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## The Neo-Humanistic Criticism Of Irving Babbitt

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THE NEO-HUMANISTIC CRITICISM OF IRVING BABBITT

being

A thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty  
of the Fort Hays Kansas State College in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Science

by

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University of Nebraska

Date August 1, 1945

Approved Myrtle E. McGinnis  
Major Professor

W. C. Robertson  
Chairman Graduate Council

PREFACE

1973  
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Many influential treatises have been written in the field of literary criticism. It was the writer's privilege during last year to make a study of the opinions of some of the past masters in this art, but the course that was pursued included no critical essays of the present or of the very recent past. Modern writing has plunged into such a diversity of modes that the term "chaotic" is frequently applied to it. Such multiplicity and complexity of form, style, and ideas have evolved that it is particularly gratifying to find one willing, capable, and opinionated enough to decide by careful judgment whether a thing is good or bad. Such a person elevates himself to a position of leader and critic. Irving Babbitt has distinguished himself uniquely in this capacity. He has presented most significant issues and has accomplished lasting results with his ideas for the readjustment of a theory of "true" classicism. He has also attacked vigorously certain types of romanticism and the deterministic theories of naturalism.

The theories and criticism of this author may be studied through two approaches. A reading of his books and essays, which are copious and diversified, gives to the careful reader a first-hand introduction to his ideas. He has influenced the thinking of many literary men. From them, both his opponents and his proponents, one may further study his theories. Much reading from both of these sources has been done by the writer, and the method used in arriving at conclusions has been largely one of comparisons.

The plan for presentation of the material is much the same. Aside from comparisons, the writer has felt that a generous amount of quoting was necessary, in order that the reader may become better acquainted with Irving Babbitt through the medium of his own words.

The nature of the investigation carried out makes it advisable to present the results by chapters, each more or less a unit in itself. The whole is an attempt to afford the readers a fairly complete and detailed picture of the critical theories and the influence of the man, teacher, and author, Mr. Babbitt.

And now but one task remains to be done: to express my appreciation for the help so generously given me. The time accorded the preparation of this work would have been insufficient had it not been for the prompt and courteous aid given me by Dr. Streeter, our librarian. I thank Dr. Albertson, who in the beginning assured me that "one is never too old to learn," and Dr. Reed, who doubted it, and thereby presented a challenge. Dr. Wiest is an inspiring teacher; his vast understanding and ability in the field of literature is enviable. There must be omitted, in any list of acknowledgments, many whose assistance has had a part for which no writer could effectually thank them. There are also those to whom words seem inadequate to convey the admiration and respect one feels for them. Such a one is Dr. McGinnis, regarded by the many whom she has taught as a brilliant scholar. The writer is grateful to her for her very substantial assistance.

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## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to determine whether to call the Neo-Humanistic philosophy and its exponents a movement, a school, or a group. In so far as the word 'movement' is suggestive of more or less continuity of development, it is a handicap to apply the term in connection with humanism. It has been stated that it is premature to do so. In so far as the term 'school' suggests a trend of thought and its adherents, the application is probably acceptable with reference to humanism. The term 'group' does not have an all-inclusive connotation, but it does reveal a suggestion of persons banded together in a common cause. For this reason the writer feels that the word 'group' is preferable to the other terms. This paper has for its objective the presentation and consideration of only one from the Neo-Humanistic Group.

If humanism could be explained in simple terms, most people would accept it. As is well known, the term 'humanist' was used, first in European countries in the Renaissance period to refer to the type of scholar who was proficient in Latin and Greek, and was inclined to prefer the humanity of classical writers to what seemed to him the excess of divinity in the medievals. The word derives from Greek thought; its etymology implies discrimination and judgment. So complex a term as humanism cannot be adequately explained or even intelligibly put into a definition or a brief account. One cannot frame a clear-cut, precise, and brief explanation, or a

definition that would be unanimously accepted. In the word 'humanism' we find a suffix which denotes something not easy to define. It is used in some comparatively simple terms such as 'Americanism' or 'patriotism' but for the most part it has been the writer's experience to find some difficulty in explaining such terms as 'pragmatism', 'deism', 'Platonism', or 'behaviorism.' Such a word is 'humanism.' Louis Mercier has said:<sup>1</sup>

By definition, there is really nothing new about it, nothing in fact which the man in the street does not take for granted as the immediate data of consciousness. It merely asserts that there is such a thing as "man as such."

Confusion concerning humanism arises from the general terms.

In the early part of his book, Literature and the American College,<sup>2</sup> Mr. Babbitt has written:

The term humanism is confused with humane, humanistic, humanitarian, and humanitarianism. Humanism comes from the Latin (humanus, humanitas) from which all the words of the group are derived.

In the preface to this volume we read:<sup>3</sup>

For his understanding of the word Babbitt goes back to a study made by M. Gaston Boissier on the ancient meanings of humanitas. He stated that in the beginning it represented a fairly elastic virtue of Romans, later used so loosely as to sacrifice its meaning, Aulus Gellius complained. "Humanitas" says Gellius, is incorrectly used to denote a 'promiscuous benevolence, what the Greeks call philanthropy,' whereas the word really implies doctrine and discipline, 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.

1. Louis J. A. Mercier, The Challenge of Humanism (New York, Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 13.
2. Irving Babbitt, Literature and the American College (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910), p. 1.
3. Ibid.



Paul Elmer More gives the following statement of the fundamental philosophy and psychology of modern humanism:<sup>4</sup>

...Against those who teach that man is totally submerged in natural law, the humanist lays emphasis on that in man which distinguishes him generically from other animals and so in one part of his composite being lifts him out of the more narrowly defined kingdom of nature; and the humanist assumes for himself this title as opposed to the naturalist because this superadded element, or faculty, however named, is what marks off a man as man. In a word, the humanist is simply one who takes his stand on being human. Against those who still hold that man is only a fragmentary cog in the vast machine which we call the universe, moved by the force of some relentless, unvarying, unconscious law, the humanist asserts that we are of free will and answerable for our choice of good or evil. Against those who reduce man to a chaos of sensations and instincts and desires checking and counterchecking one another in endlessly shifting patterns, the humanist points to a separate faculty of inhibition, the inner check or the frein vital, whereby these expensive impulses may be kept within bounds and ordered to a design not of their making. Against those who proclaim that a man can only drift, like a rudderless ship, with the weltering currents of change, the humanist maintains that he is capable of self-direction, and that character, as different from native temperament, is a growth dependent on clarity and strength of purpose. Against those who, to appease the stings of conscience, assure us that we have no responsibility for our character, so the lesson of wisdom is to shuffle off any sense of regret or remorse or fear; and against those who go further in flattery and, through each and every appearance of delinquency, assert the instinctive total goodness of a redeemed nature--against these the humanist contends that as free agents we are accountable for defalcations and aberrations and that self-complacency is the deadliest foe to human excellence. On the other hand, the humanist will not stand with those who fear at human nature, as if men were in no better state than rats in a trap ...

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4. Paul Elmer More, "A Revival of Humanism" (a review of Norman Foerster's Humanism and America, first published in the Bookman for March, 1930), in On Being Human, New Shelburne Essays, volume 3 (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1936), pp. 7-9.

In their contention with the naturalists who in one form or another have for some time dominated the public mind and controlled the springs of literature, our rebels the neo-humanists argue that their doctrine of humanistic dualism is no insubstantial web of fancy worn to veil the hard facts of life, but the outcome of our surest observation and of our most immediate self-knowledge.

...replying to those who revolt from the irrational aspect of dualism, Mr. Elliott continues: "...Recently humanism, in its attempt to fulfill and deepen the experimentality of the modern spirit, has of necessity placed its chief emphasis upon that inward division. It has insisted that the opposition between the higher and lower wills within us, whether they be called "divine" and "natural" or what not, is essentially inexplicable by expert reason and is nevertheless, from the present standpoint of human happiness, the most important feature of the universe arrived at by free and full experimentation... It assigns a central value to the paradox established by the immediate experience of Everyman when he tries (in the terminology of common sense) to be "at one with himself" by keeping his "better self" above his "worse self."

It is evident that the word humanist has two main meanings--an historical one as applied to the scholars who turned away from the Middle Ages to the Greeks and the Romans, and an equally important modern meaning that derives from the former one. In this latter sense humanists are those who, in any age, strive to attain proportionateness through a cultivation of the law of measure.

Mr. More asserts that the humanist, like the naturalist and the humanitarian, "may take for his creed the saying that the proper study of mankind is man." But the humanist differs in his findings about humanity.<sup>5</sup>

...The humanist is positive in his assertion that the distinguishing quality of humanity is something overlooked by

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5. Ibid., p. 12.

the hostile camp. Both would admit that man is the measure; but it is the naturalist who denies the existence of that element of man's composite being which the humanist affirms to be the normal standard of measurement. Again it is the humanist who takes into positive account the value of tradition as a complement to the limitations of the individual, and who regards the present as a small but integral part of the long experience of the human race... The law of proportion and measure and the need of self-restraint are indeed words often on his lips; but he believes that only by such discipline in the mind of the artist can the higher creative forces be liberated. He would put a check upon the spasms of eccentricity to the end that the imagination may move largely in its work of genuine originality.

In their early assertions about neo-humanism, Mr. More and Mr. Babbitt were agreed. Later Mr. More was at variance in regard to religion, seeming more inclined to supply or to admit of a connecting link between humanism and God. The question between the two seemed to be concerned with the exact nature of the relation of humanism to religion. In regard to this Mr. Foerster has said:<sup>6</sup>

"While Mr. Babbitt has been first and last concerned with building up a sound conception of individualism, Mr. More has been progressively absorbed in the study of the duality of human nature."

Humanism, as defined by Professor Babbitt, asserts that social and individual sanity depend upon the conception that man has of his own nature. His humanism is opposed to all creeds which would merge God, man, and the physical world. It is particularly opposed to pragmatism and experimentalism which would seek standards within the flux of change.

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6. Norman Foerster, Humanism and America (New York, Farrar and Rinehart, 1930), p. 23.

Norman Foerster has further expressed his opinions as follows:<sup>7</sup>

Humanism has to do primarily with that plane of practical ethics where the natural and the supernatural meet together, producing a world of harmony and order and meditation. Religion is an attempt to live in a plane above the humanistic, where the supernatural departs from the natural into its own citadel of imperturbable peace. Humanism is thus not anti-religious, in so far as it depends on the controlling power of the supernatural; but it may be non-religious in so far as its business is with the world and does not seek to escape the world.

Other less tolerant critics have considered humanism a contemporary cult that has called itself a religion but which has substituted faith in man for faith in God.

It is a difficult and delicate problem to define Mr. Babbitt's religion. His central aim was to secure sound individualism. It seems substantially true that he had more intellectual respect and sympathy for any reasonable form of an orthodox Christianity than he had for modern philosophy or theosophy. The humanism of Irving Babbitt differs from that of the period of the Renaissance most in the matter of selectiveness. The humanist of this period, Mr. Babbitt classes as a humanitarian. In chapter 1 of his book, Literature and the American College,<sup>8</sup> Mr. Babbitt makes a distinction between humanitarianism and humanism. He calls the former "unselective sympathy"; the latter "sympathetic selection." He says:

A humanitarian is a person who has sympathy for mankind in general, and is willing to further its progress, and his creed

7. Ibid., p. 334.

8. Irving Babbitt, Literature and the American College (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910), pp. 6-36.

should be called humanitarianism. His chief concern is knowledge and sympathy. The humanist is more selective. He concentrates on the individual and although he admist sympathy he tempers it with judgment... Unselective and universal sympathy is usually attributed to Christianity and dates its beginning there. This aloofness and disdain are reflected and in some ways intensified in the humanism of the Renaissance.

.....

The humanist as we know him historically moved between an extreme of sympathy and an extreme of discipline of selection and became humane as he mediated between these extremes. Socrates is said to have attained an admirable balance between thought and feeling. The aim, as Matthew Arnold has said in the most admirable of his critical essays, is to see life steadily and see it whole. The law of measure is important. The Greeks said, 'nothing too much.' Humanism needs to be defended against the encroachments of physical science as formerly from theology.

The first article of Babbitt's humanistic creed was the dual nature of man. He pitted a desire for goodness and truth and beauty against a world of evil. He was emphatically opposed to naturalism, which, he said, did not clearly recognize the duality of human nature. Naturalism, as he analyzed it, was composed of two branches. He called these "Baconian utilitarianism" and "emotional naturalism." The former, he said, concentrated on laws governing physical objects; the latter, led by Rousseau, regarded man as purely instinctive and emotional. He said they under-estimated the human will and intelligence. He said: "Striving against the problem of evil, the naturalists have a resultant chaos which can be turned into order only as men use intellect and will to overcome tendencies of bestiality."

In Mr. Babbitt's humanism the avoidance of extremes is achieved through a selection which presupposes in man the power to choose and therefore the capacity of will and of reason. He has the power to do or to refrain from doing. It is this power to choose that differentiates him from the rest of nature. In fact, it constitutes him a man, a being distinctively different from other beings.

Mr. Babbitt's theories are being reflected in the world through many channels. Their significance can best be seen by noting their effect on those with whom he associated closely. Perhaps William F. Maag, Jr. knew him as intimately as anyone, for he lived in the Babbitt home for several years while attending school at Harvard and was numbered among his students. He cites this statement as being highly inspirational to him: "To exercise the will," he Babbitt said, "to select a goal and strive toward that goal through all the difficulties that beset you, that is masculine." He writes further:

Freedom of the will is therefore of primary importance in Babbitt's philosophy... Faith demands works, and works require that one shall be free to act. Christianity, Babbitt told us, was summed up in three principles of action: One should build his house upon a rock, By their fruits ye shall know them, and Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's. Both Christ and Buddha taught that spiritual indolence is the chief source of evil.

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9. William F. Maag, Jr., in Irving Babbitt: Man and Teacher (edited by Frederick Manchester and Odell Shepard, New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1941), p. 82.

Louis Mercier has written as follows:

Hence the extraordinary significance of the work of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More. Begun as a preliminary to literary criticism, it has evolved in concentric circles to touch upon every aspect of civilization. Finding the literary critic unable to deal adequately with values because he was without abiding standards with which to measure the manifoldness of change, Babbitt had the perspicacity, as we saw at the outset of this study, to recognize that "whether the critic can judge, and if so by what standards, is only a form of the more general inquiry whether the philosopher can discover any unifying principle to oppose to mere flux and relativity." Whereas naturalism leaves man helpless in the flux of relativity, humanism would make him master of that flux by leading him to discover the abiding principles within and without that flux and to build on this basis an ordered life and civilization.

