



# Rousseau and romanticism

Irving Babbitt ;  
with a new introduction by Claes G. Ryn.

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**ROUSSEAU**  
**AND ROMANTICISM**  
**IRVING BABBITT**

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*With a New Introduction by*  
*Claes G. Ryn*

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*L'imagination dispose de tout.*

PASCAL

*Le bon sens est le maître de la vie humaine.*

BOSSUET

*L'homme est un être immense, en quelque sorte, qui peut exister partiellement, mais dont l'existence est d'autant plus délicieuse qu'elle est plus entière et plus pleine.*

JOUBERT

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE TRANSACTION EDITION

*Claes G. Ryn*

It was several generations ago that the ideas of Irving Babbitt (1865-1933) first excited controversy. They would move virtually every leading American intellectual and literary figure of his time to comment. Babbitt's challenge to dominant currents in ethics, aesthetics, and philosophy brought down upon him a flood of criticism. Among the more unfriendly critics were Edmund Wilson, Oscar Cargill, Sinclair Lewis, and Ernest Hemingway. The irritability and sheer vehemence of many of Babbitt's detractors indicated that, even as they tried to dismiss the unorthodox Harvard professor, they perceived him as a threat to their hegemony as arbiters of culture and moral sensibility.

The extent of Babbitt's violation of the moral, intellectual, and aesthetical spirit of the times and the prominence and number of his enemies limited his influence. Reckless distortions of his ideas gained wide currency. Despite the continuation and strengthening of the trends that Babbitt resisted and despite the dangers long attendant upon favorably mentioning his name, his ideas proved resilient. He was never without allies and supporters. In the 1920s and up to his death Babbitt found himself the recognized leader of an entire intellectual and cultural movement called the

New Humanism or American Humanism. Although his ideas never found favor with more than an academic minority, he won the high, if sometimes qualified, admiration of many writers who attained considerable stature in the United States and abroad. Besides his close intellectual ally and friend, Paul Elmer More, these individuals include T.S. Eliot, Werner Jaeger, Russell Kirk, Walter Lippmann, Louis Mercier, Nathan Pusey, Peter Viereck, and Austin Warren. In addition, the writing of some well-known figures who seemed to be chiefly critics of Babbitt came to show the unmistakable signs of his influence. Arthur Lovejoy and his view of romanticism is but one example.<sup>1</sup> René Wellek, though long careful to distance himself from Babbitt, speaks of Babbitt's "real critical power and acumen."<sup>2</sup>

In 1960, Harvard University inaugurated the Irving Babbitt Chair of Comparative Literature. New editions of Babbitt's books over the years and a large and growing secondary literature testify to the continuing relevance and fascination of his ideas. In the last couple of decades there has been a notable surge of scholarship on Babbitt, as well as on Paul Elmer More, some of which has given greater philosophical stringency and depth to discussion of their larger significance. In 1983 a two-day scholarly conference on Babbitt's work, held at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of Babbitt's death. A related collective volume, *Irving Babbitt in Our Time*, explicates and reassesses Babbitt's work.<sup>3</sup> In 1984 The National Humanities Institute (NHI) was founded in Washington, D.C. Among its aims is to promote the study and application of Babbitt's ideas. One of NHI's earliest publications was a new edition of Babbitt's first book, *Literature and the American College*.<sup>4</sup> There are a large number of recent studies of varying size and emphasis

that either concentrate on Babbitt's life and work or relate his ideas to different fields.<sup>5</sup>

By the end of the twentieth century it is increasingly evident that, although Babbitt's work still needs to be more fully and widely understood, it represents one of the enduring achievements of American intellectual culture. His wide-ranging writing represents an impressive exploration of the bases of civilization and of the central dynamics of the life and letters of modern Western society. His assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of modernity is remarkable for its perspicacity and prescience. Long ago Babbitt diagnosed and proposed treatment for maladies within modern American and Western society that are now widely bemoaned.<sup>6</sup>

Because of the scope and originality of Babbitt's mind, he did not fit neatly into conventional intellectual categories. Babbitt criticized the dominant form of modern moral and aesthetic sensibility, sentimental humanitarianism in the tradition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as a dangerous and decadent perversion of Christian ethics, but he was also reluctant to embrace traditional religious dogmas. Though his notion of ethical self-discipline had much in common with historical Christianity, including American Protestantism, he did not identify the source of moral order with a personal God. He added to the unease of many Christians by writing admiringly about Buddhism. Babbitt took strong exception to the reigning aesthetic orthodoxy of *l'art pour l'art*, calling for classical standards and ethical-aesthetical discrimination; but he did not on that account favor a return to a mimetic aesthetic. He emphatically rejected didacticism in art. Babbitt could find no justification for the application of natural science concepts and methods to the humanities and social sciences, but neither did he believe that the study

of religion, ethics, art, and society should be based on metaphysical speculation. In the modern world a new attention to experiential evidence was necessary. Although Babbitt drew heavily on classical and Christian sources, he saw a need to revise and develop old Western traditions with reference to the best in modernity.

