
Irving Babbitt and Cultural Renewal

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*Babbitt
quintessentially
American.*

It is tempting to think of Irving Babbitt as a voice crying in the wilderness, a lonely prophet attempting the impossible task of reversing the course of history. Such a view of Babbitt has the bonus of imputing a special virtue to those few, like ourselves, who are able to appreciate his real importance. Indeed, to think of Babbitt in this way is not entirely wrong—he did take unpopular stands, and he did oppose what he saw as the dominant trends of modern thought, Baconian naturalism and Rousseauian romanticism. Attractive though such a view might be, however, it should be rejected. Babbitt himself was uninterested in the consolations of defeat. The romance of the Lost Cause was not for him. Though he was unsparing in his criticism of the laxities of American culture, Irving Babbitt was unwilling to concede that contemporaries like John Dewey were somehow more “American” than he. When American “progressives” looked to Jefferson for inspiration, Babbitt turned to George Washington.¹ When American cultural radicals took Emerson as their hero, Babbitt claimed the Emerson who knew that the “law for man” was not identical with the

¹ In *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1979; first published 1924) Babbitt argues that “The American experiment in democracy has . . . from the outset been ambiguous and will remain so until the irrepressible conflict between a Washingtonian and a Jeffersonian liberty has been fought to a conclusion” (273). Hereafter quotations from this work will be cited in the text by page numbers and the abbreviation DL.

“law for thing.”² Shrewdly criticizing Whitman’s “democratic vistas” not for their affirmation of democracy but for the rationale they provide for American imperialism, Babbitt argued that his own politics were in the unionist tradition of Whitman’s hero Abraham Lincoln.³

Just as he refused to surrender American politics to his adversaries, Babbitt refused to be categorized as a philosophical traditionalist or reactionary. Instead, he identified himself wholeheartedly with “the modern spirit . . . the positive and critical spirit, the spirit that refuses to take things on authority.”⁴ He was guided, he insisted, by experience, understood in its fullest sense. Babbitt knew that “. . . experience is of many degrees: first of all one’s purely personal experience, an infinitesimal fragment; and then the experience of one’s immediate circle, of one’s time and country, of the near past and so on in widening circles” (RR, lxxviii). In his debate with those whose truncated empiricism reduced “experience” to sense-data, ignoring both the inner life and the experience incorporated in religion, philosophy and literature, Babbitt emphasized that it was he who was the true modernist, even warning that “[t]he whole modern experiment is threatened with breakdown simply because it has not been sufficiently modern” (RR, lxxxiii).⁵ Thus Babbitt’s criticism of romanticism does not

*Guided by
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sense.*

² Babbitt chose Emerson’s lines declaring “There are two laws discrete/ Not reconciled,—/ Law for man, and law for thing” as the epigraph for his first book, *Literature and the American College: Essays in Defense of the Humanities* (Washington, D. C.: National Humanities Institute, 1986; first published 1908). Later Babbitt commented that “it is possible to cherish Emerson, or at least one side of Emerson, and at the same time look with extreme suspicion on the Emersonians” (*The Masters of Modern French Criticism* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1912], 355).

³ Babbitt commented that “to be fraternal in Walt Whitman’s sense is to be boundlessly expansive Whitman imagines the United States as expanding until it absorbs Canada and Mexico and dominates both the Atlantic and the Pacific” (DL, 294). Comparing Lincoln and Whitman, Babbitt asserted that it was only necessary “to read, for example, the Second Inaugural along with the ‘Song of Myself’ if one wishes to become aware of the gap that separates religious humility from romantic egotism” (DL, 275). Babbitt identified his own politics with “our unionist tradition based on a sane moral realism” (DL, 295), listing the “unionist leaders” as “Washington, [John] Marshall, and Lincoln” (277).

⁴ *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction, 1991; first published 1919), lxxi. Hereafter quotations from this work will be cited in the text by page numbers and the abbreviation RR.

⁵ For a careful study of the epistemological implications of Babbitt’s thought, see Claes Ryn’s *Will, Imagination and Reason: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction, 1997; first published 1986).