And in expressing his judgment upon the value of the humanism

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of Irving Babbitt, Mr. Mercier has said:

To Irving Babbitt humanism may be more than a half-way house on the slope of spirituality. But whether on the slope or the summit, it surely is on a height where man may commune with God, rising above the plain of naturalism where man is satisfied to commune with himself.

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10. Louis J. A. Mercier, *Loc. Cit.*, p. 259.

11. Louis J. A. Mercier, *Loc. Cit.*, p. 177.

## CHAPTER II

### THE LIFE AND CAREER OF IRVING BABBITT

Irving Babbitt was born in Dayton, Ohio, August 2, 1865.<sup>1</sup> His father was Dr. Edwin Dwight Babbitt and his mother Augusta Darling Babbitt. At that time Dr. Babbitt and Mr. Abram Wilt were in partnership in a business school which they founded in Dayton. In later years he associated mostly with those to whom his son referred to as the "lunatic fringe" of liberal groups. Irving hated the "fuzzy minds and loose outlook on life," of the group and was constantly irritated by his father's connection with them. He reacted against the conditions that these associations brought into his life by a near open revolt. His mother was a mild-mannered and pleasant woman, colorless and unassuming.

The Babbitt family moved frequently during Irving's childhood, and he remembered living in New York City and in East Orange, New Jersey, where he attended public schools. In New York he sold papers

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1. Except where other references are given, the material for this chapter was taken from three sources: "Babbitt, Irving," in Twentieth-Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary, edited by S. J. Junitz and H. Haycraft, (New York, H. W. Wilson Company, 1942), pp. 55-56.

Babbitt, Dora D., "Biographical Sketch", in Irving Babbitt: Man and Teacher, edited by Frederick A. Manchester and Odell Shepard, (New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1941), p. 12.

Foerster, Norman, "Babbitt, Irving" in Dictionary of American Biography, edited by Harris E. Starr, (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), Vol. 21, Supplement 1, pp. 14-15



on the streets, where he learned to hold his own with the rough youngsters with whom he was forced to come in contact.

When Irving was about eleven years old, his mother died, and her parents then took Irving, his younger sister Katharine, and his older brother Tom to live with them on their farm near Cincinnati. Here, his life was that of a typical farm lad. He attended a district school, and spent his leisure time in the woods and fields. He helped the tenant farmer pick vegetables and fruit and take them to the city market.

When he was sixteen he took teachers' examinations, which he passed with high grades; this qualified him to teach in a district school.<sup>2</sup> His father re-married and took Katharine and Irving again to his own home, which was in Cincinnati. Irving continued his education in Woodward High School.

During one of the summers while still in high school Irving worked as a reporter for one of the Cincinnati papers. This experience, he counted very valuable, although in it there were aspects which were distasteful to him. He was assigned to a group who covered police-court news. This brought him into contact with a rough element whose conversation reflected their environment. The roughness of the talk had no appeal for him.

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2. I could not establish the fact of his having taught at this time. Evidences seem to indicate the contrary.

A second summer he spent on the Wyoming ranch of his uncle Albert Babbitt, in company with his brother Tom. Here he experienced the real life of the cowboy, being in the saddle many days from dawn to dark, and living very close to nature. He made many trips to the big markets in Chicago, helping with the cattle en route. He underwent many harrowing experiences during that summer. For a long period of years, he carried a scar on his hand, where an eagle, whose nest he was investigating, returning home and attacking him, fastened her talons in his hand.

Irving spent more than the average time in high school. After graduating he again enrolled and studied chemistry and civil engineering. His parents had evidently made no plans for his further education. It appears probable that this was due to lack of money. The urge to learn remained strong within him, however, and at the age of twenty, he ventured to enroll at Harvard. He was aided financially by his uncles,<sup>3</sup> Albert Babbitt, with whom he had worked on the Wyoming ranch, and Thomas Babbitt of Dayton, Ohio. It was characteristic of the boy that he went alone, and also that he never used the letters of introduction given him by his uncles and addressed to business friends of theirs.

His career in college was about the ordinary one, except for the fact that he was a more diligent student than the average. He

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3. There is a variation of opinion as to the source of his financial aid. Some attribute it to his brother Tom. See Living Authors: A Book of Biographies (The H. W. Wilson Company, New York, 1931), p. 14.

also seemed to have more inquisitiveness than his classmates, for it is said that he always chose the foremost seat in the classroom and asked so many questions that he oftentimes confused his instructors. His classmates dubbed him "professors' helper."

In his early study he was interested most in Greek and Latin. After he had been abroad he became absorbed in French. It is said that he was never interested in French character, which he did not admire, but that he was intensely interested in French intellect, and the French Language.

One of the most important things Babbitt did while he was still a student at Harvard was to take his junior year abroad, studying at the Sorbonne, in France. Undeterred by a shortage of funds, he walked with a classmate through France and Spain, Italy and Switzerland, down the Rhine and through Holland. Then he returned to Harvard, taking his B.A. in 1889.

In this same year he accepted a position on the faculty of the University of Montana,<sup>4</sup> which was then a small, new school in Deer Lodge. He spent two years in this position, and then he went abroad to study in Paris at the Sorbonne. Following this, he returned to Harvard, where he continued his oriental studies under Professor Lanman. At that time he met Elmer More, with whom he was

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4. Most of his biographers overlook this work and give his position at Williams College as his first teaching experience. I choose to believe it is an authentic statement, for it is recorded by Dora Mary Drew, who became his wife.

associated, directly or indirectly, for the rest of his life. He received his M. A. in 1893.

In the fall of 1893 Irving Babbitt became an instructor in Romance languages at Williams College in lieu of Professor Morton, who was on leave of absence for the year. Here he taught Spanish, French, and Italian, and also a course in Dante for upperclassmen. His youthful appearance caused him to be mistaken for a student many times, and was the source of amusing situations.

Harvard called him to her staff in 1894, and he taught there the remainder of his life. He was made assistant professor in the French Department in 1902 and full professor in 1912.

In 1900 he married Dora Drew in London. Two children were born to them: Esther, in 1901, and Edward Sturges, in 1903. His married life seems to have been one of mutual satisfaction.

His many years of teaching at Harvard were relieved by an occasional trip abroad, and by a great deal of traveling and lecturing all over the United States. He gave exchange lectures at Amherst, Stanford, Yale, the University of Toronto, and Kenyon College.<sup>5</sup> In 1907-08, he was granted his first sabbatical leave. Part of it he spent in Paris and part he spent walking through the English Lake Country of Wordsworth and Coleridge. In 1923 he made another trip. This time he was exchange professor at the Sorbonne. One trip,

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5. He also gave shorter series of lectures in other colleges and universities; for example, he lectured at the University of Wisconsin in 1922.

in 1928, was taken just for pleasure, and he enjoyed it in Italy, France, Greece, and England.

Many honors were conferred upon Irving Babbitt. He was made a corresponding member of the French Institute in 1926. In 1930 he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He was an honorary member of the Harvard Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa and was a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In June, 1932, less than a year before his death, he received the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters from Bowdoin College.

Mention has previously been made of the most important lecture engagements of Mr. Babbitt. On the platform he was an energetic and resolute speaker. With a promptitude of classical allusion, a depth of research, a profuse ability to quote, and a sincere and unwavering faith in the precepts he advocated, he made a strong and lasting impression on all who listened, whether they agreed with his views or not.

His own manner of speech was of the substantial order, straightforward, unadorned, unimaged, owing its flashes of color either to quotations artfully interwoven or to the antics of a playful humor, which in lighter vein begaled itself by caricaturing and distorting any illogical statement or any lapse from good sense in one's hurried interjections. He had, in dialoguing, a mischievous fondness for playing out the game of argument to a finish and inflicting a sudden and disastrous checkmate on any unwary advances of his opponent--a process not always relished by those whose sense of humor was less active than his own.<sup>6</sup>

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6. Giese, William F., in Irving Babbitt: Man and Teacher, edited by Frederick A. Manchester and Odell Shepard (New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1941), p. 12.

A photograph of Mr. Babbitt would be an interesting contribution to this discourse, for there is much of attractiveness in his face. Harry Salpeter wrote a vivid description of him.

His appearance gives the clue to his character. It is that of a strong man touched by age....but sustained by something like faith. He is rather above medium height, a fact that is not obvious because of his inclination to walk with a slight stoop, and his arms give the impression of hanging loosely from his shoulders. His face is rather long and concave. He has a strong jaw and the thin hard line of his lips seconds the impression of decision. He has a large forehead beneath which his eyes look out clearly and coldly. He speaks deliberately, forcefully, not harshly, but as one who might be impatient of interruption or disagreement.<sup>7</sup>

He is said to have been a most even-tempered man, never out of humor, never bored, never demanding change or diversion. He refused to be perturbed by the little trivialities that average persons allow themselves to be annoyed with. He directed his own course, calmly and contemplatively. He joined no clubs or societies; he did not often go to a theater; he took no part in sports. He had a strong aversion for sentiment. This was evidenced in his own personal contacts as well as in his criticism of literature. Women occupied so small a place in his life that one wonders how he ever attracted the girl who became his wife, and who remained the desirable companion that she was to him to the end.

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7. Living Authors: A Book of Biographies, (New York, The H. W. Wilson Company, 1931), p. 14.

Professionally, Irving Babbitt commanded much respect. His chief interest was in the promulgation of the school of ethics and philosophy which is identifiable by the term "Humanism". A number of scholarly essays have come from his pen on the subject. There is something of the Greek influence reflected in his work and life: "nothing too much." His childhood influences are perhaps responsible for his opposition to romanticism and naturalism. He was thoroughly classical in his outlook and he reached into every province from literature to religion in his studies. He was a brilliant scholar, who was familiar with a vast amount of international literature.

Personally he was not ambitious or egotistical although some of his more violently opposed critics charged him with being so. He was kindly and sympathetic even though he held dogmatically to his own opinions. He was modest in his judgment of his own literary powers.

As a writer his chief distinction is in his philosophical criticisms. He has many admirers and likewise many adverse critics. His point of view is both sustained and attacked. He set it forth in conversation, in essays, in lectures, and in books. His books consist of the following: Literature and the American College, The New Laokoon, The Masters of Modern French Criticism, Rousseau and Romanticism, Democracy and Leadership, and French Literature, On Being Creative and Other Essays, The Dhammapad<sup>1</sup>, With an Essay on Buddha and the Occident, and Spanish Character and Other Essays.

### CHAPTER III

#### IRVING BABBITT'S NEO-HUMANISM AS REVEALED BY A SURVEY OF HIS BOOKS AND OTHER WRITINGS

To acquire an intimate and full acquaintance with Irving Babbitt through the single medium of his writings is practically impossible, if one may trust the judgment of those who knew him personally. The fact that this is the common opinion of those who were thus fortunate enough to know him leads one to believe that it is true. Among the many who have voiced their opinion on this subject is Dr. Myrta McGinnis, who deems it a privilege to have attended some of his lectures; among the many who have recorded such opinions is T. S. Eliot, who claimed a friendship with him for a period of many years. Mr. Eliot wrote an editorial, on the occasion of Mr. Babbitt's death, in which he said:

Those who know Babbitt only through his writings, and have had no contact with him as a teacher and friend, will probably not be able to appreciate the greatness of his work. For he was primarily and always a teacher and a talker. He combined rare charm with great force: so that those who knew him will always remember his foibles with affection, and cherish the memory of his brusqueness when other men's suavity is forgotten.<sup>1</sup>

Further likeness of opinion is expressed in the writing of Austin Warren.

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1. Irving Babbitt: Man and Teacher, edited by Frederick Manchester and Odell Shepard (New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1941), p. 101.



What will become of Babbitt's books, all of them dictated in the pungent, vigorous idiom of his lectures, it is difficult to pronounce; and, as for one who heard his voice it is impossible to read without seeing and hearing the man behind the page, such a one must refrain from prophecy.<sup>2</sup>

As a preliminary to a consideration of Babbitt's first book, let us note the author's approach to its writing. It is interesting to read the impressions of Frank Jewett Mather, who, like Babbitt, taught his first year at Williams College in 1893-1894. Mr. Mather wrote:

As I recall the companionship of that year, Irving Babbitt's later watchwords were not then formulated. Rousseau had not yet attained his sinister pre-eminence; Babbitt seldom mentioned him. The word humanism was rarely on his lips... His concern was rather with the problem of education as the major part of culture.

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The summer of 1895 we spent together at Florence.... He was now thirty years old, and the materials and points of view of his first book were nearly ready, though it was to be twelve years before Literature and the American College saw the light. What had happened in the meantime was a greater emphasis on the word and idea of humanism.<sup>3</sup>

Literature and the American College  
In 1908 Babbitt published his first book.<sup>4</sup> It is still regarded by many, including the writer, as one of the most readable and as one of the best of his works. There are two reasons why it merits this judgment: first, because it sets forth the author's

2. Ibid., p.217.

3. Ibid., pp.40-46.

4. Babbitt, Irving, Literature and the American College (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910).

creed—a creed from which he never deviated; second, because all of his remaining work was a more or less strengthened and expanded repetition of the same doctrines.

One can feel the influence of Socrates, from whom he quotes, in the first chapter: "Think rightly and right acting will follow." The American, says Babbitt, reverses this order even if he ever thinks at all. He attributes this partly to the fact that we have taken so much energy and time for the "organizing and operating" of an educational institution that it has left us little time for thought. The rest of the chapter is devoted to his interpretation of the word 'humanism,' as discussed in the introduction to this discourse.

Chapter two presents Bacon and Rousseau, whom Babbitt classifies as humanitarians. In regard to naturalists he says they are of two divisions—the sentimental and the scientific. Wordsworth being strongly representative of the first group, and Bacon, of the second. Rousseau, he states, is the sentimental naturalist of the eighteenth century, who preceded Wordsworth. The direct influence of the period of the Renaissance on naturalism, he said, was powerful. It became effective when it united with the movement to broaden knowledge and sympathy among the people of Europe during the later eighteenth century. Babbitt differed with Bacon's belief that full knowledge could not be attained by individuals. He objected to Rousseau's notion of elevating human liberty beyond the limits of discipline or constraint. The precept of the humanist is a strong devotion to self-discipline, acting on himself as an individual, and being tested by

what he refrains from doing as well as by what he does. He will insist on a "distinction between energy and will." He will likewise demand a balance between sympathy and selection, and will guard against an excess of both, if he follows Babbitt's ideas,- restrained liberty and a sympathetic selection. "Without the inner principle of restraint man can only oscillate between opposite extremes."

