
Irving Babbitt, the Moral Imagination, and Progressive Education

Glenn A. Davis

*Education
an ethical
pursuit.*

When *Literature and the American College*, Irving Babbitt's critique of the new educational theories, was first published in 1908, it was a shot fired across the bow of the ship of progressive reform in American higher education. Babbitt fired a sound shot, but he lost the war. Since that time, educational reform has run through various movements, including, but not limited to, the industrial education movement, the mental testing movement, differentiated curriculum, child-centered education, the mental hygiene movement, the efficiency movement, constructivism, and education for life-adjustment, all reform movements advanced under the rubric of "progressive education."¹ Yet, readers who review educational practice and who delve into the voluminous works on educational theory over the past century, will recognize that Babbitt's writings on education as an ethical pursuit remain topical. Now more than ever, Americans argue the purpose and value of education and debate the central issues of educational content and methodology, as Babbitt did one hundred years ago.

Babbitt's voice should continue to be heard in the public debate because his central concern was with that timeless question raised by the Greeks and most explicitly put forth by Christ: For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose

GLENN A. DAVIS is head of the Middle School Division, All Saints Episcopal School, in Lubbock, Texas.

¹ Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Battles Over School Reform* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), 60, 412.

his own soul? (Matt. 16:26). The purpose of education, Babbitt emphatically answered the reformers, was not to train to acquire wealth and power, but rather, in the time-honored tradition of humanistic studies, to teach to assimilate the wisdom of the ages, an assimilation that could be fostered primarily through the right use of the imagination. Wisdom and virtue, not wealth and power, lead us to fulfill our deepest human need, genuine communion with others. Babbitt's concern for right judgment and community as the product of imaginative understanding has much to say to our world and indeed has much to offer educators who have refocused in recent years on the need for community building.

Wisdom of the ages fostered by right use of imagination.

Babbitt's thesis throughout his works is that the educational reforms of the early twentieth century inadequately addressed the nature of human imagination and therefore distorted our understanding of the human endeavor. Under largely utilitarian reforms, schooling was seriously undermining the human community because it was distorting the key element in learning: the imagination. According to Babbitt, if healthy community, defined in part as the corporate embodiment of past wisdom, was to grow, schooling had to play a significant role. And schooling means developing the moral imagination. In order for any educational institution to succeed in its purpose of assimilating wisdom, it must first and foremost foster vibrant imaginative qualities of its students, and imagination is the tool used to pursue the common standards inherent in wisdom.

Community in part the fulfillment of past wisdom.

Although numerous and diverse reform movements have been advanced under the rubric of "progressivism," they have all shared three fundamental principles: the de-emphasis of the academic curriculum; the desire to make learning more "natural" by treating each student as a unique individual within the context of his or her own biological, social and intellectual development; and the desire to make knowledge practical and more relevant to the child's immediate social situation.² The practical result of these three principles is that educational institutions have been strongly encouraged, through teacher training and through political pressure, to address two seemingly contradictory goals. The first goal

² Kieran Egan, *Getting It Wrong from the Beginning: Our Progressive Inheritance from Herbert Spencer, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 5.

is to nurture the innate social, psychological, and intellectual proclivities of each student (hence, the vast system of elective courses offered to students of all ages), and the second goal is to “adjust” each child to the economic and social needs of society in order to ensure an efficient work force. One hundred years ago reformers believed that a new century needed new methods and subjects to meet the challenges posed by a growing industrial and democratic national polity. As Diane Ravitch writes in her history of educational reform:

Criticism of the academic curriculum came mainly from two sources: business leaders, who wanted economy and efficiency in the schools, and progressive educators in the nation’s new colleges of education, who wanted the school curriculum to be more closely aligned to the needs of society in the industrial age. The business community was primarily interested in securing low taxes and well-trained workers. Progressive educators wanted socially efficient schools that would serve society by training students for jobs.³

Both Bacon and Rousseau undermined sense of community as an ethical institution.