*Rousseauism
produces
despair.*

rely on any prior acceptance of classical literary standards or even traditional morality but rather on the failure of the movement to live up to its own promises. Babbitt points out that "The Rousseauist seeks happiness and yet on his own showing, his mode of seeking it results, 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" (RR, 307).

To assess the significance of Babbitt's intellectual legacy, it is less fruitful to present him as a lonely genius than to consider the ways in which Babbitt's New Humanism provides a context that allows us to organize otherwise scattered insights into a coherent perspective. The power of Babbitt's thought can be gauged from its ability to integrate ideas from a polemical adversary like George Santayana, from a champion of political liberalism like Lionel Trilling, and from a contemporary novelist championed by Richard Rorty, Milan Kundera.

Babbitt certainly never lacked for polemical adversaries. In 1930 an anthology of attacks on the New Humanism appeared. According to C. Hartley Grattan, the editor of the anthology, Babbitt and the other Humanists were such obscurantists that they rejected "all scientific progress since Newton as largely false."⁶ Contributor Malcolm Cowley posed what he considered an unanswerable question to Babbitt and his colleagues: What validity did the New Humanism have "for the millhands of New Bedford and Gastonia, for the beet-toppers of Colorado, for the men who tighten a single screw in the automobiles that march along Mr. Ford's assembly belt?"⁷ Henry Hazlitt, another contributor, characterized the New Humanism as "little more than a rationalization of neophobia and a piece of special pleading for the genteel tradition."⁸

The notion of a "genteel tradition" had, of course, originated with George Santayana. Observing that the "chief fountains of this

⁶ C. Hartley Grattan, "The New Humanism and the Scientific Attitude," *The Critique of Humanism: A Symposium*, ed. C. Hartley Grattan (New York: Brewer and Warren, 1930), 3-36, 24.

⁷ Malcolm Cowley, "Humanizing Society," *The Critique of Humanism: A Symposium*, ed. C. Hartley Grattan (New York: Brewer and Warren, 1930), 63-84, 68.

⁸ Henry Hazlitt, "Humanism and Value," *The Critique of Humanism: A Symposium*, ed. C. Hartley Grattan (New York: Brewer and Warren, 1930), 87-105, 96.

tradition were Calvinism and transcendentalism,”⁹ Santayana had argued that the attempt to fuse two such radically opposed points of view could lead only to intellectual confusion. Since Babbitt was neither a Calvinist nor a transcendentalist, one might have expected that a philosopher would have protested against the misuse of his concept. Instead, Santayana responded in 1931 by writing his own condemnation of Babbitt’s New Humanism under the title “The Genteel Tradition at Bay.”¹⁰ From a point of view very different from that of Malcolm Cowley, Santayana posed a series of what were meant to be similarly unanswerable questions:

Why not frankly rejoice in the benefits, so new and extraordinary, which our state of society affords? . . . at least (besides football) haven’t we Einstein and Freud, Proust and Paul Valéry, Lenin and Mussolini? (GTB, 163)

Why should anyone be dissatisfied? Is it not enough that millionaires splendidly endow libraries and museums, that the democracy loves them, and that even the Bolsheviks prize the relics of Christian civilization . . . ? (GTB,166)

and perhaps most crushing of all:

. . . I can find little in their recommendations except a cautious allegiance to the genteel tradition. But can the way of Matthew Arnold and of Professor Norton be the way of life for all men for ever? (GTB,193)

Anyone who was introduced to Santayana and Babbitt by “The Genteel Tradition at Bay” could be excused for assuming that the two must have disagreed about everything. And yet Babbitt’s critique of literary romanticism is confirmed by Santayana’s own analysis of German philosophical romanticism. Santayana’s characterization of romantic attitudes parallels Babbitt’s own:

⁹ George Santayana, “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy,” *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays by George Santayana*, ed. Douglas L. Wilson (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1998; essay first published 1911), 37-64, 61.

¹⁰ Published as a short book in 1931, “The Genteel Tradition at Bay” has been republished in *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays by George Santayana*, ed. Douglas L. Wilson (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 152-96. Hereafter quotations from this work will be cited in the text by page numbers and the abbreviation GTB.