His third chapter deals with "Literature and the College." In education, he says, liberty should be tempered with restraint.

Unrestricted freedom among college students leads to disasters. He advocates the group selection of studies and warns against the pitfalls of premature specialization. The present trend is toward "something of everything for everybody" rather than, as formerly, a selective something for the socially élite. Mr. Babbitt asserts this democratic attitude will do much to overcome snobbery, and give all a more equal chance. He favors the idea of giving the brilliant students every possible advantage, for in them, he sees the leaders of the future. He frowns upon hero worship of athletes. He advocates fairness without favors, and grades established by judgment, not sympathy. He insists that there be a blending of aristocracy and democracy. Standard subjects, selected by capable leaders, should be offered; too much variety in the untried results in educational impressionists. "Choose things," he says, "that will reflect in some measure the total experience of the race as to things permanently important to its essential nature." Common sense may be the guide; production of men of quality may be the result, he asserts.

Mr. Babbitt frowns upon the notion of the three-year scheme for completing college. He says it is of small consequence as compared with the qualitative versus the quantitative basis. To the radicals, the degree means that a man "has expended a certain number of intellectual units of energy." To the more discerning it should represent the amount and intensity of "the intellectual current and resistance overcome." Doctor's degrees mean too much to college presidents, he states, and he expresses an individual preference for the well-read teacher, a thorough acquaintance with the classics being necessary to satisfy his requirements. An apt knowledge of the modern languages plus a workable knowledge of the classics is the best foundation for any teacher, because, he says, they are all related to life. Whether Mr. Babbitt is entirely convincing or not, he has at least accomplished the result of making his readers think on some very pertinent aspects of education.

In his chapter on "Literature and the Doctor's Degree" Mr. Babbitt begins his discourse with an argument against the supposition that literature is sissified. Through all of the book references are frequently made to a quotation from Emerson which Babbitt accepted in its entirety as a doctrine for satisfying living:

There are two laws discrete  
Not reconciled,  
Law for man, and law for thing;  
But it runs wild,  
And doth the man unking.

Language, says Babbitt, falls under philology--law for thing; the law for man is applicable to literature. The thing to be desired

in teacher training is that it be literary. A teacher should be well able to emphasize the relation between literature and thought. Neither an extreme of aesthetic refinement nor of philological industry is desirable. Much can be gleaned from the literature of the English and the French; they both have older "literary traditions" than Germany. He says, "The humanist who imports college teaching is confronted with many difficulties. He finds literature, ancient and modern, controlled by a philological syndicate, a history dehumanized by abuse of scientific method."

He closes this chapter with a plea for academic recognition for the man who can present a "plausible mixture of philology and impressionism," and a suggestion that perhaps a good substitute may be found for the Ph. D. qualifications for such a degree, he says, should lay "stress on aesthetic appreciativeness and linguistic accuracy, but would insist above all on wide reading and the power to relate this reading so as to form the foundation for disciplined judgment."

In the chapter entitled, "The Rational Study of the Classics" Babbitt writes: "As the field of ancient literature is more and more completely covered, the vision of the special investigator must become more and more microscopic."

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5. One feels in this statement a reference to his own personal experiences. At Harvard, as in many other American graduate schools, the doctorate in English long demanded extensive studies in philology with only minor attention to the study of literature.

As applied to a study of literature this statement gains in significance with meditation. He believes that such an assignment as the doctoral dissertation should test the range as well as the exactness of the writer's knowledge. All study and all writing should reflect the general culture of the person, as well as his special proficiency, "his familiarity with ideas as with words, and his mastery of the spirit, as well as of the mechanism of the ancient languages." He asserts that the average Europeans characterize the American student as having "a dry, lexicographical habit of mind," and feels that, in the main, they are fully justified in so doing.

In the study of the classics, the student should set his aim at assimilation, and not at the mere accumulation of knowledge. He emphasizes the importance of bridging the gap between Greek and Roman literature, and between these and the literature of the world today. Babbitt was a firm believer in the interpretation and understanding of the present as reflected against the background of the past.

The two chapters "Ancients and Moderns" and "On Being Original" are more closely related than are any of the others in the book. The former can best be summarized by its own diction. "Modern language will escape from the suspicion of being a cheap substitute for the traditional discipline only when taught with due reference to the classical background by men who are themselves good classical scholars." In the latter, Mr. Babbitt states that the chief aim of the classic and the neo-classic art was to be representative; the chief aim of the modern art is to be original. He emphasizes his attitude toward

the value of the classics by quoting a passage from Sainte-Beuve with which he agrees: "From time to time we should raise our eyes to the hill-tops, to the group of revered mortals, and ask ourselves: What would they say of us?" We conclude from this work that Mr. Babbitt discounts the average person's ability to be original, but <sup>believes</sup> that it may be acquired, the best method being to establish a background through careful and intensive reading of the masters. He says:

The most practical way of promoting humanism is to work for a revival of the almost lost art of reading. As a rule the humane man will be the one who has a memory richly stored with what is best in literature, with the sound sense perfectly expressed which is found only in the masters. Conversely, the decline of humanism and the growth of Rousseauism has been marked by a steady decline in the higher uses of the memory.

The last chapter, "Academic Leisure," gives advice for all those persons who become involved in work and make no time or place in their lives for relaxation or reflection. Too much action and too little thought are characteristics of Americans in general, and of teachers in particular, says Mr. Babbitt. He closes with a thought gleaned from an ancient writer:

If we ourselves ventured on an exhortation to the American people, it would rather be that of Demosthenes to the Athenians: "In God's name, I beg of you to think."

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6. Babbitt, op. cit., p.190.

7. Ibid., p.210.

## The New Laokoon

One is challengend to a careful reading of Irving Babbitt's books by his own statement of the function of books in general. Says Babbitt: "The function of books is to teach us to despise them."<sup>6</sup>

Mr. Giese interprets this statement by saying:

That has an obscurantist ring, but the maxim was evidently interpreted in a soundly conservative fashion by one who renewed his contempt for books by daily and hourly contact with them, though always on a markedly selective basis.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps The New Laokoon<sup>8</sup> has challenged more readers than has any other of Irving Babbitt's books. Interesting in subject material, blunt in style, opposed in its message to several popular twentieth-century trends, it was the target of much controversy soon after its publication, and continues to remain so.

The first challenge was thrust at his seeming presumption in imitating the great Lessing. The general reading public deemed it bold and rash to choose a topic after the notable German critic; but presumptuous though it may have been, they were to change their opinions and reverse the decision. The critic of the eighteenth

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6. Giese, William F., in Irving Babbitt: Man and Teacher (edited by Frederick Manchester and Odell Shepard, New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1941), p. 5.

7. Ibid.

8. Babbitt, Irving, The New Laokoon (Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Company), 1910.



century lost some prestige; Irving Babbitt was coming into his own.

The New Laokoön is written with a sub-title: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts, which in itself is indicative of the content. As a study of comparative literature, both in the pseudo-classic and in the romantic field, the book is important. It is written in the spirit of the West, but with much emphasis on the East. As stated before, all six of Babbitt's published books are a variation of the same theme. His particular theme for this volume was based on his conclusion that the romantics, who he thought were led chiefly by Rousseau, enlarged upon the ideas and functions of liberty and sympathy, to such an extent that ~~it~~<sup>they</sup> carried over into all of the arts in a confused application. We have followed out, Mr. Babbitt says, something of the romantic confusion which became marked in the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> This particular type of confusion arose from the efforts of writers to get the effects of music or of painting through the medium of words.

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11. One gets a clearer and more detailed conception of the author's meaning on this point from other sources in which he discusses the works of specific writers. From an article which he called "The Primitivism of Wordsworth," I quote:

Emotionalism as a substitute for thought is implied indeed in Wordsworth's definition of poetry as "a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." A poet should be a man who has thought long and deeply. Thoughts are the representatives of all our past feelings.

Irving Babbitt, "The Primitiveness of Wordsworth," The Bookman, 74:10-11, Sept., 1931.

Irving Babbitt does not frown unrelentingly upon imitation, but he does insist that it be kept in a particular category. He says, "Imitation is the pivotal word of the 'Poetics'"<sup>12</sup> and as such carries much influence. He is in agreement with this ancient author in his belief that nature is the prime pattern worthy of imitating, and that models are next in rank. He says that the plot in writing is of corresponding value to the design in painting.

In his chapter dealing with Lessing, he expresses agreement with the German critic's interpretation of the function of the critic, in so far as he says it is the setting up of "definite standards and a rational discipline." And then he says: "If the Germans are to justify the high claims they make for Lessing as a critic they must make it on ground other than his intellect, his originality, or the fineness of his taste." One wonders what other ground might be left as a foundation upon which a critic might build, and at this point might deduce that Babbitt held Lessing in light esteem. At a later page he gives us his personal opinion in these words: "He [Lessing] is a great critic, but a greater character."

It is interesting to consider Babbitt's own ideas as to the function of a critic. In dealing with a writer, especially with so systematic and lucid a one as Babbitt, one can hardly do better than to quote. In conversation with G. R. Elliott, he explained his ideas on the subject.

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12. The "Poetics" of Aristotle.

A critic must understand his function. He dare not aim at future readers. Of course any writer who is worth his salt hopes to be read after his death. But it is the critic's business to grapple with the age in which he lives and give it what he sees it needs.

It is distinctively this attitude that is manifested in The New Laokoön. Babbitt saw the particular needs of twentieth-century criticism as being a fair judgment of subject material, a cold and analytical consideration of composition as regarded for structure and style, a sharp curtailment of emotionalism, and a thorough appreciation for its value as applicable to life. He discounted the theory of spontaneity, as being a detriment to writing, substituting thoughtful consideration in its stead. He regarded Rousseau as the greatest single figure in emotional reaction, calling him the "great apostle of the original and the spontaneous." He characterized Neoclassicism in France by comparing it with the dancing master, at one extreme, and Aristotle at the other. He scoffed at the idea expressed by Rousseau that man should not think, and urged the doctrine expounded by Plato that man should use his intellect to step ahead.

Confusion of the arts, Mr. Babbitt asserts, is due also to an overlapping of implied suggestiveness. The poet tries to paint things rather than write them. Artists try to impress their public by placing before them pictures in which they have tried to suggest sounds through color. In music the artist strives to produce color and action. In this art, Babbitt expresses the opinion that the artist is less successful, the suggestiveness being less certain in

music than in literature.<sup>13</sup> He concludes by saying that each of the arts has its natural limits. Extreme overlapping results in undesirable confusion. Each can be appreciated within its own bounds.

#### The Masters of Modern French Criticism

An enviable reputation as a scholar of French literature is accorded Irving Babbitt by both opponents and proponents of his ideas in general. His book, The Masters of Modern French Criticism,<sup>14</sup> forcefully reveals his right to such acclaim. It is a thorough study of French critics of the nineteenth century, plus a somewhat more limited discussion of the modern critics, and their aims and accomplishments. In the preface to this volume Babbitt says in part:

What I have tried to do in this volume is not to criticise criticism, at best a somewhat languid business, but to criticise critics, which may be a far more legitimate task, especially if the critics happen to be, as in the present case, among the most vital and significant personalities of their time... To study Sainte-Beuve and the other leading French critics of the nineteenth century is therefore to get very close to the intellectual center of the century.

Babbitt called the present trend of reaction toward the classics "anti-intellectualistic" and asserted that it could be best understood by studying the background. He recognized in it a withdrawal

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13. Babbitt did not lay claim to any adeptness in music appreciation or in any ability as a musician.

14. Babbitt, Irving, The Masters of Modern French Criticism, (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912).

from the dogmatic naturalism that loomed so strong in the latter half of the nineteenth century. He also noted a reaction against the scientific positivism that had characterized the whole century. Plato seems to be a dominant figure in his thinking in this regard.

In his treatment of the French critics, in this book, Mr. Babbitt judges the work of the authors individually. The first whom he considers is Madame de Staël. In many instances Babbitt himself has stepped aside and allowed the author to present her opinions to us in her own words. Characteristic of her main viewpoint is her attitude toward progress, which is highly commendable, in the opinion of Mr. Babbitt. "Nothing in life should be stationary and art is petrified when it no longer changes." Again in agreement with Mr. Babbitt she states that literature reflects all changes of importance. She refers especially to the profound changes in the character of the French as caused by the Revolution and portrayed through their literature. Babbitt pays her high tribute, acknowledging in her even more than the proverbial intuitiveness generally accorded women. He saw in her a disciple of nature although she was outwardly opposed to Rousseau. Her chief interest was in people as being representative of their country, and Mr. Babbitt admired her ability to depict the likenesses as well as the differences of her countrymen. She was particularly interested in the German people and characterized them with fine distinction. "We advance by looking backward," said Madame de Staël, and again she struck a responsive chord in Mr. Babbitt. In this way, they both agreed, imitation might

be avoided. In the matters of spontaneity and originality, there was a variance of opinion between the two, Madame de Staël upholding their virtues. Babbitt was likewise opposed to her ideas on formalism, to which she was strongly opposed. Toward the end of the chapter Babbitt again refers to her aptness in showing national individuality, saying that she did much to stimulate national sentiment, and that she had a powerful influence in undermining formalism, especially in the drama.

In Joubert, Babbitt saw and praised an ornate conciseness of style, which fact is interesting because he did not usually pay much attention to style, content being of more consequence, in his opinion. Babbitt regarded Joubert as an able critic. Although he was an invalid, he met many difficult demands of life, occasioned by the Reign of Terror, with much fortitude, reflecting in his writing a keen understanding and appreciation of life. Of him, Mr. Babbitt wrote: "Men tend to come together in proportion to their intuitions of the One; in other words, the true unifying principle of mankind is found in the insight of its sages. We ascend to meet." In their attitude on religion Babbitt records some disagreement. He again quotes: "Religion is neither a theology nor a theosophy; it is more than all that; a discipline, a law, a yoke, an indissoluble engagement." To Babbitt religion is a discipline for the individual, not a law imposed by a church. This quotation from Joubert gives us cause to reflect that Babbitt himself was a great and just critic, in allowing Joubert to state creeds in opposition to his (Babbitt's)

theories, and still say of him that he was a great critic and that he had "standards and held them fluidly."

Like Joubert, Babbitt emphasizes the importance of the study of the classics, and he was fond of Joubert's remark: "The great drawback of new books is that they keep us from reading the old ones."

