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## Reviews

### *A Thinker Behind and Ahead of His Time*

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**Character and Culture: Essays on East and West**, by Irving Babbitt, with a new introduction by Claes G. Ryn, a bibliography of Babbitt's writings, and an index to all of Babbitt's books. *New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995. 1+361 pp. \$21.95.*

Transaction Publishers reprints Irving Babbitt's posthumous *Spanish Character and Other Essays* (1940) under a new title. For the new edition Claes G. Ryn has added a comprehensive introduction to Babbitt's life, works, and reputation. The book collects essays, reviews, and addresses written for various occasions during the period 1898 to 1930 and covers the wide range of topics the new title suggests. While the writing is occasional, Babbitt's principles, summed up in the concluding "What I Believe," are maintained with remarkable consistency. Some essays are better than others, and I would take issue with some of their judgments, but all bear witness to a challenging critical mind. This timely publication led me to reflect on Babbitt's place in history: one of this century's foremost naysayers to Progress, he was both behind

and ahead of his time. As an articulate advocate for humane life and letters, he is for all times.

The literary discussions are those of a different era, written after nineteenth-century criticism had seen its day and before twentieth-century criticism had found its footing. Babbitt assailed the romantics' sensualism, sentimental imagination, and cult of personality and managed to make them less fashionable for a period. But like others of his generation, Babbitt was profoundly influenced by Victorian writers; he delivers his judgments in the resounding public voice of nineteenth-century social and cultural criticism. The alternative critical mode during the years Babbitt was writing was a philological idiom that embraced historical relativism and resisted literary standards. Because he rejected this, his writings now

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seem much less dated than those of his more progressive colleagues. The manner learned from Ruskin and Arnold, Emerson and Lowell is still appealing, though some humanists might prefer even older models. Babbitt did not practice the method of close reading that would become the hallmark of twentieth-century criticism; neither did he cultivate the detached civility characteristic of classical humanism. His criticisms sometimes suffer from the polemical urgency typical of culture criticism. One misses the poise of neo-classical critics, like Dryden, that Babbitt found inadequate: cooler heads, they were often better judges. Working in the Arnoldian mode, Babbitt often relies on touchstones to illustrate his points. He damned critical impressionism, but could practice it well enough when it suited his purpose, as in the essay on the Spanish character that gave the book its original title. This was not hypocritical: Babbitt's version of the romantic gusto was consistent with a doctrine that emphasized the interplay of imagination and understanding. His aim was to vivify general and public conceptions rather than particular and private sensations.

The breadth and variety of Babbitt's reading was also characteristic of the Victorian sage, ranging far beyond the kind of curriculum he advocated for purposes of education. Babbitt, who ridiculed antiquarianism, discusses court romances and minor writers left untouched even by modern specialists. His object in these far-flung investigations was to place contemporary experience in a proper critical perspective, reasoning from a broad base of evi-

dence. He strove to be discriminating without being doctrinaire, and often succeeded. But he was perhaps too much swayed by the characterizations of romanticism being made by American progressives, damning the writers they praised rather than challenging their assumption that the progressive movement originated in a romantic revolt against the classics. The evidence was more complex and ambiguous than the disputants on either side were inclined to allow.

As Babbitt admits, he did not in his literary judgments attempt "rounded estimates" of authors. He usually sought to identify particular questionable or admirable tendencies. The animus against romanticism can skew Babbitt's judgment, as when we are told that Diderot is "so little capable, in short, of composition, that he can scarcely be said to be a writer at all" (109). Diderot had an exquisite formal sense, nor could the quivering wretch described here have managed the *Encyclopédie*. We are told that Shaftesbury believes that "the unconverted man is not egotistic" when the *Characteristicks* laboriously insists upon the discipline necessary to overcome innate selfishness. Thomas Gray supposedly anticipates the tribes of demotic poets, when the *Elegy* argues that without education even the exceptional genius is rendered inglorious. Gray's opinion of style in a democracy hardly differed from Babbitt's. Babbitt was certainly right about the vicious or silly tendencies of romanticism in lesser practitioners, but he was too much given to judging major figures by their lesser standard. Yet one of the virtues of

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Babbitt's humanism is that it can illuminate the writings and characters of writers he himself was too ready to concede to the other side.