In various directions at once we see to-day an intense hatred and disbelief gathering head against the very notion of a cosmos to be discovered, or a stable human nature to be respected. Nature, we are told, is an artificial symbol employed by life; truth is a temporary convention; art is an expression of personality; war is better than peace, effort than achievement, and feeling than intelligence; change is deeper than form; will is above morality.¹¹

What seems to have bothered Santayana was that Babbitt attempted to convince others that art is more than an “expression of personality,” that feeling is no substitute for intelligence, that impulse should be restrained by morality. In his later philosophy Santayana emphasized the importance of “spirit,” by which he meant the attempt to view “things as they are, disinterestedly, contemplatively . . . to take the point of view of God, of the truth, and of eternity” (GTB, 190). According to Santayana, “when ultimately the spirit comes face to face with the truth, convention and absurdity are out of place; so is humanism and so is the genteel tradition; so is morality itself” (GTB, 195).

Whether or not Santayana is right about this, it remains true that for most of our lives we are not engaged in solitary contemplation, “face to face with the truth,” but acting as members of families, societies and states. If one chooses to take an active part in one’s society and culture, then “morality itself” is no longer “out of place.” It would be most unfortunate if the polemics of “The Genteel Tradition at Bay” led to the conclusion that one must choose between Santayana and Babbitt. It would be more accurate to say that Babbitt’s New Humanism provides an example of what is possible when Santayana’s real insights are made the basis for intellectual and cultural renewal.

Lionel Trilling famously began *The Liberal Imagination* with the assertion that “In the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition.”¹² Trilling never discussed Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, or the New Humanism in any of his essays. Even in his long book on Matthew Arnold, originally a doctoral dissertation, Trilling failed to consider Babbitt’s view of Arnold in any substantive way. He did

¹¹ George Santayana, *The German Mind: A Philosophical Diagnosis* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968; first published as *Egotism in German Philosophy* 1915), 147-48.

¹² Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979; first published 1950), unpagged preface.

note, however, that F. O. Matthiessen, if not Trilling himself, considered Babbitt one of “the continuators of the Arnold tradition.”¹³

Now it is true that Babbitt is indeed one of the “continuators of the Arnold tradition,” though his admiration for Arnold was by no means uncritical. Babbitt was explicit about his indebtedness. One may be a “continuator” of a tradition, however, without declaring that allegiance. Trilling himself may be seen as a “continuator” of the “Babbitt tradition,” even though his references to Babbitt are either neutral or hostile.

In the February 2002 issue of *Commentary* Gertrude Himmelfarb justifiably takes Richard Posner to task for, among other things, portraying Lionel Trilling as a critic torn between “the moralist and aesthetic camps,” when Trilling might be more accurately described as “the prototype of the moral critic.” She is quite possibly right to assert that Trilling “exercised” the “moral imagination” “more effectively and imaginatively than any other literary critic,” and it is at least arguable that she is right in going on to say that he did so more “than any other public intellectual of the time.” Miss Himmelfarb is wrong, however, in asserting that “It is he [Trilling] who coined the term ‘moral imagination’”¹⁴ The phrase, of course, is Edmund Burke’s, and it occurs in one of the most famous passages of his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Lamenting the ill treatment of Marie Antoinette, Burke comments that “the age of chivalry” has been replaced by a time “of sophisters, economists, and calculators.” Now, Burke fears,

All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the super-added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a *moral imagina-*

*Trilling a
“continuator”
of the “Babbitt
tradition.”*

¹³ Lionel Trilling, *Matthew Arnold* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1977; first published 1939), 190.

¹⁴ Gertrude Himmelfarb, “Judging Richard Posner,” *Commentary* 113.2 (February 2002), 37-44, 41. In the May issue Miss Himmelfarb responded to my letter pointing out the error:

Finally, James Seaton is quite right to take issue with my statement that Lionel Trilling “coined the term ‘moral imagination,’” and to remind us of Edmund Burke’s use of that phrase. Having quoted Burke to that effect in at least two of my books, where I explicitly related his usage to Trilling’s, I am, of course, aware of Burke’s priority. In making my point about Trilling, I too hastily used the short-hand “coined.” I should have said that Trilling “introduced” that phrase into our vocabulary, for it is he, and not Burke, who made us familiar with it, as a corollary to his “liberal imagination.” (*Commentary* 113.5 [May 2002], 22)

tion, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion. [italics added]¹⁵

Trilling might have run across the phrase either in Burke's *Reflections* itself or, more likely perhaps, in Irving Babbitt's *Democracy and Leadership*, whose third chapter is entitled "Burke and the Moral Imagination." Not merely the phrase but the concept is central to Babbitt's thought. He believed that "the only effective conservatism is an imaginative conservatism" (DL, 138) because he recognized "the supreme role of the imagination" (DL, 127) in human affairs. The second chapter of *Democracy and Leadership* is entitled "Rousseau and the Idyllic Imagination"; as the contrasting titles of the second and third chapters of Babbitt's book on politics suggest, Babbitt saw the culture wars of his own day as not so much a battle of ideas as a struggle between opposing imaginative visions. That was why Babbitt spent more time analyzing romantic poetry than discussing romantic philosophers—it was the poets who could touch men's souls.

Civilization
grounded in
moral
imagination.

Near the end of *Rousseau and Romanticism* Babbitt comes "back to the problem of the ethical imagination" and argues that "[t]his problem is indeed in a peculiar sense the problem of civilization itself." Having identified himself with "the critical spirit" of modernity, Babbitt notes "a civilization that rests on dogma and outer authority cannot afford to face the whole truth about the imagination and its rôle" but adds immediately that "[a] civilization in which dogma and outer authority have been undermined by the critical spirit, not only can but must do this very thing if it is to continue at all." The problem is so important because Babbitt believes that "the truths on the survival of which civilization depends" cannot finally be conveyed through abstract reason "but only through imaginative symbols" (RR, 368-69). When Lionel Trilling argues that "we stand in need of the moral realism which is the product of the free play of the moral imagination" and goes on to claim that "[f]or our time the most effective agent of the moral imagination has been the novel of the last two hundred

¹⁵ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1968; first published 1790), 170-71.

years" he is, whether he knew it or not, a continuator of the tradition of Irving Babbitt.¹⁶

Richard Rorty attempts to enlist the novelists Milan Kundera and Charles Dickens in the postmodernist cause in an essay entitled "Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens."¹⁷ Charles Dickens wrote too many books that have been read by too many people for too long to allow his reputation to be highjacked very easily. When, however, Rorty asserts that Milan Kundera's novels teach that "[i]t is comical to think . . . that there is something called Truth which transcends pleasure and pain" (HKD, 74), many might assume that Rorty knows what he's talking about. According to Rorty, Kundera's fiction reveals "the essential relativity of human affairs" (HKD, 77). It is certainly easy to see why Rorty wants to interpret Kundera this way; it allows him to borrow the prestige of one of the most acclaimed and innovative of contemporary novelists for his own ideas. The trouble is, Kundera's novels, innovative in style though they certainly are, are closer in spirit to Irving Babbitt than to Richard Rorty. Kundera's novel *Life is Elsewhere*, for example, offers striking evidence for the contemporary relevance of, among other things, Babbitt's critique of romanticism.¹⁸

Far from rejecting the existence "of something called Truth," Kundera attempts in *Life is Elsewhere* to "bear witness" to the reality of what happened when the Communists took over Czechoslovakia. The narrator insists that the complicity of literary romanticism with political brutality must not be forgotten:

Literary romanticism complicit in political brutality.

What actually remains of that distant time? Today, people regard those days as an era of political trials, persecutions, forbidden books, and legalized murder. But we who remember must bear witness: it was not only an epoch of terror, but also an era of lyricism, ruled hand in hand by the hangman and the poet. (LE, 270)

¹⁶ Lionel Trilling, "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979), 193-209, 209.

¹⁷ Richard Rorty, "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens," *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers, Volume 2* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 66-82. Hereafter quotations from this work will be cited in the text by page numbers and the abbreviation HKD.

¹⁸ Milan Kundera, *Life is Elsewhere*, trans. Peter Kussi (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1986; first published in French in 1973). Hereafter quotations from this work will be cited in the text by page numbers and the abbreviation LE.