## I

*Life and Times*

Irving Babbitt was born in Dayton, Ohio, on August 2, 1865. He was descended on his father's side from an Englishman who had settled in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1643. His great-grandfather, a Harvard graduate, and his grandfather, a graduate of Yale Divinity School, were Congregationalist ministers who resisted evangelical anti-intellectualism and disdain for higher culture. Irving's father, Edwin, abandoned the stern doctrines of his forebears for an optimistic and ethereal spiritualism. He was a businessman-physician and educator of crankish leanings who authored books on such subjects as "life forces," magnetism, and social amelioration. His pseudo-scientific schemes and sentimentalism would be for Irving Babbitt egregious examples of larger tendencies that he regarded as eroding traditional Western civilization. Irving had an older brother and a younger sister. For some of his childhood the life of the family was less than settled because of the father's shifting fortunes and recurring financial problems. Irving spent extended periods with relatives. The family lived together in New York City, with interruptions, for several years. As a very young boy Irving contributed to family finances by selling newspapers in the streets. He learned to fend for himself against unsympathetic urchins. When he

was eleven years old his mother died. Irving and his siblings were sent back to Ohio to live with his mother's parents on their farm outside of Cincinnati. There and later at his uncle's ranch in Wyoming, Irving developed a fondness for nature, adventure, and vigorous exertion, but he was often seen reading. During his high school years in Cincinnati, he and his sister were reunited with their father who had remarried and settled in that city. Without seeming to work particularly hard Irving did exceedingly well in school. His love and mastery of classical languages and poetry got their start. He had general literary and historical interests but also learned a great deal of mathematics and natural science. Irving was the valedictorian at his 1885 graduation.

After a stint as a newspaper reporter, Babbitt passed the Harvard entrance examination. With the financial assistance of relatives he enrolled in the fall of 1885. He found himself "overprepared" for his studies. Much of the instruction at Harvard seemed to Babbitt narrow and uninspiring, and his class attendance was irregular. He was disappointed in the faculty's philological pedantry and failure to deal with the central issues of life. A year-long course on Shakespeare taught by George Lyman Kittredge provided the students with large amounts of miscellaneous and detailed biographical and literary information but almost no insight into the humane significance of Shakespeare's plays. Besides acquiring a more advanced knowledge of Greek and Latin, Babbitt studied European languages and literature, learning French, German, Italian, and Spanish, as well as some Sanskrit. During his junior year he traveled widely in Europe together with an old friend, partly by foot. Babbitt graduated from Harvard magna cum laude and with honors in Classics in 1889.

Babbitt taught Greek and Latin at a college in Montana for two years. With his savings he went to Paris for a year. He attended classes at the Sorbonne, the Collège de France, and the École des Hautes Études. At the latter he studied Sanskrit, Pāli, and Indian Philosophy with Sylvain Lévi. On his own he read the early Buddhist holy texts. He delved into philosophy, religion, and literature. Returning to Harvard in 1892 for a Master's degree, he deepened his education in languages and literature and gave increasing attention to comparative religion. Among his classes was Charles Eliot Norton's course on Dante, which, unlike so many other Harvard courses, did not avoid ethical and spiritual issues. Norton confirmed Babbitt's high regard for Aristotle. In an advanced course with the Orientalist Charles Lanman, Babbitt met Paul Elmer More, who was the only other student. More was to become Babbitt's closest friend and intellectual associate. Babbitt already had a deep admiration for Buddhism in the Hinayana ("Lesser Vehicle") form.