Babbitt's great contribution to criticism was the recognition that the Enlightenment and Romanticism were less opposed to each other than allied in their opposition to humanism. But Babbitt borrowed freely from Enlightenment and romantic writers when it served his purposes. Like many an Enlightenment philosopher, he resisted tradition as a source of authority, preferring appeals to "the things themselves." He was indebted to the romantics in the way he conceives of history and culture. Babbitt's interpretation of modernity is profoundly anti-Hegelian, and yet it is difficult to imagine how he could have arrived at his reflections on Bacon and Rousseau without the example of post-romantic history before him. Here, as with critical impressionism, he proved adept at turning the tools of the enemy against the enemy.

The debt to nineteenth-century criticism also appears in a way of characterizing authors with reference to parts and fragments, a habit Babbitt both criticizes and indulges. Tellingly, he suggests that for neoclassical critics style is that "factor of a work of art which preserves in every part some sense of the form of the whole," a formulation that may owe more to Coleridge than to neoclassical criticism. He goes on to praise Longinus, critic of fragments and the wellspring of the rhetorical criticism practiced by romantics (171, 176). Babbitt suggestively identifies aesthetic fragmentation with scientific specialization. Content to let

the part stand for the whole, is he guilty of a Longinian indifference to differentiation in his treatment of Bacon and Rousseau as apostles of modernity? In the bulk of his writings Francis Bacon was a thoroughgoing humanist, if not of a kind that Babbitt could approve, and was in this respect the farthest thing from an advocate of specialization. If Rousseau figures as a dreamer in his autobiography and reflections, is he not elsewhere the totalitarian pragmatist? But Babbitt argued that these apparently inconsistent orientations are in fact different manifestations of a single view of life. In either case a more comprehensive and discriminating treatment of the works and their place in history might lead to a different evaluation. But that would contribute little to the daunting rhetorical challenge of debunking progressivism, which required a strong voice, a degree of simplification, and perhaps also a short list of heroes and villains.

If Babbitt is not always a reliable critic or interpreter, he always had an extremely keen sense of larger issues. His insights into the social and intellectual consequences of the modern age do not wait upon his judgments of particular authors or passages, nor are they dependent upon the critical mode he found expedient and congenial. As much as from literature, they arose out of his experience of life, and more particularly his experience of Harvard University at the turn of the century. Where education is concerned, Babbitt was more than just a sagacious observer. He was a prophet.

His criticism of twentieth-century education and social doctrine began in

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1897 with "The Rational Study of the Classics" and continued unstinted in "[Harvard President Charles] Eliot and American Education" (1929), collected here. Such essays might have been written yesterday: "if the average student today is more interested in football than in things of the mind, one reason may be that football, unlike the college as it has become under the new education, has a definite goal and is frankly competitive with reference to it" (216). Babbitt ridiculed the Rousseauvian idea that each student's uniqueness must be accommodated within a spineless curriculum. He was equally critical of the narrow-mindedness that typified vocational education. Again, his fundamental insight was that "Rousseauvian" humanitarianism and "Baconian" pragmatism are two sides of the same coin, both working to undermine the teleology explicit in classical statements of the aims of education. These presupposed a common understanding of the human good that has been rejected both by scientific specialists and sentimental liberationists. Their joint attack on standards, authority, classics, tradition, and common sense was, in Babbitt's view, profoundly anti-liberal. The more expansive the course offerings and the more narrow their focus on vocational specialties, the more limited their ability to transmit knowledge and shape character. The limitless possibilities anticipated by educational reformers denied not only the desirability of limits, but the inherently limited nature of the human material which was to be reformed: "What becomes of the beneficence of the control over the

forces of nature that has been secured with the aid of the scientific imagination, should it turn out that in the unconventional man—the man whose impulses are free to overflow—the will to power overflows more freely than the will to service? The Great War has enlightened us on this point" (213-14). But the First World War did not enlighten educationists on this point, nor the Second World War, nor the War on Poverty. Successive failures of the modernist program merely result in more drastic proposals for reform, all in the name of progress. Babbitt's explanation for this phenomenon is both simple and persuasive: "stubborn facts, it has been rightly remarked, are as nothing compared with a stubborn theory. Altruistic theory is likely to prove peculiarly stubborn, because, probably more than any other theory ever conceived, it is flattering: it holds out the hope of the highest spiritual benefits—for example, peace and fraternal union—without any corresponding spiritual effort" (232-33). Given this state of affairs, it is clear why Babbitt would supplement appeals to reason and history with appeals to poetic imagination, ethical will, and religion; only the most attractive and high-minded works could be expected to make the thorny path desirable to students already predisposed to prefer pleasure to virtue.