With foresight, Babbitt was able to see through these seemingly contradictory aspects of the new reforms (“individualism” versus “social adjustment”) and proffer a cogent response, embedded in his understanding of the creative imagination. Babbitt conducted a two-front war. The first front was a brief attack against the materialists, Baconian scientists and economists, who were undermining the concept of the imagination by deemphasizing the significance of the intuitive and the illusionary. The second front was the more significant, since it had more far-reaching implications: This was the war on the theories of Rousseau, who had undermined the traditional, ethical purpose of education by radically redefining the concept of the imagination in terms of the indulgent and desire-driven individual. Babbitt was able to link these two revolutions in Western thought because of what he saw as their “veritable pedantry of originality.” “The scientific pedant who is entirely absorbed in his own bit of research is first cousin to the artistic and literary pedant who is entirely absorbed in his own sensation.”⁴ By privileging the new and original at the expense of

³ Ravitch, *Left Back*, 51-52.

⁴ Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College: Essays in Defense of the Humanities* (Washington, D.C.: National Humanities Institute, 1986; first published in 1908), 196.

the representative qualities of the universal, both Bacon and Rousseau undermined the traditional sense of community as an ethical institution. Neither of these two thinkers—nor the movements that they inspired—proffered a vision of the individual in community larger than himself. These movements put into historical motion forces of disruption, rather than forces of unity and healthy creation. Combined, these movements rent the great work of time, the humanistic tradition.

Babbitt recognized that the trend toward the sciences and “practical” studies in the modern university was changing the goal of education, from training for wisdom and character to training for service and power.⁵ The implications of the Baconian or “naturalist” revolution was that the idea of progress was now associated with the powers of scientific investigation and that human cooperation was to be seen within the context of the natural world. The traditional humanistic curriculum of literature, philosophy, and art would suffer from the growing desire to control the material world. What made this revolution dangerous to the theater of humanistic education was that Bacon’s pursuit of the understanding of nature caused him to neglect human self-knowledge. “[I]n seeking to gain dominion over things he lost dominion over himself,” writes Babbitt.⁶ When paired with the ideology of individual liberation as defined by Rousseau, nature takes on a cult well out of proportion to its significance.

While Babbitt was highly critical of Bacon’s “naturalism,” he believed that he could trace the deepest roots of educational decay back to J. J. Rousseau’s understanding of the imagination. Rousseau and his descendants, the progressives, defended their teachings under the faulty assumption that wisdom and truth lie in the radical uniqueness and genius of each individual, and that the purpose of education is to encourage the individual student’s imagination to sense his or her own uniqueness, and to liberate it from customary restraint. Babbitt believed that a wandering, unrestrained imagination would prove to be socially and morally destructive, especially when combined with the Baconian desire to act on the world, because individual students would not be encouraged to cultivate the humanity they shared with contempo-

⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁶ *Ibid.*

rary and historical others. The romantic genius was, by definition, individual and impulsive, and was not to be restrained by higher standards. Rousseau yearned for the spontaneous, the non-imitative. All sense of vice was corporate; the only individual vice was limiting the expanse of one's own conceit. Education, therefore, did not mean training for ethical character or virtue, but rather it meant "letting go" of all externally imposed standards. This radical individualism fostered by Rousseau and his followers would produce at best eternal childhood and, at worst, freaks and monsters operating under the guise of individual genius. Lost was a shared sense of reality, the building of a just social and political order. Educational reform to Babbitt appeared provincial in that it was barring the transmission of the larger world, the higher reality, from the student and severing the ethical connection of person to person.

Babbitt feared that reform was narrowing the scope of education by limiting instruction to the utilitarian needs of its constituents. This resulted in denying the greater lessons of human experience to students and in lowering ethical expectations. In a significant way, reform became an attempt to redefine value according to quantity rather than quality. Babbitt's critique, however, directly addressed what he viewed as the more significant and permanent bases of the human condition, the non-economic and non-material realms of being. He maintained that the rewards of a classical education would include an appreciation of the universally human and of community, the latter understood in the Burkean sense of a partnership between "those who have died, those who are living, and those who are yet to be born." What creates community—what advances civilization and the happiness of the human person—is that which takes the individual away from his impulsive, natural, self-conceit and offers a larger reality revealed through the lessons of the ages. These lessons, exemplified in great works of literature and history, communicate the larger world and stimulate the moral imagination of the student with reference to a shared, humane center.