Upon receiving the A.M. degree in 1893, Babbitt taught Romance languages at Williams College for a year. He was then offered a faculty position at Harvard. Babbitt had hoped to join the Department of Classics, but declining enrollments and other circumstances led instead to his appointment as Instructor of French. For the rest of his life Babbitt would teach outside of the area for which he had the greatest love. His own broadly humanistic approach to literature and his disdain for what he called "the philological syndicate" created opposition to him among his faculty seniors, a resistance that was aggravated by his outspoken and sometimes combative manner. Neither was his academic career helped by his criticism of President Charles W. Eliot's elective system, which he regarded as a poor substitute for a classical curriculum. Babbitt was not promoted to Assistant

Professor until 1902, the same year that he started teaching in the new Department of Comparative Literature. In 1900 he had married Dora Drew, one of his former students at Radcliffe, where he taught for extra income. Dora was the daughter of a Protestant missionary and had lived in China. The Babbitts rented a three-story house at 6 Kirkland Road in Cambridge. It became their permanent home. William James and Josiah Royce were among their neighbors. Babbitt did not neglect publishing, but neither did he want his ideas to appear in print until he was satisfied they had the proper ripeness. He brought out his first book, *Literature and the American College*, in 1908. It criticized the decline of American higher education and defined and defended the classical discipline of *humanitas* as a remedy for the erosion of ethical and cultural standards. Two years later Babbitt published *The New Laokoon*, an aesthetical treatise about weaknesses of modern conceptions of art, including the blurring of genres. By this time Babbitt had attracted a large number of advanced students. He had also been given major responsibility for Harvard's Honors education in literature. Still, the new Harvard President, A. Lawrence Lowell, would not give Babbitt a permanent appointment or even a salary increase. Not until 1912, after Babbitt had received a very flattering and lucrative offer of appointment from The University of Illinois, did Harvard give Babbitt a full professorship with tenure. Babbitt remained at Harvard until his death in 1933. He became one of its truly legendary teachers.

The attacks upon Babbitt continued and intensified. His reputation grew with the publication of *The Masters of Modern French Criticism* (1912), *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919), *Democracy and Leadership* (1924), and *On Being Creative* (1932). These works related issues of



literary criticism and aesthetics to basic questions of human existence. Relying heavily on literary phenomena for illustrations, they developed a philosophy of life and letters centered in Babbitt's understanding of the relationship between states of ethical character and states of imagination. In *Democracy and Leadership* he applied his philosophy of civilization to political questions. Babbitt's original translation of *The Dhammapada*, the Buddhist holy text, with a lengthy essay by Babbitt on Buddha and the Occident, was published after his death. A volume of literary and cultural criticism, *Spanish Character and Other Essays*, also appeared posthumously.

Babbitt's teaching left an indelible mark on his more serious students, many of whom have written about Babbitt in the classroom. An excellent source is the collection of memoirs edited by F. Manchester and O. Shepard, *Irving Babbitt Man and Teacher*. First published in 1941, this volume contains contributions from a large number of academics and literary figures. Austin Warren's comment is representative: "Irving Babbitt in his classroom was an experience not before encountered nor ever to be forgotten."<sup>7</sup> Babbitt taught with a magisterial authority and vigor that seemed to many students "Johnsonian." Like his books, his courses were wide-ranging. They related literary subjects to the larger questions of human existence. There emerged from them a general view of life and culture. Babbitt's lectures brimmed with ideas and literary illustrations. According to Stuart Pratt Sherman, "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."<sup>8</sup> T.S. Eliot, who later came to differ with his teacher on some issues, writes that he cannot imagine that a student who had been under Babbitt's influence could ever think of him as

"something one has outgrown or grown out of . . . his ideas are permanently with one, as a measurement and test of one's own."<sup>9</sup> Babbitt always conveyed great earnestness, but his lectures and conversations were full of humor and wit, qualities notable also in his writing. Laughter often rocked his classroom.

Babbitt stood out both in personal appearance and as a thinker. He looked very much like one of Yankee stock, was above average height and of large, almost athletic build. He was blond, had dark blue eyes, a fair and healthy-looking complexion, and handsome features. He looked at once distinguished and robust, exuded integrity as well as vitality. As he spoke the prominence of his jaw seemed to underscore his tenacity and energy. His gestures were quick and a little awkward. He spoke in a clipped, yet vibrant manner.

Babbitt's dedication as a professor was perhaps never more evident than in the last months of his life in the spring and early summer of 1933 when ulcerative colitis and various complications caused him much pain and discomfort and drained his strength. He forced himself to try to complete his lectures for the semester. Just weeks before his death in a severely weakened state, he read exams and theses in bed between periods of rest. To the remonstrances of a visiting friend he responded that "When a man has been hired to do a job, it's only decent to stick to it to the end."<sup>10</sup> Babbitt died in his Cambridge home on July 15, 1933. Funeral services were held at the Harvard chapel.