Kundera is writing from personal experience, since as a young man he himself was swept away by the romance of revolution and, like his protagonist Jaromil, welcomed the Communist take-over of Czechoslovakia. Throughout the novel Jaromil's zeal is fired not by economic or political theories but because his identification with the revolution allows him to strike romantic poses. It is when his mother embarrasses him by combing his "carefully mussed-up hair" in front of her friends that he swears "eternal allegiance to radical transformation of the world" (LE, 114). When Jaromil turns in his girlfriend to the secret police, he is able to justify and even take pride in what he has done because it makes possible "a great poem":

He did not expose his girl to danger because love meant little to him—quite to the contrary, he wanted to effect a world in which people would love each other more than ever. Yes, that's how it was. Jaromil had risked the safety of his own beloved precisely because he loved her more than other men love their women: precisely because he knew what love and the bright new world of pure feeling were all about. Of course, it is terrible to sacrifice a concrete living woman (red-headed, petite, talkative, freckle-faced) for the sake of the future world. Such a sacrifice, the only genuine tragedy of our time, was worthy of a great poem.

He sat down at his desk and wrote and paced the room and it seemed to him that the poem he was creating was the greatest he had ever composed. (LE, 265)

Poetry "the crudest means of gaining consent."

The narrator suggests that the protagonist's linkage of romantic poetry and Communist revolution is not peculiar to him but illustrates a larger connection. After all, "[t]hrough poetry, man realizes his agreement with existence, and rhyme and rhythm are the crudest means of gaining consent." If one asks "Can a revolution dispense with repeated affirmation of the new order? Can a revolution dispense with rhyme?" the answer is obvious. Certainly, "[r]evolutions have no wish to be examined or analyzed, they only yearn to merge with the masses. For that reason, revolutions are lyrical and in need of lyricism" (LE, 193). The narrator has an historical perspective that young Jaromil, who succeeds in dying young, will never possess.

Communism today persists as official state doctrine only in Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam, and China. Romanticism, however, will survive, whatever the changes in literary fashion, as a set of attitudes about life. Babbitt himself believed that most people "al-

ways have been, are and probably always will be romantic" (RR, 5). And when the young allow themselves to become intoxicated and exalted by the thought that they will soon die and in dying kill others, they may be accurately described as romantics, whatever name they or their leaders may use—Muslims, Marxists, nationalists, revolutionaries, or whatever. Emil Bergson in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* exemplifies the romantic attitude toward death at its most attractive:

He was at that height of excitement from which everything is foreshortened, from which life seems short and simple, death very near, and the soul seems to soar like an eagle. As he rode past the graveyard he looked at the brown hole [of a new grave] in the earth . . . and felt no horror. That, too, was beautiful, that simple doorway into forgetfulness. The heart, when it is too much alive, aches for that brown earth, and ecstasy has no fear of death. It is the old and the poor and the maimed who shrink from that brown hole; its woovers are the young, the passionate, and the gallant-hearted.¹⁹

That suicidal killers may be among "the young, the passionate, and the gallant-hearted" might be thought not to excuse their crimes but, if it has any moral relevance at all, to provide further grounds for condemning those who exploit youthful generosity in the service of murderous ideologies. Yet when the custodians of our cultural heritage fail to pass on the traditional wisdom available through humanistic studies, intensity of commitment may seem to trump all other values, and an incapacity or unwillingness to be restrained from murder by the "inner check," whose importance Babbitt emphasized so untiringly, may seem the stuff of heroism.

Failure to transmit traditional wisdom makes murder seem heroic.

Irving Babbitt remains important not only because his thought offers an intellectual framework that furthers our understanding of contemporary masters like Milan Kundera and humane thinkers of the last century like Lionel Trilling or George Santayana but, even more significantly, because his life lets us know that it is possible to confront romantic extremism without falling into a dogmatism that mimics what it opposes. At a time like the present Irving Babbitt is important not only as an analyst of the illusions of popular romanticism but also as a champion of the unromantic

¹⁹ Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (New York: Signet, 1989; first published 1913), 191-92.

virtues, the qualities so important in everyday life and so disdained by the mass media. Babbitt's humanism remains vital because it is not a doctrine but a way of life:

After all to be a good humanist is merely to be moderate and sensible and decent. It is much easier for a man to deceive himself and others regarding his supernatural lights than it is regarding the degree to which he is moderate and sensible and decent. (RR, lxxx-lxxxi).