Babbitt never exactly specified what the humanistic, academic curriculum should encompass. He never compiled a general reading list, as some educators do today. Rather, he asserted that the central purpose of education was to foster wisdom by shaping the imagination, and that the imagination was best served by reading

the classics of high civilization.⁷ Since the goal of education is ethical, conduct is best addressed by teaching works that shape the moral imagination. Babbitt's mission was to foster a humane citizenry, wise and learned, and he freely wrote of the need for "gentlemen," "elites," and "natural aristocracy."

Throughout his works, Irving Babbitt addressed the continuing decline of the humanistic imagination, humanism constituting a tradition that had produced a leadership class of ladies and gentlemen. His educational theory was aimed at producing an elite, humanistic aristocracy that would lead responsibly and ethically.⁸ This leadership class (which Babbitt was helping to form at Harvard College) was to be noted for its moral and intellectual seriousness and a wisdom formed by literary imagination and experience. As a classroom teacher, Babbitt did not provide the practical experience that the students needed for wisdom, but in his courses he could, through directed study of language and literature, offer them symbols and images to stir their imagination in the proper way. In order for an understanding of good conduct to emerge, in order for virtue to become one's habit, sound imagination had to take hold in the individual. Only then could rational "theoretical-conceptual" powers properly form,⁹ and it was through the teaching and reading of great works of literature and history that Babbitt most effectively accomplished this in the classroom and in his writings. "Babbitt's defense of the rights of the imagination in human life is one of the greatest treasures in his legacy. Babbitt alone among all of the great American thinkers of the golden age . . . broke through the received modern philosophical discourse of reason and experience, and rehabilitated the

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⁷ See Claes G. Ryn, *Will, Imagination, and Reason: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality*, 2nd exp. ed. (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 180. See also Richard B. Hovey, "Literature and the American College: Irving Babbitt Yesterday and Today," in *Irving Babbitt in Our Time*, ed. George A. Panichas and Claes G. Ryn (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 1986), 211. Historically speaking, Babbitt was arguing to preserve an existing form of study. By contrast, a contemporary defender of the traditional curriculum, E. D. Hirsch, advocates a "core curriculum" in order to restore something that is nearly lost to our civilization.

⁸ Babbitt's most direct exposition on the development and qualities of a political leadership class is *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1979; first published in 1924).

⁹ Michael A. Weinstein, "Concentric Imagination: An Alternative to Philosophical Reason," *Humanitas*, VI, no. 2 (1993), 95.

imagination."¹⁰ Babbitt's attention to the imagination is central to his theory of education and must remain primary in our discussion if we are to address contemporary educational issues in his humanistic manner. It is this theory of the imagination that separates him from other traditional educators with whom the progressives—at least those few who have studied Babbitt—have tied him.

Recent progressive theorists have generally disparaged traditional educators because of the differences in the perceptions of the imagination and in the imagination's relationship to the concept of imitation. Howard Gardner, one of the foremost progressive educators of our time, is typical in his assessment of what he terms "traditional" pedagogy:

In what has been called "mimetic" education, the teacher demonstrates the desired performance or behavior and the student duplicates it as faithfully as possible. A premium is placed on precise mastery of information or slavish duplication of models, and any deviation from the model is immediately challenged and rejected.¹¹

It is a theme of many progressive educators that "traditional" education is characterized by unimaginative and uninspired lecture and response which enslave students to corporate behaviors and beliefs.¹² Gardner himself argues that inside every child there is an "unschooled mind" struggling to be liberated from the stereotypes, conceptions, and "scripts" forced upon children in conventional schooling.¹³

¹⁰ Michael A. Weinstein, "Irving Babbitt and Postmodernity: Amplitude and Intensity," *Humanitas*, VI, no. 1 (Fall 1992/Winter 1993), 43.

¹¹ Howard Gardner, *The Unschooled Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 119.

