IRVING BABBITT: A REAPPRAISAL

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I

THE humanism of Irving Babbitt is receding into mere academic history at a moment when it needs to be brought to bear against the Left and the Right, the subtleties of quasi-theology, and suave psychological criticism. The shivering young Davids, as Ludwig Lewisohn once called them, have triumphed, and Babbitt's criteria appear to be demolished; witness the contempt of Bernard Smith. On another side, Anglo-Catholics and neo-Thomists—T. S. Eliot, G. R. Elliott, Mortimer Adler—have swung off from humanism into orbits of their own. It may not, however, be too late to reappraise Babbitt's views and to revitalize his influence.

Babbitt usually probed an issue with a fine discrimination that he liked to call Socratic. Yet a Socratic inspection of his own criticism (for his work was almost entirely critical) exposes a damaging insufficiency in method. No one seems to have insisted that Babbitt evaluated the ethical life by one method and literature by another. His opponents, and even his followers, sensing this dislocation without understanding its cause, have been led to distrust or modify the whole scale of humanist values. Nevertheless, if this insufficiency is admitted, one can afford to abandon most of Babbitt's literary criticism, but at the same time reaffirm his ethical outlook.

The dislocation in method reduces itself to this: Babbitt as a critic of conduct appealed to the data of consciousness, whereas Babbitt the critic of literature appealed to formulas. Thus, in depreciating "romantic" writers, he lapsed into the very critical failing that he deplored—"pseudoclassicism"; that is, judging not by intimate perceptions from experience, but rationalistically by inflexible absolutes. That these absolutes are ethical ones does not make his literary criticism less

pseudoclassic than criticism based on artificial "decorum"; ethical or literary, such formalism violates the humanist address to experience itself. This disharmony in method is injurious since the humanist must be clear-eyed in his insight, sensitive in taste, and wary of a thin rationalism. By filling every judgment with the substance of experience itself, the humanist avoids the metaphysical dream, the empty absolute.

Of course, Babbitt has been assailed for puritanism; but this failing is not puritanism. The humanist in a sense must be puritan in that he denies the autonomy of beauty. The damaging fact is that Babbitt was doctrinaire, or pseudoclassic. The pseudoclassic heresy in literary criticism is more blighting than any aesthetic heresy or puritan heresy. Pseudoclassic criticism, testing by its rationalized patterns, denies the classic awareness of experience itself; the aesthetic heresy divorces form from content, and beauty from meaning; finally, puritanism can itself become a heresy by accentuating ethical or theological values alone. The humanist is temperamentally averse to aestheticism; but whatever affinity he may have with the puritan, he must at all costs renounce the dryness of the pseudoclassic and must temper the light of reason by sensitivity to experience.

The humanist also seeks totality. If aesthetic experience differs from ethical experience, he must admit this diversity of consciousness. Babbitt recognized such a diversity; art, he said, "rests primarily not on ethical but aesthetic perception."[1] He complained that Johnson allowed his love for edification to dull his literary sense. Nevertheless, aware though Babbitt was of the intricacies of ethical life, he was prone to deny the literary experience. In this way Matthew Arnold is more central in the humanist tradition than Babbitt, for he was more sensitive to the totality of consciousness, to "Hellenism" as well as to conduct. Babbitt, acutely responsive to the ethical or restraining will within man, hardened himself

[1] *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Boston and New York, 1919), 203.

against Cézanne, for example, because he is "expressive"; but an honest attention to experience finds a great deal more in Cézanne than expressiveness. In general Babbitt desired in both ethical and aesthetic activity the "imitation" of a standard; in ethics his standard was set by the "higher will" issuing from ethical consciousness, but his artistic standard was an "imagination" controlled not at all by aesthetic, but only by ethical, experience. This form of puritanism can be justified only if it answers to experience itself.

II

Insensitive as Babbitt may have been to literary experience, no one can doubt the nicety of his ethical perception.

His deepest conviction was that civilization is possible through no mechanical adjustment of social forces, but only through the cultivated will of civilized persons. Unpliable as his individualism may seem, it was finely selective in its inspiration. In contrast to his almost priggish devotion to the literature of the Greeks, Babbitt was receptive to a very wide range of ethical experience. He proposed "to bring a Socratic idea into relation with a Buddhistic one and then to use the two ideas thus combined in defense of an idea that is central in Christianity."[2] This fusing of the disparate virtues of discrimination, energy of will, and humility is, as he said, highly eclectic. It has the flexibility so desired by Arnold, and is guided by insight, without which humanism petrifies into dogma.