In his consideration of Chateaubriand, Babbitt recognizes a great similarity to Byron, particularly in their sympathetic adherence to Rousseau. In comparing him with Madame de Staël, Babbitt says it was the role of the Madame to understand and to impart to her readers that same understanding, while the role of Chateaubriand was to feel and teach others to feel. As a writer he chose selected nature, enlivened by a keen imagination, as a medium for his best work, which field Babbitt thinks rather unworthy of so great an artist. In his critical works Chateaubriand covered a broad field. The classical, pseudo-classical, and romantic were all well done, in the opinion of Mr. Babbitt, but he praised him most for his work in the romantic field.

His interpretations of the influences that affected the growth of religion, Mr. Babbitt says, are of great and lasting significance. In part his ideas were as follows: The eighteenth century was a very inferior one, the chief cause being the lack of religion. It was "irreligious because it was unimaginative, and unimaginative because it was over-analytical."

Mr. Babbitt could not reconcile himself to this reasoning, but nevertheless saw in it a strong influence. He censures Chateaubriand

for his slight regard for the high principles and truths of Christianity, saying that he gleans from it more of an aesthetic charm than a creed by which to shape his living.

Chateaubriand excelled in his work which presented his conceptions of the relation of art and literature, in the opinion of Mr. Babbitt.

Mr. Babbitt calls Sainte-Beuve one of the most colorful of the French critics of this period, and attributes this feature to the variety of his experiences, specifically in religion. At an early age Sainte-Beuve became thoroughly informed in the Catholic doctrines. Later he was influenced by Jansenism and Calvinism. If we look further into the background than Mr. Babbitt takes us, we will see that Sainte-Beuve received his early schooling under a good humanist, but he seemed to deviate from the course of humanism as set forth by Babbitt, at least through the middle years of his life. Then his hold upon Christianity gave way to a stronger humanistic tendency. Mr. Babbitt regarded his nearest approach to definiteness as being tied to the ideas he held about scientific progress, his faith in its advance being strong.

Mr. Babbitt denounced many of the personal things that Sainte-Beuve allowed to come into his life as a man, remembering in particular incidents which linked him too intimately with the wife of Victor Hugo. As a critic he held him in high esteem, saying of him: "Now Sainte-Beuve was not only a literary to his finger-tips, but as he got away from the special atmosphere of the romantic movement,



he became more and more classical." He classified him as an "aesthetic humanist", recognizing that he lived in an age when it was hard to "adjust claims of the real and the ideal in art". He appraised his critical literature by saying that he has shown "perfect tact and measure and good sense against the extreme". He particularly noted approval of Sainte-Beuve's high regard for the truth. In his consideration of his work, he quoted Sainte-Beuve's own statement of his aims in literary criticism: "to introduce into criticism a certain charm and along with it more reality than had been put into it previously;" and expressed the opinion that in this statement of aim there was merit for the noblest of critics. He especially saw much worthiness in Sainte-Beuve's protests against the dangers and excesses of scientific naturalism.<sup>15</sup>

Sainte-Beuve's later work was more expressive of his notion that literature was a medium for depicting the characteristics and impressions of society. He regarded the author himself as a very vital part of the work, appraising him closely as an individual. His method of attack was from the author to the book, from the book to the individual, and from the individual to the race. This all-inclusive outlook made him very vital as a critic, in the opinion of Mr. Babbitt. He said of him: "He is at once the best read and the

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15. Other reviewers divide the critical works of Sainte-Beuve into three divisions: militant romanticism, comprehensive impressionism, and humanism. See: Smith, J. H. and Parks, E. W., The Great Critics (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1939), pp. 592-595.

least bookish of critics.)

Compared with Sainte-Beuve, Babbitt thought Scherer was inferior. This was due, in part, he said to the narrower environment in which he lived. He attacked him rather severely for his strong belief that progress was in sure and rapid decline, and for his emotionalism regarding religion. He praised his reverence for truth as a quality in itself, but doubted that he commanded a comprehensive understanding. His interests were in generalizations rather than in particulars. His principal contribution to the field of literary criticism, Mr. Babbitt judged, lay in the light he gave on spiritual crises of the century. In these matters he recognized solid worth in him as a critic.

Of Taine, Mr. Babbitt thought less than of the others previously mentioned. He thought that he was prematurely quick in his judgments and too rabid in his expression of them. Babbitt judged him to be the victim of outer circumstances, which, in itself represented a weakness, to him. He was fatalistic in his attitude. His having lived in the period of the revolution had caused him to recoil from brutality, and the resultant gentleness was reflected in his work. He was far too detailed in his writing to please so curt a person as Mr. Babbitt. His last works, Babbitt said, reflected an "exaggerated determinism" that was a recoil from the opposite direction. His books were "works of the minds of men," written in the spirit of his own time. Mr. Babbitt did not predict a lasting influence from them.

"The critic's business as once conceived was to judge with reference to a definite standard and then to enforce his decisions by his personal weight and authority." So said Renan at a comparatively early period in his writing career. Later he said: "Formerly every man had a system; he lived and died by it: now we pass successively through all systems, or, better still, understand them all at once."

Mr. Babbitt agreed with this attitude and saw in the expression of Renan a quick and discerning appreciativeness.

Renan like Babbitt founded his study of man, not on introspection, but on evidences of language and history. Likewise they both judged the present against the background of the past. Renan said that the most important book of the nineteenth century should be a critical history of the origins of Christianity. This statement was made in his youth; he devoted thirty years of his life to its accomplishment. His attitude toward life in general was that the individual was obligated to society first, to himself second. Babbitt said of him:

Any study of him would be singularly incomplete that failed to do justice to his greatness as an artist. He owes his pre-eminent place in recent literature even less, perhaps, to his importance as a thinker than to the perfection of his literary workmanship, to a finish of form that is rare in French prose, and still rarer in English.

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Our total judgment of Renan may be summed up by saying that, though he is a great influence, he has few of the qualities of a great philosopher, but many of the qualities of a great historian, and nearly all the qualities of a great artist.

Brunetière was the last critic of this period about whom Babbitt undertook an estimate. He judged that he was at his best as a historian. He approved of his reaction against the naturalism of the century, and also of his protests against the absorption of man into nature.

In summary Babbitt said:

What we are seeking is a critic who rests his discipline and selection upon the past without being a mere traditionalist; whose holding of tradition involves a constant process of hard and clear thinking, a constant adjustment, in other words, of the experiences of the past to the changing needs of the present.

These standards were closely allied to French ideas, he thought, and also expressed a belief that the French influence in literary criticism has been stronger than that of any other nation.

Our ideal critic, then would need to combine the breadth and versatility and sense of difference of a Sainte-Beuve with the elevation and insight and sense of unity of an Emerson. It might be prudent to add of this critic in particular what Emerson has said of man in general, that he is a golden impossibility.

#### Rousseau and Romanticism

Nearly all of the titles of Mr. Babbitt's books are misleading because they are not completely suggestive of the content. Rousseau and Romanticism<sup>14</sup> is no exception in this respect. It presents a criticism of literature and civilization from the

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14. Babbitt, Irving, Rousseau and Romanticism, (New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1919).

eighteenth century down through the years to the time in which he wrote the book. In this period he found very little that he thought good, and very much that he thought bad. In literature he condemned expressionism and imagism, in particular. He said there was intellectual confusion, "moral indolence," and a "crowning stupidity of the Ages," all resulting in the World War. He deplored the fact that "the analytical intellect" had been suppressed. He denounced recent and current philosophers so emphatically as to border on rudeness. He accused Professor John Dewey and his followers of "suffering from an advanced stage of naturalistic intoxication." The new realists, he said, were "flat on their faces before the man of science-surely an undignified attitude for a philosopher." "Modern philosophy," he called "bankrupt," and said the "total tendency of the Occident at present is away from rather than toward civilization." He expressed the idea that civilization had been on a rapid decline, since the time of Rousseau.

Rousseau, in Babbitt's opinion, was the source of most of the evils of the age through his philosophy of the return to nature. The emotionalism of the century, as expressed in literature and in the social attitudes of humanitarianism, he attributed to influences of Rousseau; he also felt that emotional nationalism and internationalism could be traced back to Rousseau.

Mr. Babbitt called romanticism "emotional realism." And with humor, he said, "Realism is merely romanticism going on all fours." The tendency toward romanticism, he recognized as being human, more

strongly so in the Teutonic races than in the French. To a degree, there is good in romanticism, he thought, but when carried to excess it led to naturalism. The tendency of the romantic group to substitute feeling for virtuous action was particularly distasteful to Babbitt. In place of it he would have us apply the classical rule of reason and the law of measure. Everyone, he insisted, must feel moral responsibility. To naturalism, he attributed most of the evils of the modern world. The scientific naturalism of the Baconian, the emotional naturalism of Rousseau, and the pessimistic naturalism of such writers as Dostoevsky and Tolstoy—all put too much stress on the "law for thing" and too little on the "law for man". All of this group were<sup>ed</sup> bad influence because they tended to dehumanize man, and because they put the emphasis on mankind as a whole and not on the individual. Babbitt thought the whole of humanity, at the time he wrote the book, was "wallowing in a trough of naturalism." Naturalism, with its theory of determinism, excused the individual from moral struggle. The primary need of man, in this respect, he said was a strength within himself to decide between 'yes' and 'no.' This power he referred to in this book as in many of his other works as the "inner check." To acquire this restraint, he said, man may turn to the classics or to religion for inspiration, but effort is necessary to obtain it from either source. He said the wisest<sup>est</sup> of all ages had recognized a power in the universe that was stronger than they.

Of particular interest in this volume is Mr. Babbitt's treatment

Of particular interest in this volume is Mr. Babbitt's treatment of romantic melancholy.<sup>17</sup> "Happiness for the romanticist," says Mr. Babbitt, "is achieved, so far as it is achieved at all, in dream-land." Professor Babbitt interprets the Rousseauistic ideas of happiness by saying that happiness is to be sought in the free play of the emotions and of imagination,<sup>18</sup> with the result that the romanticist is satisfied by neither society nor solitude.

The irony of all this, says Babbitt, is that this burning with indefinite desire results for the romanticist not in happiness but in wretchedness. 'A movement which began by asserting the goodness of man and the loveliness of nature ended by producing the greatest literature of despair the world has ever seen.' This quest for happiness through the free play of the passions must inevitably result in melancholy. If the quest for the superlative moment is unsuccessful, disappointment and melancholy result. If the quest is successful, the individual must pay the penalty for the enjoyment of the superlative moment by a succeeding languor when the ordinary round of life seems pale and insidid.<sup>19</sup>

The same effect may be the result of day-dreams or reverie, when the romanticist compares them with actualities; and instead of correcting the fault which lies within himself he imagines himself a superior being, oftentimes a martyr, too good for this world. With this attitude he withdraws into himself and proceeds to be as miserable as he can, Browning being one of the very few exceptions,

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17. Dr. Myrta McGinnis made a special study of this phase of the book. My interpretation has been largely influenced by an article, "Romantic Melancholy," which she wrote, and which I read from her notebooks.

18. McGinnis, Op. Cit.

19. Op. Cit.

with romantic tendencies. The loss of religious faith as evidenced by the writings of Renan, Mr. Babbitt said, was another cause of romantic melancholy.

Mr. Babbitt says that the distinguishing feature between the melancholy of the Greeks and that of the romanticists is that in the Greeks it grew out of the recognition of the universal sorrows of mankind; in the romanticists it was personal and often grew out of self-pity. The chief danger, he says, is in the likelihood of the latter, by seeking to find his happiness in the free play of his emotions, so separating himself from his fellow-beings as to deprive himself of their natural companionship. A close association with others requires emotional control—the exercising of the "inner check." True happiness, he emphasizes, is the result of ethical effort; it comes not from the enjoyment of a fleeting moment, but from virtuous activity and the control exercised over the emotions, which thus elevate man to a higher level.

In so far as Rousseau was influential in the "back to nature" movement, he was guilty of an injustice toward society. The book is a very direct attack against practically everything that Rousseau stood for plus a clear definition of modern life and its needs. So far as romanticism itself is concerned, he has again picked out all of its faults and none of its good points. He recognizes in it only the destructive features.



### Democracy and Leadership

This book, Democracy and Leadership,<sup>20</sup> follows the context of its title more closely than any of Mr. Babbitt's others. Written in 1924, it came closest to the average reader at that time, and probably continues to do so.

It is concerned chiefly with an application of the influences of the romanticists on our theories of government, and also concerns itself with what might be the logical development of romantic practise in modern government. He attacks this problem with his characteristically keen power of analysis. The underlying principles of government Mr. Babbitt would have based upon humanistic philosophy. He bases all of his adverse criticism upon the tenet that democratic government is not so based, and on the belief that it must remain essentially experimental until it is thus founded. Individualism in governmental affairs is largely a farce; it should be more closely related to positive theories. Again he emphasises his thought that humanism is weakened because of the influence of Rousseau and the naturalist.

With critical detachment he places the responsibility on the individual, again emphasizing restraint. The true humanist, that is, the man who is sympathetically selective, has his standard within him, but its outward emphasis will result in truer democracy.

The individual in a democracy must be concerned with

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20. Irving Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership (New York Houghton Mifflin, 1924).

achieving a correct scale of values and must exert his concentrated efforts toward seeing governmental issues proportionately, Mr. Babbitt writes, and then he must be constructive in his expressions, having something of greater merit to offer in place of what he denounces.

#### French Literature

French Literature<sup>21</sup> has aroused wide recognition because of the fact that Babbitt was at the time of its publication a recognized authority on French Literature. In comparison with his other volumes, which are all more or less lengthy, this one is very brief. However, the subject matter in this small book is so concise and well organized that it carried a weight of informative material.

The first chapter is devoted to an analysis of the general characteristics of the French Literature. He begins:

Probably no other modern literature, not even English, has been so richly and continuously productive from the medieval period to the present day, and has exercised so wide an influence as that of France... Familiarity with some of the great French writers will prove rewarding in itself; it will also put one on guard against preconceived notions, and enable one to some extent to form a first hand estimate of a great national culture.

He states further that the French were misjudged by critics from all countries at the very time that they were producing their

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21. Irving Babbitt, French Literature (Chicago, American Library Association, 1928).

22. Irving Babbitt, Rousseau and Romanticism (New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1919), p. 12.

best work. He attributes this to the fact that we criticise with too much of the point of view of our own nationalities.