¹² Blackwell, Futrell, and Imig ground "traditional" pedagogy in behaviorism and believe that the more "scientifically based" approach of progressive cognitive psychology proves more exciting and productive. "Around the turn of the twentieth century, new forms of education emerged that were an amalgam of ideas from Europe and the U.S. and promised to treat each child as an individual, to offer a more natural means of education, and to provide instruction in fundamental concepts and problem solving, as opposed to using the traditional pedagogical methods of textbook, recitation, and lecture." Peggy J. Blackwell, Mary H. Futrell, and David G. Imig, "Burnt Water Paradoxes of Schools of Education," in *Phi Delta Kappan* (January 2003), 357.

¹³ Educational theorists like Gardner and Alfie Kohn ascribe the lecture and response methodology ("drill and kill") to traditional or conservative leaning pedagogues. Primary among their targets is E. D. Hirsch, author of the *What Every Child Needs to Know* series, an elaborate core curriculum. Even though Hirsch

Progressive critics have long dismissed traditional or “classical” educational theory because of its assumed highly mimetic and rote-learning methodology. Interestingly, Babbitt himself would probably not strongly disagree with this criticism of imitation as a pedagogical tool. A close reading of Babbitt reveals that, although he advocates imitation as a method of instruction, what he means is *creative* imitation, or mimesis found in the tension between an enlivening “classical” understanding and a modern aesthetical understanding of creativity. What he dismisses—as the progressives dismiss—is the *neo-classical* tendency to eliminate imagination from learning:

The neo-classics, in taking over from Aristotle the idea of probability or truth to the universal, tended to eliminate from it the element of illusion or, as we should say, the imaginative element. Moreover, they hoped to achieve their universal not so much by the direct imitation of “nature” (in the Aristotelian sense, human nature in purposeful action), as by imitation of models.¹⁴

Babbitt could write, as he did in *Democracy and Leadership*, that a person’s first need is to look up to a sound model and imitate it. But this imitation is not “mere copyism,” but rather an exercise in the creative imagination.¹⁵ Learning is a mimetic exercise in perceiving a sound model for imitation and assimilating the universal, humane characteristics of that model with the unique particular characteristics and circumstances of the student-recipient. The blending of the one with the many is an act of creation and is the function of the imagination. As Claes Ryn has written, imitation or mimesis “requires constant moral, intellectual, and aesthetical vigilance and fresh articulation of meaning.”¹⁶

Of course, it is vital here to remember that Babbitt emphasizes

has distanced himself from overt political labels, he has become the *bete noir* of the left. On the other hand, traditional conservatives of the Irving Babbitt school are rarely, if ever, referenced in the battle of the education books. See “In Defense of the Progressive School: An Interview with Alfie Kohn,” by Kitty Thuermer, *Independent School* (Fall 1999): 90-96. See also Alfie Kohn, *The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and “Tougher Standards”* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), especially the politically charged chapter 3, titled “Getting Teaching and Learning Wrong: Traditional Education and Its Victims.”

¹⁴ Babbitt, *On Being Creative and Other Essays* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1968; first published in 1932), 14.

¹⁵ Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 125, 128.

¹⁶ Claes G. Ryn, *A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 92.

the importance of a *sound* model to imitate. He was not an advocate of indiscriminate reading, as many literacy advocates are today. Babbitt strongly favored the study of the classics because they create in the mind the permanent experience of the human race.¹⁷ Knowledge of the good comes about through the interplay of reading, remembering, and imagining the sound models of our corporate experiences. Through the dynamic interplay of memory, imitation, and imagination, the student achieves a deeper understanding of our shared human reality. Put simply, a student well versed in the tradition of the classics comes to a better imaginative understanding of the plight of the human race and of its ethical and social norms. Pedagogy, therefore, is something much more than rote-learning, or “slavish duplication.”

Babbitt favored imitating things as they ought to be, not slavish duplication.