Babbitt hoped to supplement mere scientific experimentalism by humanistic experimentalism, to make an outright appeal to the immediacy of consciousness itself. Among these experiential data the higher will, or *frein vital,* is undeniable. This "certain quality of will"—a daemonic instinct to refrain—is known, Babbitt never tired of saying, in an immediate and experimental way. He wrote to G. R. Elliott:

2 *On Being Creative* (Boston and New York, 1932), xxxvii.

The paradox of the whole matter is this: a philosophy of the "inner check" when put theoretically and in terms of the intellect seems intolerably negative. But when this philosophy is actually *lived,* when it becomes innate in a personality, the inner check is then felt, not as something negative, but as a positive driving-power.[3]

Thus he was insistently experiential in dealing with conduct; this "driving power" or higher will is a mystery to be recognized "in its practical effects," and we are able to affirm this will "without going beyond immediate experience and falling into dogma."[4] In fact, he discerned in European culture since the Middle Ages a "failure to disengage the truths of the higher will from theology and to deal with them experimentally as 'immediate data of consciousness.' "[5]

Like Aristotle, the humanist will establish ethical principle upon ethical experience. The daemonic check unmistakably intuited by each civilized person expresses itself as *appamāda,* or spiritual strenuousness, a "fact of immediate perception." Innate laziness (*pamāda,* or yielding to the impulses of temperament) is the original sin to be combated only by a will "anterior to both intellect and emotion," although not present equally in all persons. Spiritual strenuousness means spiritual autonomy—"Self," as the *Dhammapada* has it, "is the lord of self." The civilized person, deprecating any "liberal" faith that true human satisfaction can be gained from control of the physical world, must assert his spiritual autonomy as "a fact of experience, a fact so primary that the position of the determinist involves an evasion of one of the immediate data of consciousness in favor of a metaphysical dream."[6]

Paul Elmer More found Babbitt to be "almost appalling

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3 G. R. Elliott, *Humanism and Imagination* (Chapel Hill, 1938), 86.

4 "Humanism: An Essay at Definition," in *Humanism and America,* edited by Norman Foerster (New York, 1930), 40; *The Dhammapada,* translated by Irving Babbitt (Oxford, 1936), 80.

5 *Democracy and Leadership* (Boston and New York, 1924), 323.

6 *On Being Creative,* 215.

in the immobility of his central ideas,"[7] and Babbitt himself did not mitigate this immobility: "When first principles are involved," he remarked, "the law of measure is no longer applicable. One should not be moderate in dealing with error."[8] Ethically, this absolutism was not dogma, because Babbitt satisfies a "deep-seated craving for immediacy." His criteria were no metaphysical dreams. The sharp conflict of higher and lower wills accords with civilized experience; the will against laziness is an ethical absolute—attested by consciousness itself. Then too, he was catholic in his sensitivity to the diverse experiences of the Socratic philosopher, the Buddhist and Confucianist, the Jansenist, and even the Jesuit—for of the last he observed that there is a sense "in which casuistry is legitimate and indeed inevitable. The general principle needs to be adjusted to the infinitely varying circumstances of actual life."[9] In this casuistry lies the virtue of "prudence." His ethical absolute—the appeal to the higher will—was thus not only experimental but also classical in its immediacy of point of view; here is the authentic humanist address to consciousness.

III

To turn to Babbitt's literary criticism is to lose this sense of immediacy and refinement; one feels, instead, the doctrinaire, that is, the pseudoclassic.

Babbitt clearly separated the classical from the pseudoclassical judgment when he charged the latter with employing a "fixed absolute," an absolute that is empty because it fails of immediacy. Yet Babbitt's own literary judgments failed of immediacy because he employed an inappropriate absolute. In his dislike of the sensorium and temperament he abandoned literary experience to appeal to moral values of character and will: "To imitate the universal," he asserted, "means

7 "Irving Babbitt," *American Review*, III, 27 (April, 1934).
8 *Humanism and America*, 32.
9 *Dhammapada*, 71.

practically to depict human actions not at random but with reference to some sound scale of ethical values."[10] To be sure, the artist is not irresponsible; nevertheless T. S. Eliot has fittingly warned that "The 'greatness' of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards; though we must remember that whether it is literature or not can be determined only by literary standards."[11] Too often, literary standards are wanting in the humanist criticism, which lacks, as one recent writer put it, the touch of life. If Arnold was ethically less perceptive than Babbitt, he was, with his excursions into sweet and light Hellenism, more nearly a humanist critic of literature. The good poet may be a good man, but to evaluate poetry according to whether the writer himself is adequate is partial and arbitrary criticism.