The first of the merits that Mr. Babbitt recognises in the writings of the French is clear and logical thinking. He admits that, at times, the French rather over-do the matter of logic, but he prefers this fault to the English characteristic of "muddling through." The second value from the French writings, he says, is their "discriminating and artistic speech." He alludes to their "keen and sensitive intelligence" and says that this merit linked with their artistic touch has resulted in preeminence in literary criticism. He continues:

As a result of the French clarity and logicity it is perhaps easier to trace in France than elsewhere the interplay, and at times conflict, of certain main conceptions of life from the Middle Ages to the present day. These main conceptions can be reduced to three; the religious, the humanistic and the naturalistic... Naturalism does not become a major factor until the sixteenth century and does not threaten to overthrow the religious and humanistic points of view until the eighteenth century.<sup>23</sup>

The rest of the text is devoted to an analysis of the works of the principal writers of France. In contrast with Rousseau and Romanticism and other works of unfavorable or destructive criticism, this book shows an example of Babbitt's favorable criticism.

In the chronological arrangement of the works of Irving Babbitt the next of importance to appear was his essay which he called

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23. Babbitt, op. cit., p. 39.

"Humanism: An Essay at Definition." The content of this article having been discussed in fore-going pages, will be omitted at this point.

#### On Being Creative and Other Essays

On Being Creative and Other Essays was published in 1932.

The writer was unable to secure this book in its entirety; however, the title essay and one other commonly referred to as being of major importance, "The Primitivism of Wordsworth," were read from other sources.

Judging from the content of these two essays, the writer feels that this book is again replete with much the same ideas as those formerly expressed in Babbitt's works. The first one is stated with a great deal of vigor, presenting the idea that creativeness should be based on inspiration drawn from the classics bolstered up by honest and persistent effort on the part of the writer. Sentimentality is again ruled out, cold reasoning being of more importance, in the opinion of the author. Having gleaned the same ideas from others of his writings, one feels that perhaps this essay merely gains emphasis through repetition. He talks much about meditation in this chapter, but he suggests no definite method by which it might be accomplished in our modern world. His opponents suggest that churches provide many methods.

The writer of this thesis, being especially fond of the works of William Wordsworth, dislikes the attack leveled at him by Mr.

Babbitt in his "The Primitivism of Wordsworth." He criticizes adversely almost everything that has endeared Wordsworth to his readers: his attitude toward nature, his creed of happiness, his emotions, and his style of writing. He does not seem to ask, 'Is this poetry?' but 'Is it humanism?'

Of this book Mr. G. R. Elliott has written as follows:

Mr. Babbitt is too absolute in his categories. Nevertheless his book is timely, powerful, and interesting. A deep vein of meditation goes through it, and its pages are alive with swift and witty reflections ranging all the way from Confucius and the old East to Theodore Dreiser and the new West. The central chapter, on 'Coleridge and the Imagination,' takes its place unmistakably among the few best critical essays in our language.<sup>24</sup>

#### The Dhammapada

The Dhammapada: With an Essay on Buddha and the Occident, published in 1936, from a manuscript prepared by Babbitt before his death, was the only other work of Irving Babbitt which the writer was unable to obtain. From other sources one may learn the author's attitude toward Buddha. By many critics the opinion is stated that Buddha was probably the greatest single influence in the development of his philosophy. Of his relation to the Orient and Buddha, Norman Foerster wrote:

The Orient knew Babbitt from his studies of the ethical unity of Buddhism and Christianity, and Babbitt's final contribution to the religious literature of our language was

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24. G. R. Elliott, "Latest Work of Irving Babbitt," Saturday Review of Literature. 8:768, June 4, 1932.

his translation of the ancient Pali classic The Dhammapada. Like the Brahman in that manual of strenuous virtue, he was awakened, "without blemish, wise, rich in knowledge and goodness."<sup>25</sup>

From Frederick Manchester we read:

Of the image of the Buddha he Babbitt once said: "You will notice that though the eyes appear to be closed they are not entirely so. The Buddha is not asleep. Attention is turned within, where there is intense activity."<sup>26</sup>

#### Spanish Character and Other Essays

Spanish Character: and Other Essays <sup>27</sup> was published posthumously, in 1940. Mr. Babbitt in the early thirties prepared himself for the task of writing the title essay of this book by spending a month in journeying over the peninsula from the Pyrenees to Gibraltar. He penetrated deep into the country, back to where the old Spanish civilization took root. He shunned the cities, for the most part, because he believed that he could learn most from the common people. The country itself he describes with such pictorial style that the reader begins to doubt his aversion to a romantic view of nature. He reminds us of the extremes of dryness and moisture, heat and cold, fertility and barrenness, such beauty and such desolation.

The people themselves he presents to us vividly. He

25. Norman Foerster, in Irving Babbitt: Man and Teacher, edited by Frederick Manchester and Odell Shepard (New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1941), p. 88.

26. In Foerster, op. cit., p. 134.

27. Irving Babbitt, Spanish Character: and Other Essays (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1940).

compares them with the French, expressing the opinion that they have a greater capacity for solitude and isolation. Of the French, he said:

...reason, insufficiently quickened by imagination, easily degenerates into dry rationalism; whereas in the land of Don Quixote the imagination tends to break away from the control of the senses or understanding, and is unwilling to accept the limitations of the real, and then follows the inevitable disenchantment when the world turns out to be different in fact from what it had been painted in fancy.<sup>28</sup>

Mr. Babbitt interprets Spanish poetry as being based on the eternal theme of illusion and disillusion. The Spaniard is strong in the qualities of pride, power of self-idealization, and he has an "exalted notion" of personal dignity; he will sacrifice much in the name of honor. To defend his self-respect he will commit deeds of violence and cruelty. The classic theater revolves on this play of sentiment and honor. Mr. Babbitt thinks the Spaniards have little capacity to trust their fellow-men, to cooperate with them, or to work to a common end. They rebel against discipline and are impatient of organization. Mr. Babbitt compares them with the Oriental in their indifference to bodily comfort; the cruelty in their nature also being a survival of medieval and Oriental tendencies. In spite of these strong characteristics, Mr. Babbitt still judges them to be the most temperate of all peoples in Europe. They have, in his opinion, a decided lack of mechanical skill and practical sense, as well as

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28. Babbitt, op. cit., p. 19.

the Oriental disregard for time.

Mr. Babbitt expresses admiration for their simplicity, believing that in other western countries there may be intellectual overtraining. He says that, to the Spaniard, "education is as truly the last object of his concern as it is the first of the American's."

Spain is geographically poorly located, all ideas filtering into Spain having to pass through too much French influence. Mr. Babbitt suggests that this handicap might be overcome by the sending of their youth out into other countries for knowledge. Instead, he says, the majority who go at all, go to Paris, where they receive "infinitely seductive and infinitely false" impressions.

The Spanish love aristocratic notions, and detest manual labor. He concludes his remarks with the question: "Will she Spain learn to found self-respect on conscience, instead of on the medieval sentiment of honor...?"



## Chapter IV

### A SUMMARY OF IRVING BABBITT'S

#### NEO-HUMANISTIC THEORY AND CRITICISM

To write a comprehensive presentation of Irving Babbitt's ideas or to analyze his theories, and yet keep within a desirable brevity, is difficult, for one must scan the ages a long way back to appreciate the trend and conclusion of his reasoning.

Civilization in western Europe fell to a very low state, as a result of the invasions of the Northmen, and remained at low ebb for two hundred years after Charlemagne. In contrast, the Middle Ages seemed supremely dynamic and progressive. Intellectual, political, social, and artistic trends were developed to a remarkable degree between 1100 and 1500. Interest in the supernatural was so high as to be a distinct detriment to any consideration of the study of nature. Nationalism began to develop in the twelfth century. The Renaissance, which culminated in the sixteenth century, first asserted itself through individualism and neo-paganism, finally settling into what might be called an era of humanistic civilization which lasted well into the eighteenth century. While students of Roman law sought to establish legal authority for national kings and to do away with feudal lords and the Papacy, the "humanists" sought to reveal the laws gleaned from the Latin and the Greek Literature, and they found in the classical authors so much material on the dignity of man as man as to challenge a direct study of human nature.

The humanistic age gave way to the modern age of science with its tendency to view man as "totally submerged in natural law."

The civilization of any age seems largely dependent upon the prevalent conception as to the nature of man. It is in this regard that Irving Babbitt's theories become valuable. In the long span of the ages man has been placed on so many levels as almost to lose his identity. The Middle Ages brought forth a clear conception of human nature, partly distinct from animal nature. This was revealed through a philosophy known as scholasticism. According to this philosophy, human nature was characterized by will and intellect; God had superimposed upon this human nature, a super-human nature; therefore, man was called to live his earthly existence merely as a preparation for the life to come. It was this idea that Renaissance "humanists" tended to displace. They would shift this attitude of humility toward God, to a pride in man's status as man. They would seek to better mankind through the medium of thought instead of through faith. Likewise, Babbitt's neo-humanism reasserted the human dignity of man against the naturalism of the modern age of science; he refused to identify man with nature and emphasized the differences which set him apart as a human being. His idea seemed to be that all the evils of the world are centered in human beings as single units; that should every individual use the proper restraint in all that he does, all troubles would be overcome. What he really emphasized was the mediation between extremes. The logic for this line of reasoning

is clearly based on the Ethics and the Poetics of Aristotle. The avoidance of extremes, Babbitt believed, could be achieved through a selection possible to man because of his power to choose. The will to do, or to refrain from doing, differentiates man from the rest of nature.

In his system of thought Babbitt is primarily interested in man as an individual personality. He objects to any theory of philosophy of psychology that represents man as merely a part of nature, "totally submerged in natural law," without recognizing and emphasizing those characteristics which set man apart as a human being. He especially objects to any system of thought that denies man's possession of free will and moral responsibility.

According to Babbitt (and the other Neo-Humanists), man is distinguished from the rest of nature by his freedom of will and purpose. Man is endowed with freedom of choice between good and evil. Therefore, he is a free moral agent and is responsible for his own conduct. Babbitt admits a duality in man's nature; there is the "natural" or animal self and there is also that which he refers to as the "supernatural"<sup>1</sup> or ethical self. Consequently man is capable of self-discipline and self-direction. Man as an individual can live on three planes: religious, human, or naturalistic. Tragedy, said

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1. By "supernatural" Babbitt apparently does not mean super-human. See Paul Elmer More's interpretation of Babbitt's idea in More's "On Being Human," New Shelburne Essays, vol. III (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1936), pp. 37-38.

Mr. Babbitt, is possible only to human beings. Naturalism, he explained as a negative plane on which what man has ceased to do is differentiated between himself and nature.

Man reaches his greatest happiness through moral effort - through keeping his "supernatural" or ethical self above his "natural" or animal self. To succeed in this he must exercise the "inner check"<sup>2</sup> to restrain emotion and to control instincts and desires. Character is a growth which depends on clarity and strength of purpose and on the amount of exercise given the "inner check."

A suggested maxim for Babbitt and the other Neo-Humanists is: Reason should rule over passion." "Not the crase for liberty..., but the sensitive pursuit and practice of self-discipline, constitutes a man."<sup>3</sup>

In his own personal life Irving Babbitt exemplified the merits of will and purpose. His rather cold, calculating outward manner gave the general impression of aloofness, but he had a great capacity for friendship. Greatly occupied as he was, he would go out of his way to serve the interests of his friends. For his pupils no sacrifice

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2. In Babbitt's works, so far as I can find, he has given no suggestions of means by which youth can be trained to exercise the "inner check." This leads to some speculation as to how best to interpret the term. Its chief connotation seems to be conscience. It might also have something in common with the Freudian conception of the "Super-Ego," though Babbitt would probably have been reluctant to admit that he had anything in common with the teachings of Dr. Freud.

3. Quoted from a review of The New Lookout by Frank Jewett Mather, Nation, vol. 90 (June 9, 1910), p. 580.

of time or effort was considered by him to be too great.

His creed for society was only an enlarged vision of what he demanded of the individual. Of this, Odell Shepard wrote:

The fundamental teaching of Irving Babbitt is as simple, when all is said, as that of Immanuel Kant. 'After all,' says he, 'to be a good humanist is merely to be moderate and sensible and decent.'

'Moderate, sensible, and decent' --it is true, no doubt, that Irving Babbitt gave wealth and weight of meaning to each of these quiet adjectives such as it is not accustomed to bear in ordinary parlance...to be moderate is to pause between two extremes.... To be 'sensible' meant that one had bent himself to the disciplines of society and had corrected whatever was eccentric and aberrant with reference to normal and representative humanity...'decency' included the whole high doctrine of decorum...which governed and controlled warring impulses, in the sense of a free and noble 'imitation' of great persons and great ideals. In these three quiet adjectives there is a program for the most aspiring and inwardly or ethically strenuous life. Each of them, one sees at once, suggests some form of discipline or restraint, some 'inner check' put upon impulse, appetite, or headstrong will. Whatever else he may have included in the word, there is no doubt that he wished it to refer primarily to conduct.<sup>4</sup>

According to Babbitt, then, satisfactory human relations must be based on the moral responsibility and the emotional restraint of the individual. Better individuals will produce a better society. True social sympathy and the realization of brotherhood require the control of temperament and impulse and are incompatible with the seeking of happiness through unrestrained play of emotion and imagination. Babbitt thinks too much emphasis in modern social thought has been placed on "humanity in the lump." He apparently feels that

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4. Odell Shepard, in Irving Babbitt: Man and Teacher, edited by Frederick A. Manchester and Odell Shepard (New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1941), p. 304.

attempts to make people better by passing laws is largely futile; discipline and reform, he believes, should be developed within the individual rather than being enforced from without. He objects particularly to humanitarian sentimentalism about social reform.

Democracy, Babbitt feels, fails in proportion as it fails to find leaders with standards. Standards must be arrived at by co-operation of imagination and intellect, and such standards must be subordinated to the ethical will. His opinion is that democracy has too often used quantitative rather than qualitative standards; it has emphasized too much the mediocre, the "divine average"; it has given too little attention to the choice of leaders who are intellectually and ethically superior. Babbitt apparently, then, upholds an aristocracy of merit and achievement from which leaders should be chosen if "equalitarian democracy" is not to encourage mediocrity. The humanism of Irving Babbitt touches society strongly through educational channels. He suggests that education should help to find and to train the right types for leadership. Unfortunately he fails to show any more workable method than those used at present by which desirable leaders may gain and maintain their positions. But he expressed his opinions with a crusader's spirit, and stood ready to defend them even at the risk of making himself unpopular with his colleagues. Such an instance is recorded by Mr. Maag:

...Babbitt differed with President Eliot. Young as he was he openly took issue with him in faculty meetings and did not

hesitate to denounce the elective system in his published writings. Eliot's theories were, in his opinion, merely a new expression of the humanitarianism of Rousseau and the scientific utilitarianism of Bacon, to the destruction of the humanistic ideal of education. What Eliot brought to college students, he asserted, was not liberty but license, and he protested against it as depriving uninformed young people of the guidance they needed and letting them fritter away their time on trivial, unrelated courses which made for neither sound knowledge nor character.<sup>5</sup>

Just as the will power to say "no" is important in the individual, so, Babbitt thinks, the veto power (exercised especially by the judiciary) is important to the state. He points out the danger of man's "lust for power" in the modern period when "the analytic intellect," he says, is held in abeyance, for the free play of emotions is encouraged.<sup>6</sup> German Kultur (of which we heard so much in World War I) he characterizes as a combination of scientific efficiency and emotionalism which illustrates the dangers of modern trends.