Babbitt's reputation was worldwide and often seemed much more favorable abroad than in the United States. He had disciples as far away as China. Oriental students were among his strongest admirers. When a highly cultured Hindu visitor to Cambridge who had met Babbitt was asked his opinion of him, he surprised others by saying about this assertive and

energetic American scholar: "Oh, Babbitt, he is a noly man, a great saint!"<sup>11</sup> Babbitt was highly regarded in France where in 1923 he was James Hayden Hyde Lecturer and Visiting Professor at the Sorbonne. His lectures were enthusiastically received. In 1926 Babbitt was made a corresponding member of the Académie des sciences morales et politiques of the French Institute, but he also received some formal recognition in the United States. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1930. He received many invitations to give endowed lectures at leading universities and colleges. In 1932 Bowdoin College awarded him an honorary doctorate.

Babbitt's ideas were widely and vigorously discussed during his lifetime. Comments appeared in mass circulation magazines and newspapers as well as academic journals and books. The debate about the humanism of Babbitt and More and their followers can be said to have culminated in 1930. In that year two collective volumes appeared, one, *Humanism and America*, edited by Norman Foerster, advocating the Humanist cause, and the other, *The Critique of Humanism*, edited by C. Hartley Grattan, opposing it. While a great deal was written about Babbitt by critics and sympathizers alike during his lifetime and just after his death, most of it has limited value as philosophical interpretation. It is perhaps not surprising that controversial ideas should get distorted in the heat of controversy, but the criticism directed at Babbitt was exceptional for the amount of vituperation and misrepresentation it contained. Some of the least discerning and least scholarly remarks were made by Babbitt's more prominent detractors. Wholly misleading characterizations of his thought have been uncritically repeated long after his death.<sup>12</sup>

Today, the decline of education and culture generally has amply confirmed Babbitt's warnings and given new urgency to his prescriptions for recovery. Babbitt scholarship in the last few decades has also cleared away many misunderstandings and more generally facilitated the assimilation of his work.

## II

*Babbitt, Rousseau, and Romanticism*

*Rousseau and Romanticism* may be Babbitt's best known and most widely discussed book. It is perhaps also the one that best conveys the ethical-aesthetical core of his thought. Like Babbitt's other books it is broad in scope. It examines a variety of literary and other manifestations of romanticism and presents a typology of the imaginative inclinations of that movement. These phenomena are compared to earlier notions of art and life and especially to classical and neo-classical principles. For Babbitt works of imagination are integral to and even constitutive of human life in general, and he explores romanticism with a view to its implications for Western civilization. Babbitt is particularly interested in its ethical significance, which he finds both far-reaching and disturbing. *Rousseau and Romanticism* is indistinguishably a work of literary history and criticism and a work on the philosophy of civilization. It deals with ethics and the theory of knowledge as well as aesthetics. It has been pointed out often that Babbitt's books are not strictly delimited, self-contained treatises on discreet topics. They all take up similar or closely related central issues that are illuminated differently as different materials are examined. In addressing its special subject, *Rousseau and Romanticism* reflects most

of the main themes of Babbitt's thought, making it representative of his work as a whole.

Because of Babbitt's extensive analysis and criticism of Rousseau, in other books as well as this one, unfriendly commentators have alleged that, for Babbitt, Rousseau is *the* source of the problems of modern Western society. Babbitt does regard Rousseau as a writer of genius and seminal influence, but he also makes clear that Rousseau is but one leading exponent of a large and powerful historical movement that far transcends the work of particular individuals. Rousseau is of special interest to Babbitt as a paradigmatic cultural type, as the quintessential embodiment of the ethical-aesthetical dynamic that is replacing the classical and Christian moral and artistic ethos in the Western World. Rousseau gives brilliant and enticing expression to what Babbitt summarizes in the term sentimental humanitarianism. To examine Rousseau's work in depth is to get to the heart of the outlook that is transforming Western society and to understand better the ramifications and implications of this new view of life. Babbitt treats the ideas of Francis Bacon in a similar fashion, letting Bacon represent what Babbitt considers the second of the two most powerful strains within modernity, scientific naturalism. In Babbitt's view, scientific naturalism is, superficial appearances to the contrary, intimately connected with sentimental humanitarianism in the philosophy and psychology of modern Western man.<sup>13</sup>

*Rousseau and Romanticism* interprets Rousseau's ideas and relates them to literary works and currents that are either inspired by Rousseau or expressive of a similar or related sensibility. Babbitt does not claim to deal comprehensively with Rousseau or to present a "rounded estimate" of his writing. Neither does he claim to assess romanticism as a

whole. He writes primarily about features that he deems problematic and destructive of civilized life.