Babbitt acknowledged the romantic criticism of neo-classic conformity as partly justified, but the appropriate response is not to dispense with the idea of imitation, as the romantics and the progressives did. Rather, the answer lies in a correct understanding of imitation, as a creative act of rendering the universal through the particular, of imitating things as they ought to be in the higher reality, rather than copying things as they perceptually are.¹⁸

Here Babbitt arrives at the crux of the matter. The blending of imitation and imagination is the main point at issue between his view and that of the romantic and progressive ideologies. For, according to Babbitt, imitation is a necessary part of the learning process, whereas for the romantic, imitation is what needs to be repudiated in order to free the inner genius of the individual from all restraint. Imitation, properly understood, provides material for the memory, and memory provides fodder for the imagination. That is why sound models for imitation are central for the healthy development of the humane student. A person “should have a humane standard to which he may defer, and which will not proscribe originality, but will help him to discriminate between what is original and what is merely freakish and abnormal in himself and others. . . . 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 that is found only in the mas-

¹⁷ Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 201.

¹⁸ Babbitt, *On Being Creative*, 11-12; ; Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1991; first published in 1919), 17.

ters.”¹⁹ The school of Rousseau, built on a cult of unique genius, represents the stark decay of memory: “What the genius wanted was spontaneity, and spontaneity, as he understood it, involves a denial not merely of decorum, but of something that . . . goes deeper than decorum—namely the doctrine of imitation.”²⁰ As a more recent scholar of the imagination in learning and teaching has written, the connection between imitation, memory, and imagination is “crucially important,” and theorists have “uncritically” and “with hostility” marginalized the concept of memory to such an extent that within progressive circles the imagination has been “starved.”²¹ Rousseau’s mistake, and the mistake of those following in his footsteps, was to define imitation as the opposite of the spontaneity of natural emotion. Babbitt was emphatic in his critique that Rousseau’s linkage of creativity to romantic spontaneity was a great flaw. The result has been the privileging of the eccentric, rather than the privileging of the representative quality that integrates creativity into the human community, understood temporally as well as geographically.

Babbitt and the romantics agree that imagination is vital to the development of the educated person, but each school of thought advocates a different quality of the imagination. For Babbitt, imagination represents concentric movement, leading the intellect and the will into the realm of shared, universal human understanding. It therefore represents a moral movement. On the other hand, its opposite, the romantic imagination pioneered by Rousseau, represents eccentric movement in that it separates the individual person from the shared realm of the moral. Babbitt’s educational theory signifies healthy formation of human character and, by analogy, healthy formation of the leadership class and the

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¹⁹ Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 201.

²⁰ Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 34.

²¹ Kieran Egan, *Imagination in Teaching and Learning: The Middle School Years* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 52. Egan, a critic of progressive educational theories who adheres to the importance of a “romantic” approach, suggests that rote-learning has its place in the classroom, but that it has suffered at the hands of progressive educators who increasingly have focused on skills rather than learning “by heart.” Rote-learning, properly understood, is not “vicious”; it is not effortless, not pleasurable, and not “natural,” but, because it does generate a wealth of accessible knowledge, it must not be avoided. Egan criticizes progressive reform for being unduly narrow in its approach and for impoverishing the child’s imagination. See also Egan, *Getting It Wrong*, 67-68, 137.

larger community. It is this quality of the imagination that steers the direction of the moral development of the individual, development which he, as Harvard professor, took very seriously. If the goal of education is virtue, then the quality of the imagination directly affects the success of that goal.

Babbitt's central premise about human community and about existence in that community is that there is an ultimate or higher reality predicated on happiness and peace. This reality is universal and binds human beings one to another in historical relationships that can be willed only if properly imagined. This ultimate reality of happiness and peace cannot be willed by the romantic, eccentric imagination precisely because that type of imagination separates man from man, woman from woman. The eccentric individual is a distorted or incomplete sort, unable to reach the fullness of life; he is, therefore, insufficiently human, in that the imagination leads him away from—in fact, compels him to escape from—human community. As an Aristotelian, Babbitt affirmed that man is best and happiest when he has reached his full development in the social bond and is most savage when divorced from it.