Mr. Babbitt seems strangely silent on the question of economics. The writer does not recall that he ever committed himself to any particular theories in this regard.

In the field of education Mr. Babbitt has very plausible precepts. Of prime importance is the emphasis he places on the humanistic studies, such as history, literature, art, and philosophy,

5. William F. Maag, Jr., in Ibid., p. 83.

6. Most of my impressions regarding Mr. Babbitt's views regarding man's place in and obligation toward society are influenced by his Democracy and Leadership.

for the young student before he begins specialization. He says this is necessary to the student's betterment, and so that he may have some conception of the relation of his field of specialization to human effort and human experience.

He states emphatically that the teaching of literature should be freed from domination by the linguists or philologists of the graduate school on the one hand and from overpopularization on the other. He apparently thinks that literature courses should require thoughtful, serious reading and study; they should not be "snap" courses. But he thinks also that there has been too much attempt to apply scientific methods to literary studies where they do not fit.

In Rousseau and Romanticism he acknowledges the value of modern science but seems to think that the scientist needs to be more concerned with the human values and effects of science. Thus he points out that science produces the airplane but does not determine whether it is to be used to carry mail or to drop bombs on women and children. Therefore he states that science needs to be brought under ethical control. This principle should apply to education in science as well as to research.

For society, in general, Mr. Babbitt saw with uncanny foresight, a great and devastating catastrophe. Of this Mr. Maag wrote,<sup>7</sup>

The world's lack of moral and spiritual unity, and the advance which science had made without corresponding advance

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7. Maag, op. cit., p. 81.



in self-control, made Babbitt fear a new dark age, worse than any which mankind had yet experienced.

In humanism Mr. Babbitt recognized a factor of great stability for society.

The controversy that Irving Babbitt stirred up concerning religion is in itself a justification for the existence of neo-humanism, for he certainly forced the issue with a host of lax thinkers with the result that many sound decisions were made.

Without something of an understanding of Mr. Babbitt's religious views, the writer judges it impossible to interpret his writings fairly or to obtain any comprehensive view of his intentions, for they are at the bottom of everything he wrote. To say they are at the "bottom" is both figuratively and literally true. He seemed always extremely reticent to write his opinions about religion. The most direct ideas one may obtain are from the recorded conversations he had with his students or friends. So far as personal evidence is concerned, it is vastly clear that he dedicated his life to the betterment of mankind. Whether his precepts were in accordance with the majority or the minority, he is entitled to much respect.

To attempt to present a clear-cut interpretation of Babbitt's religious views is impossible; to attempt to show the general direction of his thoughts is liable to result in some degree of misrepresentation, for the record of his own statements is sparse. His

work is not a set of doctrines, but a profound examination of the modern spirit from the viewpoint of traditional wisdom. Armed with a knowledge of the past, he studied the whole course of our times, judged it, and found it lacking. His prodigious learning about the history of ideas and the human spirit was slowly assimilated, for he did not begin serious publication until he was forty years old.

Irving Babbitt condemned the immediate past, his chief quarrel being with naturalism. He found guidance in the distant past, assimilating much from teachings of the ancient Buddha, from Aristotle, from Plato, even from the "Know thyself" of Socrates. And he looked to the future to elevate mankind, the vehicle being humanism. His conception of the higher will is a key to the relation of his humanism and religion. What he terms "higher will," the most of us recognize as conscience, but because it is often confused with the term "natural will" in reference to Christian grace it is not strange that the exact nature of the comparison of humanism to religion should have been questioned. Of this Mr. Babbitt says: "The higher will must simply be accepted as a mystery that may be studied in its practical effects, but that, in its ultimate nature, is incapable of formulation."<sup>8</sup>

In his approach to humanism Mr. Babbitt was straightforward and critical. We have his own statement which says: "I am for coming

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8. Maag, op. cit., p. 86

at my humanism in a positive and critical rather than in a merely traditional manner."<sup>9</sup> In contrast to this attitude most people accept their religion merely because they think it has been either historically or positively established, whereas Mr. Babbitt has arrived at his conclusions through keen reasoning. He believes that the revealed religions all end in mystery; he points out that, for man, every avenue of knowledge must likewise do so. He admits that the character of his "higher will" is as mysterious as any tenet of revealed religion. He says that the higher will must simply be accepted as a mystery that may be studied in its practical effects. He insists on keeping humanism within a limited scope; in other words, he makes it stand on its own merits. Mr. Foerster confines it to a specific domain by saying that humanism sets forth the idea that there is need as well as room for a working philosophy mediating between scepticism and dogma and devoid of ecclesiastical organization or revelation. As regards Mr. Babbitt's own views of humanism in relation to revealed religion, it is perhaps necessary to be more specific.

Humanism does not utilize revealed religion. It may be accompanied by belief or unbelief in it, but in any case, it takes no stand against it. Humanism is established critically by the observation of the immediate data of consciousness and by the study of the record of the race. Such observations and study reveal that man's intellect and will, as well as senses, are constantly prone to excess; but they also reveal at work

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9. Maag. op. cit., p. 92.

in man a principle of control over them, and consequently superior to them. This principle is designated as the "higher will," "inner check" or frein vital, and as it may be exercised over the natural activities of man, it is apparently of supernatural origin, so that it corresponds to grace in the Christian system. Its utilization in the curbing of excess and in thus securing a harmonious functioning of man's natural activities, through mediating between extremes, constitutes humanistic living. The standards for thus mediating between extremes, the universal principles of decorous or humanistic living, are to be sought by imaginative concentration on the experience of the race and applied, with the help of the higher will, as reason dictates in the particular circumstance.<sup>10</sup>

It seems apparent at this point that about the only issue that stands between humanism and revealed religion is a missing link that might connect it with God. To the writer it would seem one and the same thing if the neo-humanists would confess the inner check as being the divine will of God. It is evident that humanism becomes, if not a religion in actuality, a very adequate substitution. For those of the Orient who have never accepted Christianity, for those who drift away from it, finding its mysteries too illogical, for those who cannot accept naturalism as an alternative, perhaps humanism is the answer. It must be admitted to be more free from the mysterious than most other creeds with the possible exception of Pelagianism.<sup>11</sup>

While it is patently true that Mr. Babbitt refuses to discuss the supernatural order, because it is a separate domain, dependent

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10. J. A. Merz, The Challenge of Humanism (New York, The Oxford University Press, 1935), pp. 174-175.

11. Pelagianism is a doctrine taught by Pelagius, a British student of Greek philosophy. It teaches that human nature by its own power is able to save itself without the help of God's grace.

upon revelation, this does not necessarily indicate that he denies its existence. It is apparent that Mr. Babbitt formulated his own opinions, recalled the observations of the East that a principle of control, very similar to Christian grace, is evidenced to be at work within human beings. The only things that he does not admit is that it is an ultimately divine principle. He cannot be called a Pelagian because Pelagianism does not admit of a higher will. He cannot be called a Scholastic because Scholasticism reasons that the ultimate end of man is God. After we have established that the "higher will," which is an essential to Babbitt's humanism, may be just another term for God's grace, the fundamental relation of his humanism to a revealed religion would seem to be established.

The question: What is the ultimate goal of humanism? might fairly be asked. Mr. Babbitt would reply that it is the happiness of mankind. He would insist on true and abiding standards. To obtain a workable knowledge of these, and to seek to establish them permanently, prompted his prodigious study of mankind down through the ages. This involved a careful survey of experience. In this regard one might confuse humanism and pragmatism. The essential difference is that pragmatism looks away from first principles toward results, while humanism and Christianity both look toward existing and abiding truth. 'Happiness' for Mr. Babbitt means satisfying results derived from the normal activities of man's faculties, proportionately developed and harmonized. Man must transcend his animal self to

attain true happiness. This is essentially the same attitude as that which Aristotle held. This happiness ties up with the law for man and depends substantially upon a higher will.

Upon this evidence one may or may not decide that Mr. Babbitt believed in God. It would seem to depend entirely upon what interpretation one makes of his term "higher will." He has admitted that humanism is based on religion and is dependant on it. Of Christianity he has said that he was not so arrogant as to deny the validity of other ways of affirming the existence of a higher will. The church, he would seem to condemn, on the precept that it calls too much attention to evil. But whether humanism or religion, the path of both seems to be an ascending one. With the ancient Buddha, Babbitt would say: "Good is restraint in all things," and with the God of our Christians believers: "Thou shalt not..."

Babbitt's theories about literary criticism fall naturally into two groups: the negative or adverse criticism, and the positive or favorable criticism. The writer will first consider the negative criticism.

Norman Foerster had this to say about Irving Babbitt: "As a writer Irving Babbitt was a genuine critic, comparable with Carlyle, Arnold, and Emerson, inferior to them in literary quality, superior to them in intellectual energy and penetration."<sup>12</sup>

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12. Norman Foerster, in Irving Babbitt: Man and Teacher, edited by Frederick Manchester and Odell Shepard (New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1941), p. 89.

As time goes on, it is likely the truth and fairness of this statement will become more apparent. It has now long been evident that the writings of this author will be of value more for the informational content than for any claim to outstanding artistry in composition, such as any of the above-mentioned three has attained. His superiority to them in "intellectual energy and penetration" is commonly conceded. The vast knowledge that Mr. Babbitt acquired over long years of arduous study and research afforded him a background adequate to the formulation of fair criticism. Out of the enormous amount that he read, if he rejected the major portion of it, it was because of the elevation of his standards. Therein probably lies the chief merit of his work. Stuart P. Sherman gives to us his impressions as follows:

I knew Professor Babbitt as a graduate teacher in the "History of Literary Criticism" and in his "Rousseau and His Influence." At that time he had very small classes, meeting around a table. He came in with a bag bursting full of books, and took out a handful of notes which he arranged around him. He began to sway in his chair, then leaped out upon some doctrine or line of poets, "to cast o'er erring words and deeds a heavenly show"--Buddha, Aristotle, Plato, Horace, Dante, Montaigne, Pascal, Milton, etc., etc.

He deluged you with wisdom of the world; his thoughts were unpacked and poured out so fast you couldn't keep up with them. You didn't know what he was talking about but you felt that he was extremely in earnest; that it was tremendously important; that sometime it would count; that he was uttering dogmatically things which cut into your beliefs, disposed derisively of what you adored, driving you into a reconstruction of your entire intellectual system of ideas.

You never felt for a moment that he was a pedagogue teaching pupils. You felt that he was a Coleridge, a Carlyle, a Buddha, pouring out the full-stuffed cornucopia of the world's wisdom upon your head. You were no longer of the elementary class.

You were with a man who was seeking through literature for illustrations of his philosophy of life. You were dealing with questions on the answer to which the welfare of nations and civilizations depended. He himself seemed to know the right answer and was building a thoroughfare of ideas from the Greeks to our own day.

You went out of the room laden down with general ideas that he had made seem tremendously important, ideas which you met in the newspaper, in the next book you read, in the next man you met. He related for you a multitude of separate and apparently disconnected tendencies to the great central currents of thought. You carried away also a sense of the need for immense reading. He had given you theses about literature, about life, which you would spend a lifetime in verifying.<sup>13</sup>

In general, Babbitt seems to find the modern literature of both Europe and America gloomy, lacking in purpose, reflecting a confusion of thought and a sense of futility that he feels are all too prevalent in the modern world. He decries the tendency in modern literature to glorify self-expression as a substitute for clear thinking and for self-discipline and self-development. He offers adverse criticism of all the chief literary trends that have appeared in Western World literature from the seventeenth century to the twentieth century: pseudo-classicism, romanticism, realism, and naturalism.

Going back to the afore-mentioned charge that modern literature is gloomy, Mr. Babbitt finds that this condition arises from the fact that most modern literature is purposeless and unprogressive. Little of worth and nothing of endurance is evidenced in the major portion of this writing. The subject material he condemns, as being irrelevant to human progress. This leads us to his belief that the



writing of this period is lacking in purpose. Some of his most scathing criticism is used to support this charge. He would again refer us to the advice of the ancient Socrates: "Think rightly and right acting will follow." Mr. Babbitt charges this age with practically a complete failure in the matter of sound thinking. As has been previously mentioned, he said that the modern tendency is to act first and think later, if at all. The inevitable result is purposeless literature, confusion of ideas, and futility.

Criticisms, as offered by Mr. Babbitt, seem not to have been made with any maliciousness toward authors themselves, but always toward some logical fallacy in their principles, and he was never wholesale in his judgments. If he centered his critical reviews on any particular persons, it seems evident that it was because, through them, he desired to point out a general destructive tendency. Among such authors were Bacon, Rousseau, and Wordsworth.

As was set forth in chapter three of this discourse, Babbitt's judgment of Bacon was that he was a scientific naturalist. His chief variance with the opinions of Bacon, as made clear through his writings, are with regard to the capacity within the individual for learning: Babbitt maintains that complete knowledge is attainable by the individual. He objects to the entire philosophy of Rousseau; in particular to the elevation of human liberty above the restrictions of discipline and restraint imposed by humanism. Unrestrained liberty and unrestricted selection result in moral laxness, says Mr. Babbitt.

He repeatedly emphasizes his idea that the "law for man" is applicable to literature.

He berates the high value that many critics have placed on much of the writing of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He prophesies that time will prove most of it to be at best comparable only to the pseudo-classical literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>14</sup> He attributes the fallacy of critics' opinions to a lack of sufficient knowledge of the proved classics to admit of fair judgment.

