

An Act of Reparation

GEORGE A. PANICHAS

Democracy and Leadership, by Irving Babbitt; with a Foreword by Russell Kirk, *Indianapolis, Indiana: The Liberty Press, 1979. 390 pp. \$9.00 (paper \$4.00).*

IRVING BABBITT (1865-1933) never wavered in what he viewed as being his commanding office as a teacher and critic. During the more than forty years of his career he held firmly to a position, both avoiding and scorning "sudden conversions" and "pistle-shot transformations." He never fell into the traps of confusion and expediency; nor did he ever compromise his position either out of self-doubt or of self-interest. His critical position, as hard and tough as it was sincere and authentic, sanctioned neither retreat nor re-routing. From the start he chose to travel and to stay on one road. Like Archilochus' hedgehog, Babbitt knew one big thing, related everything to a single central vision, and affirmed a single, universal, organizing principle. Even as storms of controversy (and abuse) raged around him he did not give way. He was, in his special style, a battler; "never say die," in the best tradition of that worn phrase, could have easily been one of his slogans. To claim, as is the habit of some commentators, that Babbitt is monolithic as a critical thinker is to subtract from the real truth and worth of his achievement. It is to perpetuate, in fact, the myth that his enemies came to create about his being a reactionary. His position was, to

be sure, four-square, but it was also a position that excelled in character; he never betrayed his conscience, the truths of which, once he had discovered them, he possessed irretrievably. In the academic world, where one too often finds all kinds of weasels and upstarts, Babbitt proved himself to be a great and brave man. He had guts.

This tenacity of character and principle is compellingly present in Babbitt's creed of humanism, or of the "New Humanism" as it is better known. Unfortunately his position has generally been misunderstood and misrepresented. His enemies gave it too little credit and his sympathizers expected too much from it. Babbitt himself defined his creed clearly, augmented considerably by the simplicity of his delineation of his ideas and judgments. Unprofitable subtleties, conundrums, complexities, and paradoxes never interfered with or distorted Babbitt's presentation of his creed. Its other most notable quality is its centripetal force. His vision of order is impelled by his principle of control. In this respect, Babbitt's position was to militate against anything that leads one to fantasy or illusion. Limits, not expansion, is an informing word in his concepts. It could be said that the restrictive essences of Babbitt's thought worked against its popular acceptance and influence, in much the same way that the human capacity for reconstructive change, or what Babbitt termed a "metaphysic of the many," as preached by his famous contemporary,

the philosopher John Dewey, spurred on an epidemic scale a refashioning of thought not only in philosophy but also in law, in education, in politics. A "maker of twentieth-century America," Dewey appealed to man's expansionist impulse. His radical optimism, in the contexts and with the specifics of an inclusive program of social action, was appropriate to a national mood and a liberal trend. Human possibilities unlimited: to this doctrine of change and growth, in the attainment of creative, that is, pragmatic, "consummations," Dewey gave his first and last loyalty, as even this one sentence from his voluminous writings shows: "Democracy is the faith that the process of experience is more important than any special result attained, so that special results achieved are of ultimate value only as they are used to enrich and order the ongoing process." Any emphasis, then, on inner, or spiritual life, as watched over by a decreative, in other words purgative and humbling, "inner check," as made by Babbitt, could hardly compete with Dewey's view of life as an evolving social experience of "shared good."

Babbitt's humanistic doctrine is ultimately characterized not by ambition but by humility with its intrinsic, its total and irrevocable sense of man's limit-situation and, consequently, of man's need for self-discipline and self-reliance. There is nothing either programmatic or enthusiastic about Babbitt's doctrine; indeed, it is austere and even solitary, lacking any grand temporal plans or metaphysical promises of redemption. It is a doctrine completely shorn of personal or collective illusions and non-essentials: the dreams of infinitude, of a "great society" and of a "city of God" alike, are for Babbitt vague and unrealizable. One could say in this respect that Babbitt's doctrine is *spiritual*, as this word conjoins ethical and moral constituents, rather than religious in a supernatural sense. It revolves around conscience rather than grace. His innately Protestant sensibility is severely

schooled by his classicist and orientalist metaphysic in its assimilated forms and consecration to what Babbitt, in his first published piece of writing in 1897, "The Rational Study of the Classics," termed "the service of a high, impersonal reason." For Babbitt reason is an indwelling and salutary force of mediation, legislating restraint and proportion,—the middle way, the law of measure, that avoids the extremes of human consciousness, whether as an Augustinian curse *of* or as a Rousseauistic adventure *in* consciousness. Babbitt was a genuine ecumenist. His humanism was a finely wrought reconciliation of East and West, of Confucius and Aristotle, of Buddha and Christ. ("Mediation and meditation," Babbitt insisted, "are after all only different stages in the same ascending 'path' and should not be arbitrarily separated.")