Indeed, one might condemn Babbitt's critical practice by Babbitt's own critical theory. Wishing the humanist to be "living, flexible, intuitive," he discerned that "there is nothing abstract in our estimates of beauty: they are invariably based on something immediate."[12] He remarked, in a vein at once Aristotelian and positivistic,

> . . . the best art gives us "the illusion of a higher reality"; and this has the advantage of being strictly experimental, of being only a statement of what one actually experiences on reading a great poem or seeing a great picture.[13]

He granted that art springs from aesthetic rather than ethical consciousness. Howbeit, his literary criticism was inquisitorial, shrill—criticism *manquée*—because he sacrificed aesthetic to ethical vision.

When he condemned Shaftesbury for equating the aesthetic

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10 *On Being Creative,* 103.

11 "Religion and Literature," in *Essays, Ancient and Modern* (London, 1936), 93.

12 *Masters of Modern French Criticism* (Boston and New York, 1912), 374; *On Being Creative,* 142.

13 "Genius and Taste," in *Criticism in America* (New York, 1924), 160.

with the moral, he passed judgment on his own attitude. Shaftesbury, he said, "can scarcely be said to discriminate between the moral sense and the sense of beauty." Precisely—Shaftesbury is an unreliable moralist. But Babbitt, fleeing the aesthetic heresy, took refuge within the doctrinaire: "One needs, in short, to deal with both art and life from some ethical center."[14] He, like Shaftesbury, can scarcely be said to discriminate between the moral sense and the sense of beauty. The aesthetic self is not autonomous, and sound art doubtless accommodates ethical values; yet judging art by an ethical absolute is a kind of coarseness not unlike that in Ruskin's position (condemned in *Masters of Modern French Criticism*) that only a sound religion can produce a sound art. In reviewing Saintsbury's *History of English Criticism,* Babbitt once stated that "moral earnestness, acting in a mechanical and one-sided way" is fatal to criticism as well as to art and literature. Again, Babbitt's heresy was a heresy not because it was puritan but because it denied experience. He may have protested that "even if one dispenses with absolutes, one may still retain standards";[15] his literary standards were, nevertheless, ethical absolutes—properly absolute within ethical experience, improperly so within literary experience.

Except in the early pages of *The New Laocoon* or, perhaps, in one or two articles, Babbitt too often provoked the retort of Mary Colum that he "managed to hold up to contempt nearly every great writer of the nineteenth century: he did not like their philosophy, so he attacked their work, their minds, and their characters."[16] This retort stings. Babbitt it was who complained that criticism has become a form of gossip: what, then, is one to think when he depreciated the music of Berlioz by telling how that composer, lulled by the charm of Nice, absurdly forgot to murder a rival lover; or the

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14 *On Being Creative,* 139; *Rousseau and Romanticism,* 173.
15 *On Being Creative,* xxii.
16 "The War on Literature," *Forum,* XCIV, 208 (October, 1935).

verses of Vigny because they ring with the "disillusion that comes from having sought an ideal communion in a liaison with a Parision actress"; or the views of Rousseau because he left his children to be wards of the state; or portions of Goethe because Goethe's love affairs were "prolonged into the seventies"? This anecdotal criticism, shamelessly trivial, inexcusably personal, was impelled by Babbitt's scorn for romantic ethics. Where are the judgments of a literary *esprit de finesse* springing from a "multitude of delicate perceptions"? Such perceptions quickened his ethical criticism alone. His literary taste was benumbed by the dogma that "With the elimination of the ethical element from the soul of art the result is an imagination that is free to wander wild with the emancipated emotions."[17] Possibly; although Coleridge might reply, experientially, that the poetic imagination is esemplastic, able to shape the wildest odes by its own discipline. We may need to discredit spontaneity as a way of life; Arcadian revery is indeed no substitute for living; the nature cult is doubtless only recreative; doubtless, too, suggestive word painting cannot serve for ideas: but to slight "Kubla Khan" *because* it was composed "without any participation of [Coleridge's] rational self" is not puritan but, far worse, doctrinaire.