Perhaps it is no accident that reason and history, poetry, ethics, and religion are in such desperate straits in American education. The elective curriculum at Harvard, which Babbitt so despised, has been extremely influential in weakening the humanities in higher education. Recently the National Association

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of Scholars has undertaken to quantify just how far the elective system has penetrated the leading American universities, and the results are astonishing: students can not merely omit this or that author, doctrine, or period, but avoid literature and philosophy and history altogether. And many have, rendering humanist criticisms of modernity utterly incomprehensible to much of America's elite.

The present round of reforms promises to be one of the most dangerous yet, for in recasting their disciplines as social science, humanities faculties have courted a backlash that may deprive the universities of their best hope for substantive reform. In 1929 Babbitt spoke of the "almost universal suspicion" directed against "the most thoroughgoing humanitarians—for example, our professors of pedagogy and sociology" (201); that suspicion is now extended to academic disciplines generally, as well as the professions and government agencies dependent upon the academy for doctrine and certification. Institutions will certainly be downsized; whether they will be reformed is an altogether different question. Babbitt recognized the need to discipline the disciplines. As he saw it, the issue was less one of quantity than of quality: "Even an editor of *The New Republic* may, it is true, be modern enough to see that democracy needs discipline. In that case he looks for this discipline to some form or other of 'efficiency,' an excellent thing in its place, but when thus lifted out of its place, leading straight to that Philistinism or worship of mere machinery against which Arnold waged lifelong warfare" (58).

When colleges promise to reform themselves by redistributing resources towards "productive" departments they miss the point. Modern educators are notoriously slow learners: serious reform, reform that calls into question the presuppositions of modernity, is as vigorously resisted now as it was in Babbitt's lifetime.

In spite of Babbitt's opposition to didacticism in art, his stature rests in large part upon his status as a moralist. Morality, being part and parcel of human nature, is common to all times and places. But it is also a matter of manners and beliefs, and so finds different manifestations. The task of the humanist, as opposed to the specialist, is to identify and uphold general standards of behavior and taste. Babbitt regarded himself as a humanist of a particular kind, however, and while he pledged allegiance to what he regarded as the core of humanist teachings, he aspired to being "positive" and "critical" in ways that are obviously modern and American.

Thus, "the person who refuses to accept pseudo-science or any other substitute for standards still has to decide whether he is to secure his standards in a critical or a purely traditional way" (220). Americans are traditionally uncomfortable with tradition, and so with Babbitt, although in a special way: he found mere traditionalism insufficient as a source of standards in the modern world. In some ways similar to Emerson and William James, he was an eclectic and pragmatic individualist, which resulted in no small tension between himself and younger humanists like Allen Tate or T. S. Eliot, as they sought an anchor in traditional, ortho-

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dox Christianity. To them liberalism, which Babbitt wanted to reform and deepen, was less attractive. Babbitt sincerely believed that the problem with most modern thinkers is that they are not modern enough, that a truly positive and critical examination of the evidence would vindicate what wise men had always known about human nature.

That knowledge includes what Babbitt called the Higher Will: "this whole dispute as to what is a real rendering of human nature reduces itself at last to a single question: Is the 'war in the cave' artificial, after all? Suppose it be true, as the humanist asserts, that deep down in the breast of the individual man, far more primary and immediate than either thought or feeling, is a power of control over thought and feeling, a something that may be defined experimentally as the back pull towards the center. In that case, the 'war in the cave,' so far from being artificial, the mere prejudice of outworn dogmatisms, is a fact of formidable import. To deny this fact in the name of 'nature' is to be guilty of a monstrous mutilation of human nature" (119). Denying the struggle between the Higher Will and innate tendencies towards evil and laziness, naturalists abandon morality for sociology.