Both his friendly and his enemy critics have failed to appreciate the simple and direct meaning of Babbitt's doctrine: For T. S. Eliot, it was inadequately religious, an alternative or ancillary doctrine that suppressed the divine or outrightly denied the revelation of the supernatural. For Edmund Wilson it was insufferably reactionary, a doctrine containing "not really conclusions from evidence, but the mere unexamined prejudices of a bigoted Puritan heritage." For Eliot, Babbitt's teachings lacked Catholicity, and for Wilson they lacked Liberalism. The point is that Babbitt's teachings failed to pass the "ultimate" tests of Orthodoxy or of Enlightenment and, as a result, were never given a fair hearing. Babbitt himself would rightly dismiss the charges of his enemy critics as a hodge-podge of humanitarian, utilitarian, and sentimental opinions, invariably failing to adhere to some higher principle of unity, or standard, with which to measure mere manifoldness and change or a mere multiplicity of a scale of values. But that his greatest pupil and eventually even his greatest ally, Paul Elmer More, chose to deprecate the spiritual dimension of Bab-

bitt's doctrine must be noted as an unfortunate phenomenon. Babbitt, after all, was not a theologian. He was, however, a humanistic teacher and prophetic critic of extraordinary ability, as time and history have proved. "On being human," to use the title of a volume of one of More's "New Shelburne Essays," and on being human in an age discrediting the older dualism, underlined Babbitt's prophetic concern. This concern is at the very center of his mission; it is a total concern as it relates to an ongoing interaction of economic, political, philosophical, religious, and educational problems in the modern world. No two passages from Babbitt's texts better catch his significance as an ethical prophet of modernism, in whose words the invisible God becomes audible, than the following, the first written at the beginning of his career, the second at the end:

The greatest of vices according to Buddha is the lazy yielding to the impulses of temperament (*pamāda*); the greatest virtue (*appamāda*) is the opposite of this, the awakening from the sloth and lethargy of the senses, the constant exercise of the active will. The last words of the dying Buddha to his disciples was an exhortation to practice this virtue unremittingly (*appāmadena sampādeṭha*).

He [Buddha] has succeeded in compressing the wisdom of the ages into a sentence: "To refrain from all evil, to achieve the good, to purify one's heart, this is the teaching of the Awakened." The Buddhist commentary is interesting: When you repeat the words, they seem to mean nothing, but when you try to put them into practice, you find they mean everything.

II

NOW WHETHER or not Babbitt is, say, a philosopher, or an aesthete, or a literary critic, or a moral agent, or a social commentator, or a conservative ideologue . . . or a guru is a debate that, at least

among the academic boulevardiers, is fated to go on. No less evident, though more alarming and revealing in its constancy and consistency, is the violent tone that marks this debate, as violent when it appears today as it was in the twenties and thirties when the New Humanism, with Babbitt as its chief spokesman, enjoyed something of a vogue. In any case, identifying the nature of Babbitt's work and thought—his mission—is not difficult. If one must insist, however, on pinning some kind of name-tag on Babbitt before admitting him into the grove of academe, and certainly before considering the significance of his contribution (though it is much more than that simplistic word could ever indicate), not one but several name-tags can be presented. Generalist, diagnostician, teacher, thinker: in each of these categories Babbitt acquitted himself honestly, honorably, humbly. That, as his pupil Austin Warren writes, Babbitt can also be counted among the New England Saints, in the goodly company of a Bronson Alcott, an Edward Taylor, a Charles Eliot Norton, is perhaps a claim that, in the end, transcends all others and makes them finally superfluous. For some, no doubt, Warren's claim may be extravagant, even as for Babbitt, who insisted on basing all judgments on the immediate data of consciousness, it may have been found embarrassing. A mediating designation that identifies Babbitt, and one that, it is to be hoped, neither he nor his enemies would quibble over, is catechist, the office of the catechist defined as being that of not only instructing and teaching but also examining. Indeed, Babbitt's teachings and writings (and the latter are the fruit of the former) disclose precisely his catechistical style and approach, as well as his duty, which was his act of faith. Only when Babbitt is seen in this refining light will proper recognition of his achievement be possible. Only, that is, when he is seen as a teacher in the old, *and* catechistical, sense will he be re-

vered in the sense that a Ralph Waldo Emerson is revered. Clearly, in the case of Babbitt, any plea for critical re-consideration must also predicate what is even more important, an act of reparation.