He seems especially severe in his criticism of the works of William Wordsworth. Mr. Babbitt calls Wordsworth a "sentimental naturalist" and disapproves heartily of the idealistic attitude he displays toward the peasant, the child, and the primitive man, in most of his writings. The writer would defend Mr. Wordsworth against most adverse criticism, finding so much to be enjoyed from his work as to render impartial judgment impossible. She finds herself sustained by many who declare him to be the most popular choice among poets, and by such eminent critics as Harry Salpeter, who writes: ". . . with Babbitt, the question seems to be, not, 'Is it poetry?' but 'Is it Humanism?'" Coldly detaching ourselves from our own conclusions, however, and appraising Wordsworth from the critical angle of the humanist, we must agree that his conception of poetry is at great variance with Babbitt's. Mr. Wordsworth said: "Poetry takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity." Mr. Babbitt, with Matthew Arnold, would

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14. Mr. Babbitt says that the pseudo-classicists misunderstood Aristotle's doctrine of imitation and thus tended to make their writings imitative in a wrong sense, with extremely poor results.

judge poetry for its "high truth" and "high seriousness."

While Irving Babbitt's personal life gave every evidence that he was an ardent lover of nature, he still would not lower his literary standards to permit of unbounded emotionalism or unrestricted sentimentality such as is prevalently displayed in the poetry of Wordsworth, and in the works of other romantic writers about nature.

Our conclusions concerning Mr. Babbitt's opinions of romanticism are drawn most accurately and completely from his book Rousseau and Romanticism. He finds fault with Rousseau particularly, judging him to be the most representative of the movement. His charge that romanticism resulted in a confusion of the arts has been discussed elsewhere in this paper. He criticises Rousseau for his admonitions against the use of mental energy, upholding the precept of Plato, who felt that man progressed only through mental effort. The "back to nature" urge resulted in such moral laxness that it led to national catastrophe, culminating in the revolution. Mr. Babbitt applied the term "emotional realism" to romanticism, and meant nothing complimentary in its implications. Realism he defines as being "romanticism going on all fours."

In so far as the romanticists substituted emotion or feeling for action, Mr. Babbitt condemned them, for, carried to excess, this resulted in naturalism, in which he saw little good. One of the trends of the romantic movement was a breaking away from the pseudo-

classic rules of structure and the experimenting with various literary forms. The result with some writers was the formlessness which Babbitt denounced.

In general, the main issues objected to in the sphere of the romantic writers were: they sentimentalized nature; they placed too much emphasis on emotion; they tended to divorce literature from its rational purpose; they sought sensation rather than fact; and the intellectual content of literature grew less as the romantic movement developed.

Of particular interest is his estimate of the value of naturalism. He uses this term to refer to a literary trend characterized by extreme realism (including the theory of determinism) of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He especially dislikes the theory of naturalism that would convince us that man is the victim of circumstances - of heredity and environment. Neither can he conceive of man being submerged in nature. Man, thinks Mr. Babbitt, must work out his own salvation, and he must do so with studied deliberation and with firm control over emotion. He must remain a power unto himself, a human individual endowed with a capacity to control his destiny. He must exercise the "inner check." The negative and critical side of Babbitt's teaching might be summed up by saying that naturalism is his greatest opposing force. It is founded on scientific law, the "law for thing"; according to Mr. Babbitt, it is false in its ethics and in its human values; man

cannot be merely a part of nature. Babbitt believes that a "touch of hysteria, or at least sentimentality, is observable in the naturalists, when dealing with the human realm."

In summary of his objections to naturalism, we find that Mr. Babbitt disagrees with the naturalistic philosophy of life -- its deterministic attitude, its denial of man's moral responsibility, and its withdrawal of all incentive to moral effort. In addition to these criticisms which he applies to poetry and prose alike, he further criticises the naturalistic theory of structure of plays and novels; that is, that they may be "plotless." His ideas in this regard again remind us of Aristotle, who decreed that all plays must have a plot, and that unity of plot must be sustained. Such plays or fiction as depict a "cross section of life" were distasteful to Mr. Babbitt.

In the field of realism Mr. Babbitt has made less direct charges, although one feels that much of the criticism offered in the other spheres might well be intended for realism also. He makes his most direct remarks about the work of Tolstoy, who is usually considered one of the greatest modern realists, thereby recognizing in him a dominant influence in his particular domain. Babbitt expresses distaste for the pessimism of Tolstoy, and he says that too much emphasis is placed on the "law for thing" in his writing. He berates the tendency to dehumanize man. He also does not approve of the general category into which Tolstoy relegates humanity, but insists on man remaining first, last, and always, an individual.

Man is relieved of most of his moral obligation in the writings of Tolstoy, says Mr. Babbitt, and his destiny is fore-ordained.

Mr. Babbitt evidently thinks that more negative criticism is needed today. He thinks that modern criticism is too tolerant, that critics today praise more than they blame, that they are too unselective. To the impressionist who quotes "De gustibus non est disputandum" (there ought not to be any arguing about tastes) Mr. Babbitt retorts with the Spanish proverb: "There are tastes that deserve the cudgel." He thinks the twentieth century would be much better if it had more sternly judicial critics such as Boileau and Dr. Samuel Johnson.

The amount of literature that Irving Babbitt rejected, for various reasons, far exceeds that which he accepted. But he maintained great enthusiasm for the good which he acknowledged, an enthusiasm which is so contagious as to impel the opponent and proponent of humanism alike to read and investigate for himself.

Mr. Babbitt is very blunt in his demands that literature must challenge one to think; otherwise it is meaningless and useless. It must lead to thoughts of life as it concerns human beings, and the central figure must always be the individual. His positive taste for literature is for the classics with their intellectual appeal. His humanism places not rigid, but flexible boundaries. Besides intellectual appeal, he demands emotional restraint, balance,

symmetry, decorum, and careful finish of style. His most lavish praise is accredited to the classical literature of Greece and Rome. He singles out Homer, Pindar, and Virgil, favoring them on account of their objectivity, their restraint of personal feeling, and their expression of general or universal (rather than personal) emotion. In Homer he saw the working of a masterful mind, depicting humanity through the medium of such forces as the gods; he saw creative ability; and he saw style that still remains a challenge to the world of writers. Pindar, he praised, as an original genius, his creative ability being depicted mostly through the innovation of the Pindaric ode. In Virgil he saw a great creative ability that helped to mould and direct the progress of fellow-countrymen. In all three he saw charm, fluidity of style, and thought-provoking subject material. His chief regard for Plato was stimulated by the similarity of their conception of the need for clear and consistent and determined thinking. He praised Plato's work for its high intellectuality; as he did also the ancient Buddha.

So penetrating and so scholarly is Mr. Babbitt's understanding of the ancient classical age and its historical and literary figures, that many people (most notable among them probably being Paul Elmer More) have felt that he would have served his college better had he not been refused a position as teacher of classical language. A greater portion of the heritage of his literary criticism would have been favorable if he had been dealing with the great literature of

the past masters. But as a teacher of modern French literature, Babbitt (according to More) was forced to work in a period whose literary trends were largely distasteful to him; hence his criticism seems largely negative. Austin Warren recalls a conversation in which Mr. Babbitt was asked: "When in the past, would you like to have lived?" and the answer which Mr. Babbitt gave without hesitation was: "At Athens in the age of Pericles."

Yet Mr. Babbitt seems to have found sufficient good in the literature of the French and other European writers to occupy the average reader for many years. He admired the tendency of Racine to withstand the forces of pseudo-classicism and hold fast to the principles of the true classicists. He liked the mature work of Goethe, feeling that it was truly representative of the best of the modern German writing. His earlier work he rejected as savoring of too much weak romanticism; his later work showed strong evidence of having a true humanistic point of view.

His estimate of the French writers has been given in detail under the summary of The Masters of Modern French Criticism. In brief, the writers of this age in France whom he recognized as having some particular virtue or influence were: Madame de Staël, whom he characterized by her own statement: "Nothing in life should be stationary and art is petrified when it no longer changes"; Joubert, with whom he disagreed on religious principles but praised liberally for his ability as a critic and a stylist; Chateaubriand, whom he



judged to have been very influential in the shaping of forward-looking conceptions of the relation of art and literature; Sainte-Beuve, whom he classed as an "aesthetic humanist" and whose critical work he praised as exhibiting "perfect tact and measure and good sense against the extreme"; Scherer, whose chief worth lay in the light he gave on the spiritual crises of his time; Renan, whom he admired most because he attempted to set a standard for literary criticism (he admired also the perfection of his literary workmanship); and Brunetiere, whom he judged to have been a most able literary historian.

In general, Mr. Babbitt expressed a belief that the influence of the French literature would out-last that of any other modern nation. The best of the French writers were far superior to those of any other modern nation, in their ability to think clearly and logically. In comparison with the English authors, in this respect, he said the English exhibited a habit of "muddling through." Among the English authors, Mr. Babbitt singled out Matthew Arnold as being the writer of outstanding high ideals. He agreed with his conception of the function of literature, which, according to Arnold, must be, in some sense, a criticism of life. Babbitt and Arnold were also agreed in their theory of the classical view of life; that the reason working through the imagination and controlling emotion can and should be to "see life steadily and see it whole." Mr. Babbitt

was not impervious to many of the beauties of the poetry contributed to the world by English poets. In so far as they upheld the dignity of human nature, he found much to admire in their work. Chesley Martin Hutchings gives us his report as taken from his class notes. Mr. Babbitt said:

Of course the 'Ancient Mariner' has merit. It is sheer magic. But the adventures of the Mariner are not a part of universal human experience. Do not misunderstand me. I demand merely that we recognize in literature, different levels of value. And works like the 'Ancient Mariner' or Keat's 'Ode to a Nightingale,' while excellent in their way, do not approach the highest level. It is precisely in this, the failure to admit such gradations, that the expressionist critics err most flagrantly.<sup>15</sup>

If one were to formulate Babbitt's fundamental principles of literary criticism briefly, they would necessarily include his belief that content should be emphasized more than structure or style, and that, to be great, a work of literature must show a wholesome moral attitude and a sound philosophy of life. Babbitt thinks that for an estimate of a book's literary worth one should depend, not on the book's immediate popularity with the many, but on the judgment of the "keen-sighted few." In common with most critics, he agrees that the final test of literary value is the test of time--the judgment of posterity.

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15. Hutchings in op. cit., p. 228.

## Chapter V

### THE INFLUENCE AND VALUE OF IRVING BABBITT'S NEO-HUMANISTIC THEORY AND CRITICISM

It would be presumptuous of me to attempt to judge Irving Babbitt. The impression, now grown into an established conviction, remains with me that he was a man of such superior intellect that his opinions cannot be lightly cast aside. How permanent his influence on American thought and letters will be remains for posterity to determine. The reaction of the present generation can most fairly be presented to the readers by allowing the opponents and the proponents of humanism, and also prominent scholars who saw both good and bad in Babbitt's humanism, to speak for themselves. It is beyond the scope of the present study to present all the evidence. To do so would be to copy scores of closely reasoned and closely written articles, the abundance of which is a testimony to the critical controversy occasioned by Babbitt's work.

Perhaps the most purposeful charge that is made against humanism is that it is a substitute for religion. The boundaries of genuine humanism are broad and flexible, but it is plain that the word is being appropriated for points of view that cannot be brought within these confines, however generously they may be extended. It is an error to say that humanism can take the place of religion. On this subject we have the opinion of H. E. Fosdick expressed as follows:

After all,...the genesis of humanism is not difficult to see. In a generation when the older forms of theism have gone to pieces, and of high spirit and devoted enthusiasm cannot because of that stop living well....They have said, Let theism go, God or no God, the good life may still be ours.

In concluding his article Dr. Fosdick puts himself in the position of the man to whom belief in a God has become entirely negative.

Finding the cosmos...basically irrational, I should face with equanimity, being rational myself. I should do my best to say that even when all spiritual meaning is banished from ultimate reality, and the things that we love best—friendship, poetry, science, societies that grow in humanism and good will—are seen as trivial incidents in the colossal onrush of the cosmos, it still is better to love these values and find one's life in their service. I should honestly endeavor to be a courageous humanist, counting it craven to let even an antagonistic universe dissuade me from decency, justice, and goodwill. But in hours of lucid insight when I grasped the full-orbed meaning of the idea that the determiner of destiny is altogether physical, no more aware of our human values than are the stars of the Big Dipper,...I should be a far-from enthusiastic humanist....and there would be hours when I, a humanist, would pray to the God I no longer believed in to help theists so credibly to rebuild theism, that humanists might disappear.<sup>1</sup>

In these words Mr. Fosdick has voiced the sentiments of the many who, in time of dire need, feel the comforting reassurance that there is a supreme God on whom they may rely; that although humanism is a strong agency, it is not sufficiently adequate for spiritual needs. It seems clear that Babbitt's type of humanism does not necessarily imply a denial of religious faith.

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1. H. E. Fosdick, "Limitations of Humanism," Harper's Magazine, vol. 180 (Dec., 1929), pp. 50-60.

Some opponents of humanism ridicule the "inner check" idea. C. J. Herrick calls it a "coinage of a high-brow name for an unknown factor." He expresses the opinion that it is not an adequate solution of a scientific problem, though "this subtle device has at times retarded scientific advance for generations." The remedy, he suggests, should be not less but more science. Dr. Sheen criticises the whole group of modern humanists:

Our modern humanists who ask us to reject the super-human Christ, either because eternal life is not necessary or because faith in Him is reducible to 'imagination,' are asking us to fly in the face of forty centuries of experiment.

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Academic Humanism (Babbitt's group) is alarmist in temper, orthodox in tendency, and likely to degenerate into a new scholasticism.<sup>2</sup>

A similar objection to humanism is that it has its source in a psychology of "escape." It is charged with being an attempt to flee from the present into a past so remote that it has become impossible for the modern man. This charge is based on a belief that the true purpose of literature has been misinterpreted; in other words, that humanism is based upon a misapprehension of the purpose of literature.

Harry Salpeter refers to Mr. Babbitt as a Calvinist and finds

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2. F. J. Sheen, "The New Paganism," The Catholic News (Feb. 22, 1930), pp. 30-32.

little good in either the man or his teachings. He says he is "...harsh and twangy, too sure of his dogma and showing how unused he had become to contradiction...."

Frank Jewett Mather was associated with Mr. Babbitt in their early teaching at Williams College and watched the development of Babbitt's humanism from close range. He did not accept it in full. Mr. Mather apparently ruled religion out of his conception of humanism. He preferred that the humanist be an agnostic. He did not foresee any very influential development for humanism or a very bright future for Mr. Babbitt. He said:

To become legendary while living is, generally speaking, unfortunate. Such was Irving Babbitt's lot....Any time in the last 30 years to mention Irving Babbitt to the average assistant professor of any literature was to face execration.<sup>3</sup>

Not all of Irving Babbitt's disciples, including many of his pupils, could hold fast to what they had learned. Under his leadership and fired by his zeal many were faithful to his doctrines. But without his presence, the strength which he had communicated waned, until they retained only a stock of epigrammatic phrases which they regarded as ideas. As is so often the case, most of these gradually sank to a state of neutrality, admitting of both good and bad in Babbitt's teachings. Of his reaction toward this group, Warner G.