A discomforting instance of Babbitt's pseudoclassic dryness was his belittling of prose fiction; he even intimated that "the triumph of the novel has been, if not the triumph of formlessness over form, at least the triumph of diffuseness over concentration." What does "form" mean when thus applied to the novel? Ought the novel to have "concentration"? Almost as doctrinaire was his fear that the man who turns from the Greeks to study the *Nibelungenlied* or the *Chanson de Roland* or the Irish sagas may risk "impairing his sense of form." This timidity surely resembles the pseudoclassic distrust of what is "low." Babbitt's plea for the distinct genre was more reckless:

[17] *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 206.

It reduces itself to this: a clear-cut type of person, a person who does not live in either an emotional or an intellectual muddle, will normally prefer a clear-cut type of art or literature.[18]

Would one call Shakespeare, or Milton, "clear-cut"? His dread of "escape" was likewise negligent of experience: is it not problematical whether Homer, Dante, Milton did not "escape" as well as "imagine"?

Babbitt's very appeal for artistic restraint involves a violation of immediacy. The acceptance of *mimesis* is the focal point of his literary criticism. "After all," he stated, "the doctrine of imitation merely means that one needs to look up to some standard set above one's ordinary self."[19] He found literary standards in classical decorum, the imitation of models, corresponding to the ethical virtue of humility. The parallel, nevertheless, is not exact between ethical and aesthetic "conduct." In *ethos* the ordinary self is in conflict with the higher self, that by an act of vital control must dominate the lower. In aesthetic "conduct" the situation is a little different. If art be in any sense creative, the higher self, aesthetically, *is and must be operative* during creation—the control manifesting itself as technique of whatever kind. The artist *as* an artist does always look above his ordinary self. In "Genius and Taste" Babbitt presumed that

If such a phrase as a "vision of reality" is to have any experimental content, if it is to be anything more than a mask for egotism, the reality of which one has a vision will serve to set bounds to the expansion of one's ordinary self; will be known practically, in short, as an inner inhibition.[20]

Every artist senses this inhibition through his sense of what is needed to express his vision; this is as true of expressionist as of classical art. One can neither overlook this aesthetic

18 *The New Laocoon* (Boston and New York, 1910), 247.
19 "Genius and Taste," 164.
20 "Genius and Taste," 165.

higher self nor assume that it is known only to classical decorum.

Again, Babbitt separated two orders of intuitions: "on the one hand, the sensuous or aesthetic, and on the other, the spiritual, or as they are sometimes termed the intellectual, intuitions."[21] His aesthetic intuitions are those of the Many, and his spiritual intuitions are those of the One. The distinction seems treacherous, for intuitions of the many as soon as they become utterable fall, aesthetically, into an intuition of the one—*i.e.*, they become "significant." Coleridge, rather than Babbitt, was observant of experience when he spoke of the "shaping spirit of imagination." By a kindred sophism Babbitt sundered "form" from "expression," a rupture as dubiously pseudoclassical as Dr. Johnson's view that language is only the "dress" of thought. Babbitt proposed that since "expression" is an expansive and "form" a restrictive element, expression cannot become form or form, expression. This dissociation of expression from form is not experiential; it is a metaphysical quibble, the pseudoclassicism of the eighteenth century in a new guise.

IV

What, then, is the humanist attitude toward art to be? It is idle to deny that aesthetic experience and ethical experience are related; furthermore, the humanist instinct toward puritanism is a trustworthy one. As Yvor Winters says, "If the poetic discipline is to have steadiness and direction, it requires an antecedent discipline of ethical thinking and of at least some ethical feeling."[22] Otherwise poetry does not enlarge or illuminate experience. Can the humanist, however, evade the puritan and, more important, the withering pseudoclassic heresy?

Babbitt himself once suggested an attitude that is truly humanistic because it is immediate:

21 *Masters of Modern French Criticism*, 52.
22 *Primitivism and Decadence* (New York, 1937), 14.

Either beauty cannot be defined at all or we must say that only is beautiful which seems so to the right kind of man, and the right kind of man is plainly he whose *total attitude* towards life is correct. . . .[23]

One immediately recalls the Aristotelian solution (*Ethics,* x, 5) that if the good man be the measure of all, then those are real pleasures that give him the impression of being so, and those things pleasant in which he takes pleasure. The youthful Milton, who may be the best Milton, suggests this position:

> And that which is not good is not delicious
> To a well-governed and wise appetite.

