of human nature, denied the natural man's need of conversion to become less egoistic and self-centered, and were convinced (in the words of Dewey) that 'ev-

ery child is born with a natural need to give out, to do, to serve.' " From these assumptions it follows that schools, rather than prescribing a course of study, should allow students to follow their natural bent and make the most of their natural gifts. Babbitt is not impressed: "Anyone whose business it has been to advise college undergraduates will testify that as a rule they are not conscious of having any such gifts. They are determined most frequently in the choice of their life work by chance or necessity . . ." As for the child's alleged impulse to serve humanity, Babbitt comments: "Let anyone who has growing children observe them closely and decide for himself whether they exude spontaneously this eagerness for service."

With his ever-present awareness of the element of oneness that gives meaning to the diversity of life, Babbitt, as Hindus notes, believed "the university was derelict to its responsibility, if it did not help answer the simplest and most fundamental questions with which the students entrusted to it were faced daily: How to live and what to live for?" By contrast, Eliot and like-minded educators of his time held, as Eliot's neighbor and ally Professor George Herbert Palmer put it, that "no subject of human inquiry can be out of place in the program of a real university." Similarly, Ezra Cornell, who founded the university bearing his name one year before Eliot assumed the presidency of Harvard, proclaimed his intention of establishing a university "in which anyone may study anything." As one gazes upon the present "educational" scene in this country, with its proliferation of

“women’s studies,” “gay and lesbian studies,” and the like, it is pretty obvious which side has had the upper hand in this battle, to date at least. Nor would Babbitt—whose own work was for the ages, not the age—have been surprised by the direction the universities have traveled, though the *distance* may have surpassed even his predictive powers. Babbitt was clearly right, says Hindus, “in observing that Eliot ‘pushed American education in the direction in which it was already leaning. His whole career, indeed, illustrates the advantages of going with one’s age quite apart from the question whether it is going.’ ”

Another academic who defied the tenor of the age in American education was Robert Maynard Hutchins, a brilliant administrator who, at the tender age of thirty, was elevated in 1929 to the presidency of the University of Chicago. Hutchins, who was to spend the remainder of his life crusading for educational reform, commenced his career at Chicago with the declaration that the learning available in even the most prestigious of American universities was singularly inadequate. Like Babbitt, Hutchins was convinced that Eliot’s elective system had robbed education of any central purpose. To redress the balance he introduced administrative and curricular changes at Chicago that aroused controversy at his own institution and nationwide. In the 1935 Storrs Lectures at Yale Hutchins set forth a series of arguments in defense of his reforms. The lectures, published by Yale University Press a year later as *The Higher Learning in America*, created a sensation. The book has now

been reissued with a new introduction by Harry S. Ashmore.

Hutchins decries “the service-station conception of a university,” under which the institutions of higher learning see their role as catering to the “passing whims of the public. . . . If the public becomes interested in the metropolitan newspaper, schools of journalism instantly arise. If it is awed by the development of big business, business schools full of the same reverence appear. If an administration enlarges the activities of the federal government and hence the staff thereof, training for the public service becomes the first duty of the universities.” Similarly, a “state university must help the farmers look after their cows. An endowed university must help adults get better jobs by giving them courses in the afternoon and evening.”

Hutchins attributes education’s confused state in part to the universities’ scramble for sources of funding but even more so to “our confused notion of democracy,” according to which “a student may stay in public education as long as he likes, may study what he likes, and may claim any academic degree whose alphabetical arrangement appeals to him.” In place of that hodgepodge arrangement, Hutchins advocates, first, that “collegiate and university work” be separated. The role of the college—which Hutchins thinks students should attend during what is now the last two years of high school and the first two years at the undergraduate level—would be to provide to all students the same general curriculum. Hutchins would adjust teaching methods to meet the differing aptitudes of

college students, would allow them to proceed at their own pace, and would confer the bachelor's degree upon successful completion. However, the university would be open only "to those who have the interest and ability that independent intellectual work demands. . . . The university cannot make its contribution to democracy on any other terms."