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3. Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., in Irving Babbitt: Man and Teacher, edited by Frederick A. Manchester and Odell Shepard (New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1941), p. 40.

Rice has written,<sup>4</sup>

But of personal rancor or bitterness toward those colleagues who differed from him he showed no trace, making it perfectly clear that he could hold in high personal regard, men whose views he was combating.

He revealed some distress of spirit, however, when he spoke of those whom he had once accepted wholeheartedly as allies, but in whose support he could no longer trust. Paul Elmer More, he remarked, ...seemed to be falling away from him...He feared lest More was abandoning the humanistic for the religious point of view; and he was doubly perturbed in consequence, for the change meant not only that he found it increasingly difficult to keep in perfect understanding with an old friend, but also that the humanist position was losing one of its ablest expounders, the man who beyond all others had the gift of expression and the mastery of a distinguished style.

What he obviously felt to be the defection of Stuart Sherman troubled him even more-for he thought that Sherman was going over to the humanitarians, developing expansive sympathies, approaching dangerously near to sentimentality. The Middle West, Babbitt believed, had been too much for Sherman, who had lost his sense of values.<sup>5</sup>

A study of the work of Paul Elmer More is a sufficient assignment for another thesis. What is necessary to establish his position in connection with the advance of Babbitt's humanism, will be discussed at a later place in this paper.

Allen Tate can also be numbered among those who assumed a more or less tolerant attitude toward humanism. While he would admit of its elevating influence, he condemned it severely from the standpoint of religion. He charged that it was a "refuge for those

4. Warner G. Rice, in *ibid.*, p. 250

5. The writer would not agree with this statement, after having had courses in English under Mr. Sherman, at the University of Nebraska.

persons who want to be religious without assuming the responsibility of defending a dogmatic orthodoxy of the conventional kind." He says they want the "moral elevation without the super-natural sustentation."

Louis Trenchard More, brother of Paul Elmer, looked upon Babbitt's humanism with a Mid-West attitude, similar to that of Dr. Sherman, and like Sherman was also a professor at the University of Nebraska. Later he taught physics in the University of Cincinnati. Mr. More emphasizes the limitations of science and the need for humanistic ethics. He writes as follows:

I saw Babbitt when, as my guest, he came to Cincinnati to deliver the Phi Beta Kappa address....His audience will never forget the address Babbitt gave that night. But he was melancholy, and I suppose the shadows of his approaching end were gathering, for he told me again and again that all had deserted him, and that only he was left as a target for the shafts of the romanticists and humanitarians.<sup>6</sup>

Such comments as the fore-going must be weighed against those of a more positive nature, in order that we may arrive at a fair estimate of the work of Irving Babbitt.

In his profession he fought his way up by sheer attainment; appreciated or not, his accomplishment can not be denied, even by those who called him a "silly dreamer evoking a dusty path." One who is well qualified to judge Irving Babbitt is Norman Foerster<sup>7</sup>

6. Louis Trenchard More, in ibid., p. 59

7. Norman Foerster is an educator, critic, and author. He has been a professor of English at the Universities of Iowa and of North Carolina. He is the editor of Humanism and America.



a former student of his at Harvard. Dr. Foerster, in one of the many articles he has written about Babbitt, says:

One of the great men in the intellectual history of America, Irving Babbitt combined the logical firmness of a Jonathan Edwards with the intuitive flexibility of an Emerson. In an age when our intellectual life was indecisive and even nebulous, his firmness was readily granted, indeed was often taken to be rigid formalism.

Babbitt's firmness, both intellectual and ethical, needs no further testimony, though those who knew him personally could give interesting examples. Dr. Foerster continues his remarks by saying:

His flexibility, on the other hand, was denied, except for an occasional inconsistent charge that he was romantically vague. But he was never vague, in books or personal talk, if vagueness implies unclearness where the human mind is capable of clearness.

In all the years I knew him, I never found him, even for a moment, I think, dogmatically wholesale in his judgments. He made me feel, rather, that I needed correction or amendment when I agreed with him, and he was constantly coming to the rescue of his enemies, pointing out that their errors must not be exaggerated nor their virtues denied. I have never known any person, in the flesh or through the printed word, more solicitous for the true truth.

.....

I knew Irving Babbitt rather intimately for nearly a quarter of a century, from the time he was an assistant professor at Harvard down to the year of his death, and in all that time I never heard him speak maliciously of anyone.

And this despite the fact that he was a voice crying in the wilderness, resented for making a noise in the profession and in the country generally.

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He was simple and natural and honest. Like all men he had an intellectual history, a changing and developing of thought, as future scholars may be counted on to point out in detail, but still it is true that he altered less than his peers in the past

and incomparably less than men of intellectual endowments in the vacillating present. The Babbitt that I knew when I was an under-graduate at Harvard was already the Babbitt of the last years. When I saw him in April of 1933, lying in his bed marked for death (as he seemed to know better than others), he was the same firm-voiced, carefully-just, great man I had known so long,—courageous, cheerful, deeply concerned for the things that had always occupied him, living his life consistently to the end.<sup>8</sup>

William F. Maag, Jr. experienced a similar acquaintance with Mr. Babbitt and by virtue of its long duration became a competent judge. Over a period of 40 years, first as a student, and later as a roomer in the Babbitt home, his association was very close. Of Babbitt he wrote:

Knowing Professor Babbitt so well, we could never take seriously the charge that he opposed everything romantic. No one could have read aloud Rousseau's magical prose with deeper feeling than he, or show keener appreciation of its lyrical beauty....He was not attempting to give a rounded estimate of Rousseau, but, as he was to write in the introduction to Rousseau and Romanticism, to trace main currents as a part of his search for a set of principles to oppose naturalism.<sup>9</sup>

Personally, Mr. Maag found Babbitt to be one of the friendliest critics. He says he was "a man of great intellect, and narrow outlook, a man of enfranchised mind, and, at the same time, a Philistine."

Mr. Maag continues his defense of Mr. Babbitt by saying that where humanism is confused with humanitarianism, as it frequently is, Babbitt is accused of irreligion, but that "in fact he admired most

8. Norman Foerster, in ibid., pp. 95 et seq.

9. William F. Maag, in ibid., p. 71

of all the Christian gentleman and Christian humanism."

George Roy Elliott was not a student of Babbitt's, but he did accept humanism. Mr. Elliott was a professor of English Literature at Amherst College, and he wrote many articles defending humanistic doctrines. In them, he emphasized more than Babbitt the importance of "dogmatic and revealed religion" but thought humanism was of much value even without religion.

Holding closely to this same school of thought is Thomas Stearns Eliot, the poet and critic. He was a disciple of Babbitt in his theories about life and literature, and was author of numerous volumes of verse and critical essays. His views on religion coincided with those of George Roy Elliott. He wrote:

I do not believe that any pupil who was ever deeply impressed by Babbitt, can ever speak of him with that mild tenderness one feels towards something one has outgrown or grown out of. If one has once had that relationship with Babbitt, he remains permanently an active influence; his ideas are permanent with one, as a measurement and test of one's own. I cannot imagine anyone coming to react against Babbitt. Even in the convictions one may feel, the views one may hold, that seem to contradict most important convictions of Babbitt's own, one is aware that he himself was very largely the cause of them. The magnitude of the debt that some of us owe to him should be more obvious to posterity than our contemporaries.<sup>10</sup>

It may well be that the world will find the lasting influence of Dr. Babbitt's humanism to be exemplified in the Orient. Paul Elmer More has said that Mr. Babbitt was probably the only American of our time who was "regarded by Orientals as a wise man in their

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10. Thomas Stearns Eliot, in ibid., p. 102.

own tradition and who knew exactly how to receive the homage of their discipleship." Fortified with a wide knowledge of their beliefs and their traditions and their languages, he was intensely interested in them as a people. Marcus Selden Goldman attests to this in his writing and tells of the very evident influence Mr. Babbitt had on them. He says:

On a number of occasions I found Babbitt surrounded by Oriental students, some of whom had come to Paris especially to see him. Most of them were Chinese, but there were, I believe, a number of Japanese, Koreans, and Hindus.<sup>11</sup>

It seems to the writer that it is among these peoples that Babbitt's humanism is most likely to fill a permanent and desirable need. Oscillating between their pagan beliefs and more or less vague notions of Christianity, humanism could serve a transitional purpose and would divert them from naturalism, which would seem to be their only alternative. Humanism would make such peoples individualistic, and by virtue of placing the responsibility of right living within themselves, it would be a decided step forward. The writer feels that humanism is primarily a secular movement; the emphasis being on ideas and doctrines. The humanist's plane of life is not in opposition to religion. It does not seem to be impossible that in a synthesis of the two, the humanist's life may have a future. The value of humanism, as set forth by Babbitt, lies not in the novelty of his conclusions but in the power with which he has analyzed the whole modern movement. His strong contention was that

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11. Marcus Selden Goldman, in ibid., p. 238.

modern movement is proceeding away from civilization; that the "modern world is wrong on first principles." He set himself against this main direction of Western thought since the Eighteenth century, in some respects since the Renaissance. The value of the doctrines which he brought in opposition lies in the keenness of his perception, breadth of comprehension, subtlety of reasoning, wealth of illustration, range of learning, eloquence, wit, and thoroughness which have gone into the author's examination and recording.

Whether one thinks Dr. Babbitt right or wrong, he must agree with Rudolph Altrocchi, who says:

...behind his convictions, there was (there still is in his books) a valiant spirit, a sanity, an admirable integrity, nobility of intent, his unquestionably high standards of human conduct and of art--in short, his lofty idealism, so lofty as to seem now unattainable--must make even those who are inimical to his theories admire him as a strong and salutary influence. There may well be, in his books, a permanent message for our world.<sup>12</sup>

And in defense of the humanist, whoever he may be, one might say, as does Norman Foerster:

In general, why should not the humanist, it may be asked, devote himself quietly to his own task--that of effecting an adjustment between the law of measure and the ever-novel emergencies of actual living, and at the same time refuse to take sides too decisively in the great debate between the naturalists and the supernaturalists? If pressed too hard by the supernaturalists in particular, why should he not reply in the words of Pope:

"Presume not God to scan;  
The proper study of mankind is man";<sup>13</sup>

12. Ralph Altrocchi, in ibid., p. 99.

13. Norman Foerster, Humanism and America (New York, Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 30.

Paul Elmer More was without doubt the most ardent supporter of Babbitt's theories of humanism. For many years he worked in close harmony with Mr. Babbitt. He has written many books in defense of humanistic doctrines. Some of them are: A Revival of Humanism, On Being Human, and The Shelburne Essays (in several volumes).

Perhaps the world cannot interpret the workings of his mind or the influences which caused him to desert the views of Babbitt and to insist that the missing link between the latter's theories and God, be supplied. Although he still holds fast to many of the tenets of humanism, acknowledging vast benefits derivable from its study, he leans more and more to the idea of a revealed religion.

To loose the bond that had tied him so intimately to so valued a friend and co-worker as More, was perhaps the greatest disappointment that ever befell Mr. Babbitt. His keen sense of having been deserted is shown in many of his later writings.

In the winter of 1931 Irving Babbitt gave the Alexander Lectures in Toronto, the last important series of lectures he delivered. His health declined steadily from January 1932, until he died at his home in Cambridge, July 15, 1933.

It is of interest to consider the obituaries from both his opponents and his supporters. From the editorial page of The Nation one may read:

It is reported that Professor Irving Babbitt had no great admiration for many of those who climbed aboard his Humanistic Bandwagon when, for some mysterious reason, it got started about three years ago. Now that he has just died in Cambridge at the age of sixty-seven he leaves Paul Elmer More as the last remaining representative of the older generation of those quasi-Christian American scholars who carried on a losing battle against both romanticism and that naturalism which they regarded as essentially a later development of the same thing. Professor Babbitt, author of many books and for thirty-eight years a member of the faculty of Harvard University, had a prodigious familiarity with international literature, which he seemed sometimes to read chiefly in order to denounce it. By comparison with Professor More his whole attitude and work seemed relatively negative. It was a strange paradox that this aloof Professor should have been accepted as a leader in a short-lived controversy of more-or-less popular character. The explanation of the paradox is that there was a certain connection between his ideas and those of the reactionary group of younger critics. It is doubtful, however, if the older and the younger Humanists ever understood one another, and Professor Babbitt allowed himself to be quoted as an authority without, except upon one occasion, taking an active part in the controversy, which was already dying when the more recent aggressiveness of the Marxian critics pitched it into the background.<sup>14</sup>

And from the pen of Louis J. A. Mercier, we have the following account:

Often through that spring of 1933 the thoughts of all who had known him and who knew of his condition could not but turn to him with boundless sympathy as he struggled in his last meditations shot through with physical pain.

One day, shortly after the close of the summer school, a telegram came. Only a few could gather to pay him a last tribute. It was one of those perfect days which are at their best in the Harvard Yard. We took our seats in the small stalls of the chapel of the Memorial Church. No flowers. The utter simplicity of a crimson drapery in keeping with the single purpose of his life. Lynn Harold Hough from the pulpit above spoke words that marked him as one who was to do much to carry on a Christian utilization of humanism. In filing past, at the end, an

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14. Editorial, "Irving Babbitt," The Nation, vol. 137 (July 26, 1933), p. 87.

elder friend and colleague ventured a furtive sign of the cross.

We were soon scattered and I walked toward Widener, where I had so often met with him. Then I turned back. The squirrels were still gamboling and the pigeons pecking on the green. The shadows of the elms still played on the walls. The golden light still suffused the scene. But not a single human being was now in sight. I just caught a glimpse of a high black car disappearing down the sunlit path. Irving Babbitt was crossing a gate of Harvard Yard for the last time. The bell was tolling; tolling the loss of his university, of all the personal students to whom he had given so unsparingly of his precious time, of all the students of thought and letters whom he had so stimulated even when he had antagonized them; tolling for the passing of a great soul into the final mystery."<sup>15</sup>

And now there remains for the reader, on the basis of the testimony of the several witnesses, the privilege of placing his own estimate on the value of the humanism of Dr. Irving Babbitt.

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15. Louis J. A. Merriam, in *Irving Babbitt: Man and Teacher*, edited by Frederick A. Manchester and Odell Shepard, (New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1941), pp. 207-208.



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