Of the scholars and literary figures who reacted against Babbitt's criticism of romanticism, some appeared to take personal offense; they were themselves strongly drawn to the kind of imagination that Babbitt rejected as "sham vision." Others may have protested less against Babbitt's comments about objectionable features of romanticism than against a perceived one-sidedness in his treatment of this large and many-faceted movement. The absence from Babbitt's work of any systematic examination of more defensible or admirable aspects of romanticism gives the impression that he is more indiscriminately anti-romantic than in fact he is. Though less than fully aware of it himself, Babbitt's own understanding of the higher form of imagination actually owes considerably to romantic aesthetics. One of many examples of this fact is Babbitt's admiration for Coleridge's explication of the idea of creative imagination, an idea whose sources in German romantic or pre-romantic philosophy Babbitt simultaneously and mistakenly discounts. Babbitt does retain elements of the classical view that great art is representative in the sense of conveying the moral essence of human life, but he reconstitutes that notion, insisting that genuinely artistic imagination is free and creative and not just mimetic. Babbitt criticizes the formal rigidities of neo-classicist aesthetics. He opposes intellectualistic intrusions into art and condemns didacticism. Romanticism has also influenced his theory of knowledge in that he regards imagination, rather than reason or sense, as forming the base of human consciousness.

*Rousseau and Romanticism* stands on its own and can be read with benefit as a separate work, but it needs to be kept in mind that the book belongs to a larger corpus in the

context of which its terms and arguments are more easily understood. Someone not already attuned to Babbitt's thought may miss the interconnections and subtleties of particular formulations. His prose can strike the inattentive reader as merely essayistic or even impressionistic. Babbitt's easy and unpretentious command of a broad range of sources and his use of wit and humor contribute to a similar appearance. In reality, his writing is the opposite of casual. It has a coherence, continuity, and profundity that emerges more and more clearly as his books are studied carefully together. The almost epigrammatic and frequently brilliant short comments about authors and literary phenomena that fill Babbitt's books are seen to emanate from a single, firmly held central vision.

The assimilation of *Rousseau and Romanticism* may be assisted by reviewing a few closely related ideas that are basic to all of Babbitt's thought and crucial for the understanding of this book. One is his idea of a special quality of will, a "higher will" or "inner check," in which ethical good and reality have their ultimate source. An equally important notion is the centrality of imagination in shaping man's character and outlook on life. These two powers come together in what Babbitt calls the ethical imagination, the hallmark of truly great art. He contrasts the higher will and the ethical imagination with a lower will and a corresponding imagination.

In interpreting these ideas it is helpful to draw selectively from the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), author of such major works as *Aesthetics* (1902), *Philosophy of the Practical* (1908), and *Logic* (1908). Babbitt wrote with respect about Croce but was critical of the lack of attention to the ethical dimension of art in Croce's early aesthetics. He also could not accept Croce's strong leanings in the direction

of a pantheistic Hegelian monism which dissolves the distinction between good and evil. For all of his technical philosophical brilliance Croce does not quite have Babbitt's incisiveness in dealing with the relationship between will and imagination. In general, it can be argued that Babbitt has a more developed ethical sensibility than Croce. Still, the thinking of the two men is closely related in important respects. Croce's aesthetics eventually became virtually indistinguishable from Babbitt's. Croce's philosophically systematic exploration of some issues on which they are in essential agreement is often useful in explicating Babbitt. Croce can also provide some important philosophical supplements to Babbitt.<sup>14</sup>

### III

#### *Moral Irresponsibility and "Sham Vision"*

The central problem of the modern age is for Babbitt an erosion of individual moral responsibility. The general direction of life is ultimately determined by the quality of will at the root of action, but the will is always acting in intimate cooperation with the imagination. The moral erosion of which Babbitt speaks is manifest in a type of imagination that both expresses and inspires it. This imagination is abundantly present in Rousseau and more generally in the romantic movement. Poets, painters, composers, and others representing that kind of vision are playing a leading role in reorienting Western life and sensibility. Imagination that more or less subtly shields and diverts the individual from painful moral self-scrutiny and excuses him from improving self has always existed in some form. Man's inclination to take the easy course guarantees the appeal of escapist, wishful imagination. In persons of

generally sound character flights of self-indulgent fancy are merely for temporary relaxation and do little harm. But in the modern era Rousseau and many others have inspired a great flowering of such imagination. It has acquired an aura of moral and aesthetical nobility and refinement. For large numbers of people it has become the dominant form of intuition, shaping their basic self-understanding and view of the world, their fondest dreams and innermost aspirations. This form of imagination has given rise to a vast and varied cultural and socio-political movement.