Another source of the university's decline, according to Hutchins, is a descent into vocationalism: the belief that the purpose of education is to help one earn a living. Against this notion, Hutchins proposes that only those professions having a "core of creative thought" be accorded a place in the university curriculum; moreover, that the practical aspects of even those professions be learned in separate institutes—or, in the case of physicians, hospitals—subsequent to the completion of academic work. As still another "major cause of our disorder" Hutchins cites "an erroneous notion of progress." From the fact that great progress has been made in science and technology, men reach the erroneous conclusion that the past has nothing valuable to say to us. Also, because the "tremendous strides of science and technology seem . . . to be the result of the accumulation of data," education becomes more and more taken up with the indiscriminate collection of quantitative data.

"Our erroneous notion of progress," Hutchins writes, "has thrown the classics and the liberal arts out of the curriculum, overemphasized the empirical sciences, and made education the servant of any contemporary movements in society, no matter how superficial."

Consequently, a student who entered the university would find a

vast number of departments and professional schools all anxious to give him the latest information about a tremendous variety of subjects, some important, some trivial, some indifferent. He would find that democracy, liberalism, and academic freedom meant that all these subjects and fractions of subjects must be regarded as equally valuable. It would not be democratic to hint that Scandinavian was not as significant as law or that methods of lumbering was not as fundamental as astronomy. He would find a complete and thoroughgoing disorder.

The reason "that the chief characteristic of the higher learning is disorder," Hutchins adds, is that "there is no ordering principle in it." Instead, the

modern university may be compared with an encyclopedia. The encyclopedia contains many truths. It may consist of nothing else. But its unity can be found only in its alphabetical arrangement. The university is in much the same case. It has departments running from art to zoology; but neither the students nor the professors know what is the relation of one departmental truth to another, or what the relation of departmental truths to those in the domain of another department may be.

In place of the existing educational chaos Hutchins advocates a general curriculum of "permanent studies" designed to "cultivate the intellectual virtues." To the objection that "real life is in constant flux and change, and that education must be in constant flux and

change as well," Hutchins responds that, yes, "all things are in change"; however, there is more to the story. He quotes this passage from Paul Shorey:

If literature and history are a Heraclitean flux of facts, if one unit is as significant as another, one book, one idea, the equivalent of another . . . , we may for a time bravely tread the mill of scholastic routine, but in the end the soul will succumb to an immense lassitude and bafflement. But if . . . the flux is not all, if the good, the true, and the beautiful are something real and ascertainable, if these eternal ideals re-embody themselves from age to age essentially the same in the imaginative visions of supreme genius and in the persistent rationality and sanity of the world's best books, then our reading and study are redeemed, both from the obsessions of the hour, and the tyranny of quantitative measures and mechanical methods.

Nor does Hutchins accept "the free elective system as Mr. Eliot introduced it at Harvard." Against letting students determine their curriculum, Hutchins cites the then century-old advice of "Whewell, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge":

Young persons may be so employed and so treated that their caprice, their self-will, their individual tastes and propensities, are educated and developed; but this is not Education. It is not the education of a Man; for what is educated is not what belongs to man as man, and connects man with man. It is not the Education of a man's Humanity, but the Indulgence of his Individuality.

"In general education," Hutchins concludes, "we are interested in drawing out the elements of our common human nature; we are interested in the attributes of the race, not the accidents of individuals."

Toward that end Hutchins advocates at the collegiate level

a course of study consisting of the greatest books of the western world and the arts of reading, writing, thinking, and speaking, together with mathematics, the best exemplar of the processes of human reason. If our hope has been to frame a curriculum which educates the elements of our common human nature, this program should realize our hope. If we wish to prepare the young for intelligent action, this course of study should assist us; for they will have learned what has been done in the past, and what the greatest men have thought. They will have learned how to think themselves. If we wish to lay a basis for advanced study, that basis is provided. . . .