This view, while not confusing the ethical with the aesthetic, mitigates the scholastic and neo-scholastic opposition between "art" and "prudence," between aesthetic and moral faculties, which Mr. Adler has inherited from Thomism—an opposition making the situation of prudence anomalous since it "has a task of ruling which exceeds its competence."[24] The prudent man, obliged "to look after truth and goodness, so that the artist can be free to look after beauty," thus sanctions an intolerable dichotomy of living; worse still, the artist is left autonomous—in a vacuum. To ask for a real solution to the opposition of art and prudence is, concludes Mr. Adler, to ask too much.

One must not accept uncritically this dilemma by which, according to M. Maritain, the prudent man is "absolutely ignorant of everything pertaining to art."[25] Such a view accents the Aristotelian distinction (*Ethics,* vi, 4–5) between making (*factibile*) and acting (*agibile*). But it is Aristotelian largely in the mediaeval sense. After all, the *Poetics* is as

23 The remainder of his statement, that therefore "the problem of beauty is inseparable from the ethical problem," is an absolute that desperately needs adjustment to the facts through the casuistry of the second and third clauses quoted above. *Rousseau and Romanticism,* 208.

24 Mortimer J. Adler, *Art and Prudence* (New York, 1937), 448–452.

25 *Art and Scholasticism* (New York, 1930), 83.

necessary to Aristotle's view of art as the *Ethics* is to Aristotle's view of conduct, or "prudence." Tragedy, in the Aristotelian sense, is an imitation of men in action. Besides, to say that *agibile* is divorced from *factibile,* and that art is akin to science because it proceeds, like science, by certain intellectual rules and is not "involved in a tissue of circumstances," makes all art only a craft and annihilates the faculty of taste, the keenest vision of the artist. In reality, the casuistry of prudence finds its analogy in the tact of the artist that passes beyond craftsmanship, his *curiosa felicitas,* the immediacy of his subject to him. M. Maritain himself recognizes an exceptional "practically practical knowledge" of the dynamism of human beings that is not science. This penetrating competence of mind, like prudence, "descends as it particularises, as it clasps closer and closer, to the point of very contact with the concrete and particular act to be accomplished *hic et nunc,* the indefinite variety of contingent circumstances."[26] Surely here is the decorum that Babbitt called the supreme virtue of the humanist; the bridging of the gap between the general precept and the emergency wherein appears the singular tact of the artist, who, like the prudent man, is a practician in selecting the means to an end. So also the literary critic fails who does not, as Babbitt once said, employ his hard principles with the utmost flexibility.

Although Babbitt seemed deaf to this *curiosa felicitas* and imperfectly adjusted the aesthetic sense to the higher will, he at least renounced the precarious scholasticism of those who cleave art from prudence, leaving the good man and the artist each in isolation. Scholasticism, under whatever guise, is alien to humanism. The ideal of *totum bene vivere,* the humanist ideal, cannot, like scholasticism, disengage intellect from conduct, "making" from "doing," and fall back upon faith in the superhuman. Such a faith translates art to an entirely different plane and denies it as a human activity;

[26] *The Degrees of Knowledge* (New York, 1938), 387–390.

then art becomes, like prudence itself, an act of faith. It was so in the Middle Ages. While he may admire such art or such prudence, the humanist finds himself unable to attain or even to evaluate either. The scholastic view of art, essentially the view of Mr. Adler, is, in the end, unsound unless it springs from a sound faith; instead of pleading for the scholastic view of art, one properly should plead for the Christian faith. Mr. Adler is moved rather by the letter than the spirit; in this he seems to differ from M. Maritain. The humanist, like Matthew Arnold, will stand honestly on lower ground and hold that art cannot ignore moral issues. Yet he will not, like Babbitt, pedantically impose moral standards upon art; rather, he will judge with the whole self and with the *esprit de finesse*.

This, then, is the humanist quest—the quest for a man whose total attitude is correct. It is, in a sense, a puritan quest; it is, inevitably, a classical quest. The humanist should devote himself to the ideal of the civilized person (never more valuable than now), the person who can live a various and total experience and order it harmoniously. The humanist needs a more scrupulous adjustment of his aesthetic to his ethical self; he possibly must revert to Arnold and weight Arnold's superficiality with Babbitt's ethical affirmation. Above all, he must temper the brazen literary criticism of Babbitt by Arnold's tact. To the religious person he will leave the obligation to accommodate *both* prudence and art to a living faith. The humanist need not, like Babbitt, cry that great poets are not megalomaniacs. The greater task is to affirm, to reaffirm, in a time when morality becomes more social than personal, the need of a sound individualism, based upon moderation, decency, and common sense. In this way Irving Babbitt can be of the very highest use through his insistent appeal to the civilized self.