According to Babbitt, "what is disquieting about the time is not so much its open and avowed materialism as what it takes to be its spirituality." Materialism is rather easily recognized and dealt with. What is not so easily identified and counteracted are decadent and escapist forms of imagination that manage to masquerade as high spirituality. Babbitt freely grants, indeed himself stresses, that where there is no vision, the people perish, but he also insists that "where there is sham vision, they perish even faster."<sup>15</sup>

The danger of Rousseauism and related currents is that they present as liberating and elevating visions of life that are in actuality insidious evasions of all real moral responsibility. According to Rousseau humanity is by nature good. There is within the human self no chronic propensity for evil. This flattering assessment relieves man of the old obligation to discipline self. Moral virtue is redefined. No longer is it measured by the strength of will that used to be known as moral character but by tender emotion. In religion, ethics, and politics professions of humanitarian benevolence replace concrete personal responsibility as evidence of virtue. Babbitt expects grave political consequences of the deterioration of the old Western view of human nature and the spread of moral sentimentalism. He deals with this

subject at length in *Democracy and Leadership*. Though not himself a confessional Christian, Babbitt does not think that the American constitutional order can survive the weakening of the Christian sense of sin and of the related habit of individual ethical self-restraint. Writing in the 1920s, Babbitt pointed to the spreading glorification of social "service" as proof that real morality and religion were being replaced by the merely sentimental "spirituality" of humanitarianism. Babbitt dreads the prospect of a society in which socio-political busybodies invoking "service" meddle in everybody else's life while neglecting man's primary moral task, improvement of self. Domestically, sentimental humanitarianism would greatly expand government to carry out various allegedly benevolent schemes. Internationally, it would lead, as in the case of President Woodrow Wilson, to moralistic crusading. Both at home and abroad the advocacy of service masks a grasp for power. It signifies the drive of the imperialistic ego to throw off restraints. No limits need be placed on a self that seeks the good of mankind. The new virtue does not, like the old, aim chiefly at control of self, but at control of others. One of the themes of Babbitt's analysis of Rousseau and romanticism is the glaring, but in Babbitt's view entirely predictable, discrepancy between stated ideals and actual behavior.

To avert the danger to civilization of the conceited imagination of sentimental humanitarianism it is necessary to expose the moral dissipation of the will that it both expresses and inspires. Much of Babbitt's writing is devoted to explaining and illustrating the intimate relationship between qualities of will and corresponding qualities of imagination and to show that moral irresponsibility derives much of its appeal from the fact that it can present itself in aesthetically appealing dress.



For Babbitt the field of aesthetic creativity covers a wide variety of experience and ranges from the merely decorative to visions of large and lasting significance. Determining whether a particular work has great or negligible artistic value requires among other things a consideration of its treatment of life's ethical dimension. Works of art rank low, Babbitt argues, which ignore or distort the human moral condition. He ranks most highly works that combine imaginative power with profundity of ethical experience. It is important to understand that while Babbitt is greatly interested in the ethical dimension of romantic imagination and aesthetical expression in general, for him art is imagination, not morality. As art it is distinguished by intensity and coherence of intuition. Since life has many sides, art must also express much besides moral conditions. But serious art must not be judged on the narrowly aesthetical grounds of *l'art pour l'art*.

## IV

*The Primacy of Will*

Before expanding on Babbitt's aesthetics it is necessary to look more closely at his philosophy of will. According to Babbitt man discovers the essence of reality in ethical action. Such action realizes the ultimate meaning of life and is its own reward. Over time sound willing leads to the special satisfaction of happiness. Babbitt admires Plato and Aristotle, especially the latter, but he is critical of the Greek tendency, which has many counterparts in later Western thought, to equate virtue with intellectual knowledge. He sees in Christianity at its best a deeper ethical wisdom, a recognition of the primacy of will and of the need to undertake a sometimes difficult discipline of self. In

Babbitt's view, Jesus of Nazareth represents the Orient rather than the more intellectualistic West. Jesus does not offer a new philosophy of conduct to be tested on abstract intellectual grounds. He asks men to follow him, to perform Christ-like actions. Genuine morality and religion are for Babbitt most importantly a path of striving. Without entering upon this path of action, and thus undertaking a gradual transformation of character, the individual will not discover the reality of human existence, which is first of all a reality of practice.