Only at the university level, according to Hutchins, is there room for specialization, and even there it should not be carried to such an extreme that particular subject matter is not related to the whole. Regarding research, Hutchins notes that the word has two meanings. One of them—research "in the sense of gathering data for the sake of gathering them has . . . no place in the university" proper, though such data gathering for practical purposes might be done in institutes affiliated with a university. However, research "in the sense of the development, elaboration, and refinement of principles to-

gether with the collection and use of empirical materials to aid in these processes is one of the highest activities of a university and one in which all its professors should be engaged."

For a university to exist, says Hutchins, there must be an ordering and proportioning discipline capable of putting all objects of study into their proper relationship with the whole of reality. In the medieval university that discipline was theology, which is based on revealed truth and on articles of faith. Theology, he observes, served to provide rational order to the medieval university and, for its time, to provide practical order as well. But in our time it is futile, for a variety of reasons, to look to theology to unify the university. For that reason, says Hutchins, we are closer to the position of the Greeks, whose thought, though not dependent on revelation or faith, "was unified by the study of first principles. Plato had a dialectic which was a method of exploring first principles. Aristotle made the knowledge of them into the science of metaphysics."

Adapting the term as used by Aristotle, Hutchins declares that all university students should study "metaphysics" or philosophy, which he defines as "not only the study of first principles, but all that follows from it, about the principles of change in the physical world, which is the philosophy of nature, and about the analysis of man and his productions in the fine arts including literature." In addition, the student would study the social sciences—"which are practical sciences, dealing with the relations of man and man"—and "would study natural sci-

ence, which is the science of man and nature." The student, under Hutchins's arrangement, would have the option of placing emphasis on one of these categories, but he would study all three in relation to one another.

There are many obvious similarities between Hutchins's prescriptions for education, as outlined here, and the educational thought of Babbitt, though the latter was more elaborately developed and plumbed greater depths, especially in aesthetics and ethics; Hutchins at one point in his career convened a Committee to Frame A World Constitution: a goal Babbitt would have considered as dangerous as it was utopian. It would have been virtually impossible for Hutchins to be unfamiliar with Babbitt's ideas on these matters. Babbitt's "New Humanism" movement was the focus of an intense international debate that raged for more than a decade; at the height of the controversy he addressed an audience of three thousand at Carnegie Hall. Yet nowhere in *The Higher Learning* does Hutchins mention Babbitt's contribution. Nor does Mortimer Adler, who was for many years Hutchins's closest intellectual ally and collaborator, mention Babbitt in his 1977 autobiography *Philosopher at Large*.

Assuming that Hutchins was aware of similarities between his own prescriptions and Babbitt's, it is possible that he downplayed them in order to avoid the bitter and inaccurate denunciations that had been heaped on the late Harvard professor. Babbitt himself advised his students to use his ideas if they wished, but to forgo any mention of his name for reasons of prudence. (Even today, more than

sixty years after Babbitt's death and at a time of growing appreciation for his work, this writer knows of several influential Babbitt admirers who still think it the better part of valor to omit any reference to the connection between his insights and their own.) If Hutchins hoped to avoid calumny, however, he did not succeed. As Ashmore reports in his introduction, *The Higher Learning* drew praise from the distinguished Columbia scholar Mark Van Doren, writing in the *New York Herald Tribune*, as well as from the *New York Times'* reviewer, Ralph Thompson. But John Dewey, in the academic journal *The Social Frontier*, suggested that Hutchins's prescriptions were tantamount to fascism and, at minimum, suggested sympathy for medieval Catholicism. The latter charge was hurled by numerous others, although, as Ashmore observes,

It took a considerable flight of imagination to pin a Catholic label

on Hutchins. He was descended from a long line of New England Puritans, and his grandfather and father were noted Protestant preachers. Metaphysics, as he used the term, based first principles on reason, not faith, and he insisted that while moral issues could not be set aside in the name of value-free objectivity, religion as doctrine had no place in education.

Still, Dewey, like Harvard's President Eliot before him, was pushing education in the direction it was already going. Virtually all of the reforms instituted by Hutchins at Chicago have been dismantled, and the educational anarchy deplored by both Babbitt and Hutchins has worsened exponentially, with effects that pervade the entire society and culture. Which makes it urgent that their wisdom, much of which is summarized in these two books, be heeded.

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