The goal of education for Irving Babbitt was to fashion and nurture the wise, imaginative person who is able to sustain a decent, civil social order. He maintained that an integral part of that fashioning was the imaginative study of the symbols and models embodied in the classics. Human action becomes progressively better—which is to say, that education takes place—only if guided by an imagination stirred by the ethico-religious symbols of our classical heritage.²² Like Goethe, Babbitt believed that only the best art can give us the illusion of a higher reality. Politically speaking, productive human relationships can move forward best when our imagination is stimulated by artistic symbols representing the high standards of the true, the good, and the beautiful. For Babbitt, the true universal reality “can be grasped, [though] never completely, through a veil of imaginative illusion.”²³

This ability to reach an understanding of the larger world, both spatially and temporally, is dependent upon the *quality* of the imagination. By emphasizing the power of imagination in human

²² See Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason*, 177.

²³ Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 27.

learning, Babbitt went right to the central issue that separated him from the progressive reformers in education.

Irving Babbitt died in 1933. At that time, a time of economic and social depression, demands for jobs and greater material wealth dominated the national political debate. Appeals to the sensate level of the populace were driving out support for the humanistic learning that Babbitt had advocated. Imagination as a tool of learning became bound to the progressive agenda of promoting the economic and social adjustment to the vagaries of temporal life of each child. Educational progressivism had gained the upper hand almost everywhere in the United States largely because it promised to be economically and politically useful to the citizens of an increasingly active and expanding nation. Progressivism was by mid-century the reigning ideology of American education:

In 1944, the NEA's prestigious Educational Policies Commission published *Education for All American Youth*, with the endorsement of the American Association of School Administrators and the National Association of Secondary School Principals. This report outlined the education establishment's vision for the future. It portrayed the public school as the fulcrum of social planning, designed to meet all the needs of all children and youth, as well as the needs of their communities. The report treated the once-central academic curriculum as an antique inheritance of dubious value, to be quietly set aside in favor of "the imperative educational needs of youth," such as gaining job skills, learning about family life, and becoming good citizens. . . . [T]here would be no required curriculum for college preparation. All studies would be utilitarian; nothing would be studied simply to gain knowledge for its own sake. . . . Students would pay primary attention to vocation, consumer problems, citizenship, personal issues, and family life; knowledge about science, mathematics, literature, and history would be picked up on an incidental, as-needed basis.²⁴

Yet, as Babbitt well knew, no society can continue to exist, much less prosper, without the leadership and guidance of an imaginative class of elites. Following World War II, the progressive program had a setback when the political leadership of the United States was shocked into reevaluating its educational agenda with the launch of Sputnik by the Soviet Union in 1957. America was faced with the necessity of creating an imaginative leadership class to see it through the critical time of Cold War. And

²⁴ Ravitch, *Left Back*, 324-25.

more recently, many educators have aggressively attacked the inanity of what educational policy has become at the hands of reformers in order to meet the challenges of the globalization of the economic workforce, to address the horror of violent student crime, and to monitor the lack of standards in American entertainment culture.

One important theoretician of education who has written much on the uses of the imagination as a tool of learning is Kieran Egan. Egan has tirelessly advocated the importance of the imagination in learning, seeing the imagination as a necessary means to develop a greater understanding of human experience. Nevertheless, like the progressive reformers, he perceives the powers of the imagination as an agent for liberation and escape:

What seems to be central to becoming educated . . . is not being bound by the conventional ideas and beliefs which people commonly grow up to accept. . . . Education, to put it tendentiously, is a process that awakens individuals to a kind of thought that enables them to imagine conditions other than those that exist or that have existed.²⁵

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Babbitt's definition of education as the development of the art of the possible differs from Egan's in that Babbitt viewed the imagination as a way to grasp the universal, the higher reality, shared by the historical, human community. What is characteristic of recent educational theory and practice is that education is regarded as a method to jettison custom and convention. In such an approach, imagination signifies freedom from all humanistic restraint. The argument is that freedom from convention returns the human being to a stage of innocence and lost childhood, the true aim of the romantic imagination. "The justification for stimulation of the imagination is the faculty which can best preserve the memory and wonder-full experience of childhood."²⁶ But childhood, according to Babbitt, is not the lost Arcadia. The inherent problem with privileging childhood as the golden age (as implied in the influential "child-centered" educational movement) is that it attaches the ideal to an ephemeral, passing stage of human de-

²⁵ Egan, *Imagination*, 47.