In opposition to theories that tend to treat morality as a problem of reason, Babbitt stresses the human proclivity for moral procrastination, the lethargy of the will that keeps the individual from real moral effort. Theorizing about virtue does not bring the individual closer to understanding the reality of happiness unless he also acquires experience of it in concrete moral action. Philosophizing about the good easily becomes an excuse or pretext for not getting on with the more difficult task of actually improving self. The crux of the ethical life is not achieving a definitive philosophy of the good, but the ability to *act* on the ethical insight one does have. With the exercise of good will and the resulting strengthening of character the individual's sense of reality and meaning deepens. Theoretical doubts about the existence of the universal good that beset the morally deficient and passive person begin to dissolve. Babbitt sees the Christian notion of the incarnation as contributing to solving the problem of knowledge in ethical matters: "The final reply to all the doubts that torment the human heart is not some theory of conduct, however perfect, but the man of character."<sup>16</sup> The person of good action embodies and verifies in himself the reality of the eternal good.

It might be commented that Babbitt's emphasis on will suggests a Protestant rather than a Roman Catholic influence. It should be pointed out that Babbitt sees strengths and weaknesses in both of these orientations and that he maintains a certain detachment from both. His consideration of ethical and religious questions draws on a large number of different sources, including ones from outside of the Christian sphere. It is also worth noting that the rationalistic bias represented by Thomism is but one of the strains within Catholicism. What should be stressed, however, is that, while Babbitt gives preeminence to will in the ethical and religious life, he is critical of voluntaristic theologies, including those of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, which make man so dependent on the divine will that he becomes virtually "a puppet of God." In general, Babbitt is unsympathetic to Christian doctrines that tend to undermine moral effort but sympathetic to doctrines that encourage the individual to "work out his own salvation" while inducing humility.<sup>17</sup>

The result and justification of moral action, Babbitt argues, is happiness, a special satisfaction that must not be confused with moments of mere pleasure. The result and justification of specifically religious striving is a "peace that passeth all understanding." In both cases the ultimate meaning of human existence becomes known to man in the concrete, in life actually lived. What is meant by happiness or peace cannot be understood by anyone lacking in personal experience of virtuous action. The happy life of the mean described by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is not achieved simply through philosophical deliberation but primarily through ethical effort that gradually shapes sound character. Volumes of good ethical philosophy will mean little unless the terms employed find referents in the personal

life of the reader and help him better to understand his own experience. The following statement about religion can be applied to all ethical self-understanding: "Knowledge in matters religious waits upon will."<sup>18</sup>

## V

*Experience and Reason*

In *Rousseau and Romanticism* Babbitt gives considerable attention to the theory of knowledge. He criticizes both metaphysical and positivistic epistemologies for not being sufficiently attentive to concrete human experience. Instead of taking ideas on authority, modern man proposes to submit them to the test of experience. Babbitt is willing to accept this challenge and to adopt what he calls "the positive and critical spirit" of modernity. "Everything in man is a matter of experience." But Babbitt also insists that what is typically meant by "experience" today is artificially narrow. Representatives of the modern epistemological project are "incomplete positivists." (xii)<sup>19</sup> They do not take account of the full range of human experience but arbitrarily select mere fragments of it or distort it through reductionistic methodologies. Naturalistic-materialistic philosophies of various types impose abstract constructs on concrete experience. Actual human life over the centuries, as known in man's direct self-experience, provides plentiful evidence of the nature of man and society, including the existence of a universal moral order.

Babbitt uses a poorly chosen term, "a more complete positivism," to describe his own respect for experiential facts. He might appear to favor a more complete devotion to the gathering of empirical evidence in the ordinary modern sense, which is a misleading impression. The experience

with reference to which Babbitt would judge the validity of ideas is not the sphere of external objects posited by positivism. He has in mind mankind's living consciousness of the Whole, the human self-awareness that can be called the "inner life," not because it is interior to something else but because it has the intimacy of the directly experienced.

Our most fundamental awareness of life is of the universal and the particular in simultaneous tension and union, a fact of immediate experience to which Babbitt sometimes refers in Plato's language of the One and the Many. Mankind acquires a better understanding of the Whole, not by accumulating "data" in the empirical sense, but by acquiring a firmer grasp of the oneness, or unity, of life that abides in the midst of change and diversity. Man does so by orienting the personality to the ordering values of the good, the true, and the beautiful. He lays hold on the oneness of existence not, as Plato recommends, by trying to escape or abolish change and diversity; these are of the essence of human life. Instead man discovers universality in the ordering of particularity. To the extent that mankind is successful in this effort, universality is embodied in concrete experience. As such it becomes familiar to man. What has not entered human experience is not subject to human knowledge, various metaphysical claims notwithstanding. Questions about reality are best answered by those whose experience has been structured in the manner just described. This structuring of life is the task of civilization. Through it man is led beyond the merely ephemeral and the idiosyncratic. The truly civilized person is more authoritative about reality than others because he has let experience be ordered, deepened, enriched, and interpreted by the sense of the universal that emerges from the human heritage of life and letters. The empirical data upon which positivists would base

knowledge are reified and distorted fragments torn from the fundamental and continuous consciousness of the Whole that Babbitt calls human experience.