Babbitt's reflections on this point sometimes resemble those of his contemporary Sigmund Freud. Both ransacked literature, philosophy, and history in support of a pessimistic assessment of human nature rejected out of hand by the social sciences: evidence, if not of original sin, at least of innate propensities to evil. Both emphasized the vital importance to society of disciplining the passions, made pos-

sible by a higher will that can be discovered through reflection and self-knowledge. Both kept confessional religion at arm's length while recognizing it as an essentially human response to pain and desire. Neither gave an account of their doctrine that was verifiable by hard science, though some of their grittier insights into the human condition accord well enough with recent findings in evolutionary biology.

Babbitt and Freud were surely correct in emphasizing the universal connection between discipline and civilization: as moralists, Moses and Socrates, Jesus and Buddha recognized the same human failings and advocated spiritual discipline as the means to overcome them. Babbitt went beyond Freud in regarding morality as having a supranatural, transcendent source. He also affirmed the core truth of religion. But, while stressing the need for social and individual discipline, Babbitt stopped short of endorsing a particular moral or religious tradition. It has seemed to some Christians, but certainly not all, that his humanism, unaided by revelation or tradition, cannot easily supply answers to the questions, "which discipline?" "which discriminations?" For better or worse, there is a wide degree of tolerance but less specificity and detail in Babbitt's moral teachings. A Christian may welcome the higher liberalism while missing the higher authority, traditionally understood.

Babbitt's criticism of modern institutions is so very astute, one wonders why it wasn't acted upon. He was once very widely read and his ideas had a hearing both within the academy and without. Although swimming against

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the tide, he was a distinguished Harvard professor at the time when Harvard professors had enormous sway over public opinion. His essays, published in *The Nation*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The Saturday Review*, reached a broadly literate public the likes of which no longer exists. Babbitt had influential allies and disciples, and for a while in the 1920s and '30s the prospects for New Humanism looked bright. Perhaps the times were wrong: the Depression and subsequent post-war prosperity witnessed a fifty-year's triumph of Progressivism.

In its aftermath, this is certainly the right moment to re-read Irving Babbitt, though it would be a mistake to expect him to supply easy answers to contemporary dilemmas. He will hardly satisfy those now who look to traditional authority to supply the specific direction. Some may even agree with Tate in his 1930 essay "The Fallacy of Humanism": "Believers in tradition, reason, and authority . . . will approach the writings of Messrs. Babbitt, More and Foerster with more than an open mind; they will have in advance the conviction that 'the rightful concern of man is his humanity, his world of value . . . that marks him off from a merely quantitative order;' but, after a great deal of patient reading, they will come away with that conviction—and with no more than that conviction. They will have got no specific ideas about values—that is to say, they will have gained no medium for acquiring them; and such a medium, they will reflect, is morally identical with the values themselves. Values are not suspended in the air to be plucked."

The question of whether Babbitt's

critical philosophy would benefit from greater reliance on tradition is debatable. I'm inclined to agree with Tate, and would point to the decline of the New Humanist movement after Babbitt's death as an example of what was lacking: a "medium," a tradition that over the long term would lend it the institutional authority and private passion required to compete successfully. But sixty years on, there is a tradition of sorts, of which this journal is a vital part. The republication of Babbitt's works is a basic way in which his ideas acquire a medium. Another way is to structure and develop his ideas as formal philosophy. One can also continue the vein of criticism begun by Babbitt, fleshing out humanist principles by applying them to literary texts and current affairs. Finally, one can continue his program of resistance and reform within the academy, the vital spirit behind any humanist enterprise. There is also the possibility that Humanist convictions could be incorporated with larger traditions—literary, philosophical, political, and religious—which have more specific content and which would benefit from what Humanism has to offer. Those wishing to develop Babbitt's humanism in either direction will benefit from Claes G. Ryn's extensive introduction, which is succinctly and masterfully written. The bibliography and comprehensive index at the back will prove enormously helpful to anyone seeking to bring Irving Babbitt's ideas to bear on human issues that will be with us always. As even Tate conceded, "the best of Babbitt is still alive."