²⁶ Egan, *Imagination*, 25. One reads today in most mainstream educational journals and books the same oft-repeated phrases and ideas of "liberation": Children create their own meaning, children need to find ways to move off in unpredictable directions, children need to have more control over what they learn, children need to choose for themselves their own curriculum, etc.

velopment. The Arcadian dreamer is necessarily “transformed into the dangerous Utopist”:

He puts the blame of the conflict and division of which he is conscious in himself upon the social conventions that set bounds to his temperament and impulses; once get rid of these purely artificial restrictions and he feels that he will again be at one with himself and “nature.” With such a vision of nature as this it is not surprising that every constraint is unendurable He is ready to shatter all the forms of civilized life in favor of something that never existed, of a state of nature that is only the projection of his own temperament and its dominant desires upon the void.²⁷

For Babbitt, true progress was not, and could not be, the work of the adolescent artist, forever striving to shock in order to prove his individual uniqueness. (Babbitt recognized the irony in the fact that children are very naturally prone to imitate; something that appears to be lost on many contemporary theorists.) Rather, true progress is embodied in the one “who perceived the universal; and as the universal can be perceived only with the aid of the imagination, it follows that genius may be defined as imaginative perception of the universal.”²⁸ The true individual genius, therefore, properly does not represent a uniqueness that tears the human being from reality, but rather represents one who is more intimately bound to the shared ideals of the community:

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The very heart of the classical message . . . is that one should aim first of all not to be original, but *to be human*, and that to be human one needs to look up to a sound model and imitate it. The imposition of form and proportion upon one’s expressive impulses which results from the process of imitation is, in the true sense of that much abused word, culture. Genuine culture is difficult and disciplinary. The mediation that it involves between the conflicting claims of form and expression requires the utmost contention of spirit.²⁹

“To be human”—that is the summation of Irving Babbitt’s thoughts on the purpose of education. To understand the human being as less than god but more than savage is the proper study of the educated person, and it was Babbitt’s intention as Harvard professor and as writer to advance that understanding and to affect the kind of persons his students and readers would become.

²⁷ Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 79.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 64 (emphasis added).

To make humans more efficient, without reverence or restraint, makes them more dangerous.

Babbitt's message, above all, is moral in that the individual must come to understand the role he or she must play in relation to others. And that role can only be properly understood through a deep imaginative apprehension of right conduct exfoliated in the great works of time. It is through the right use of the imagination that the human being lifts himself above the simple, unrefined desires that the progressive educators foregrounded in their reforms. As Russell Kirk wrote in his lengthy introduction to the 1986 edition of *Literature and the American College*, "the moral imagination is the power to conceive of man and woman as moral beings—something more than creatures with animal wants."³⁰ Babbitt believed that the reform of education, founded on the suppositions of Rousseau's romantic ideology, would degrade the curriculum, and consequently would degrade the moral imagination of future generations of American students. Progressivism, with its initial appeals to the economic wants of American businesses and laborers, and with its more recent appeal to the ephemeral desires of America's children, cannot adequately address the means to develop an ethical leadership class. Babbitt warned that to make humans more "efficient . . . without reverence and restraint, was simply to equip them with ampler means for harm."³¹

The progressive reforms initiated one hundred years ago have only deepened. The call for educators to "serve the broader public interest in producing competent citizens and productive workers" still dominates professional and political discussion.³² For the reformers, the goal of education was—and continues to be—not ethical, but political and social. While Babbitt would be appalled (though not surprised) at the naked political aggrandizement of educational theorists at the turn of the twenty-first century, his ideas, his approach to literature and ethics, can greatly revitalize our schools and curriculum, can move the discussion in a more humanistic direction. It is becoming increasingly evident that catering to the impulsive, unrestrained individual does not facilitate the creation of a decent civil, social order.

³⁰ Russell Kirk, "Introduction," *Literature and the American College*, 43.

³¹ Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 108.

³² See David F. Labaree, "Resisting Educational Standards," *Phi Delta Kappan* (September 2000), 29.