To submit claims about reality to the test of experience means to judge them ultimately from the point of view of life's completion in good action. For Babbitt the final criterion of reality is the special type of willing whose very nature it is to satisfy man's deepest yearning and to make life truly worth living. Babbitt suggests that the problem of epistemology, "though it cannot be solved abstractly and metaphysically, can be solved practically and in terms of actual conduct." (xvi) What cannot be grasped in mere theory, can be understood in concrete ethical experience.

It should be interjected that Babbitt's theory of knowledge can be criticized for unduly discounting reason's contribution in the search for reality. When speaking of reason he usually has in mind an analytic faculty which chops up immediate experience in pragmatically convenient parts. This faculty simplifies and even violates the facts of human consciousness in order to make rational sense of them. Babbitt often points to the inability of reason to grasp the paradox of the One and the Many that constitutes man's fundamental self-awareness. He sees reason as imposing an abstract and ultimately artificial consistency on the experiential facts. To know reality, Babbitt contends, it is necessary to go beyond the formulations of reason. Like most thinkers in this century Babbitt does not explicitly recognize a form of rationality that faithfully accounts for actual human experience. That such a reason exists has been persuasively shown in this century by the neo-Hegelian Benedetto Croce.<sup>20</sup> Simultaneously philosophical and historical, this reason is compatible with Babbitt's view of

life, including his notion of the ultimacy of the practical criterion of reality.

The weakness of Babbitt's understanding of reason is evident, for example, in the following sentence in which he indicates the futility of trying to capture the path of religious striving in rational formulations: "The end of this path and the goal of being cannot be formulated in terms of the finite intellect, any more than the ocean can be put into a cup." (150) This statement appears to push intellectual humility to an extreme. But if reason is as powerless as Babbitt here seems to think, by means of what faculty is Babbitt expressing the shortcomings of the "finite intellect"? In many places, including his long essay on the *Dhammapada* in his edition of that work, Babbitt does formulate the nature of the religious path and the goal of being. He must be relying on a type of reason that is philosophically more capable and comprehensive than the "finite intellect" mentioned in the quoted sentence. The same reason must be active in his writing about other aspects of life. All of the arguments, concepts, definitions, and terms presented in his various books—the practical criterion of reality, the higher and the lower will, the tension between the One and the Many, etc.—assume the existence of a reason capable of significant observation, a reason not suffering from the defects of pragmatic and analytical rationality. In his studies of human life and letters Babbitt is clearly not confined to the kind of "finite intellect" that he explicitly acknowledges. Although he is not systematically conscious of it, he relies upon a more truly philosophical reason whenever he presents an idea that does not distort or violate actual experience but simply expresses it in concepts.<sup>21</sup>

Babbitt's incomplete understanding of the role and meaning of reason does not undermine his idea that questions of

reality should be submitted to the test of experience. In assessing theories of life it is appropriate, he argues, to be guided by the words of Jesus, "By their fruits shall ye know them." Ethical and other ideas produce consequences that throw light on their meaning and tenability. Historical evidence, the experience of the human race, is indispensable. Thinkers who are hostile to all traditional authority and who will not seriously consult the insights common to the great ethical and religious systems of mankind are likely to foster superficial and dangerous ideas. As these ideas are put into practice they bring upon their originators and others a sense of life's absurdity and misery. Those, on the other hand, who are willing to undertake some of the action called for by the older traditions, if not accept the literal meaning of inherited dogmas, are likely to produce very different fruits in themselves and others: a deepening sense of the meaning and happiness of life. Babbitt observes that if absolute knowledge must forever elude man, "we may still determine on experimental grounds to what degree any particular view of life is sanctioned or repudiated by the nature of things and rate it accordingly as more or less real."<sup>22</sup>

## VI

### *The Duality of the Will*

Since Babbitt views ethical effort as providing the final answer to questions of reality, more should be said about his idea of a higher will or "inner check." This is a subject poorly understood by most of his interpreters. Babbitt's doctrine is summed up in these words: "I do not hesitate to affirm that what is specifically human in man and ultimately divine is a certain quality of will, a will that is felt in its relation to his ordinary self as a will to refrain." Most of