The prospects for any full-scale reparation are not too good in the present derelict phase of American culture. It is a phase in which post-liberal driftings and shiftings are everywhere in abundance, and with an abundance of frightening consequences, which Babbitt himself had prophesied. If we can boast with all our indiscriminating liberal optimism of being a nation of "New Adams," we are hardly a nation of catechumens. The catechises of Irving Babbitt are no more to the liking of most Americans, among the intelligentsia or the rabble, than any message that stresses moral or spiritual restraint of any sort. "Outward bound," the bigger the better, not the "inner check," characterizes the yearnings of most Americans today. Early on in his life Babbitt, a brave man, chose to resist this centrifugal quest, equating it with an imperialism as dangerous in its psychic as in its social-political dimensions. It is sometimes said by some of Babbitt's Harvard pupils that at the close of his life he grew pessimistic as to the efficacy of his mission. Such a feeling would be natural to any sensitive and intelligent observer of the chaos of values embracing the whole of modern life. Indeed, no modern American thinker exposed himself more to attack than Babbitt. From T. V. Smith to, just the other day, in a virulent letter appearing in *The American Scholar*, Ernest Earnest, the attacks have continued with the kind of intolerance prompting Douglas Bush to protest against the unqualified charges aimed at Babbitt by "automatic liberals who," he notes, "can be as intolerant of nonconformity as automatic conservatives." "Nonconformity" may seem the wrong word to use to describe Babbitt's thought. But when one deliberates on the matter and considers the power of the reigning orthodoxy of enlightenment then

one can easily see that Babbitt's catechistical thought, positing as it does the idea of a minority culture, goes against the grain. The fact remains that many Americans are by now so addicted to the illusion of liberalism, with all its promises of a "fair deal," that they can hardly be patient when confronted with the demands—and Babbitt never ceased making them—for affirming the moral constant and the moral imperative. No, it is not easy, in the peculiar circumstances surrounding Babbitt, to make an act of reparation.

Ideally, such an act, as a spiritual act of "grace and gravity" (to use here Simone Weil's apt phrase), could start on a modest scale. It could start by having more people read and ponder Babbitt's books, not many, really, seven to be exact, six of them published in his lifetime, one posthumously. (There is, too, another posthumous volume, his translation from the Pāli of *The Dhammapada*, with its remarkable introductory "Essay on Buddha and the Occident.") Babbitt's writings, in fact, incorporate, in a very masculine, sometimes racy and aphoristic style, his teachings, again underlining the catechistical quality of his work and thought. Of writings that are teachings, as in Babbitt's case, we have immense corrective need, particularly when these are filled with sagacity and wisdom. Any return to and re-frequentation of sapiential literature can have both therapeutic and antidotal value. There are at least two major problems, however, to be overcome in encouraging readers to return to Babbitt's works. First, from a pedagogical point-of-view, there are no longer any "required texts" at any educational level, so that, for example, a J. R. R. Tolkien is now counted equal to Joseph Conrad and a Samuel Beckett to Shakespeare. And second, most persons, including and even especially those who have had a college or university education, have never read the right books, the right poets and novelists (in the sense of what the Germans call

Dichter), and the right critics and thinkers, and it is possibly too late for them to start now. What we see in this phenomenon, as symptom and portent, is the cruel absence of a great tradition, sacrificed, obviously, to the changing climate of opinion that goes hand-in-hand with our cultural pluralism, and to a compulsory mediocrity. To judge by the way civilization is going we can have only modest expectations of any effort to revive Babbitt's relevance to the modern situation. But as in any permanent doctrine that revolves around first principles modest expectations must themselves be accompanied and judged by absolute standards. Any effort to renew connection with Babbitt's work, in part or in whole, should be counted a worthy one. "To be understood by a few intelligent people," observes T. S. Eliot, "is all the influence a man requires."

III

IN *BABBITT* we observe a judging mind hard at work, and it is precisely this process that marks him as a modern profoundly aware of the disequilibrium affecting every aspect of civilization since the Renaissance. He connected this disequilibrium with man's expansive desires and with naturalistic trends, particularly as embodied in Rousseau's thought. To combat these conditions of existence he chose an active ministry of life, what he called a positive and critical humanism. Hence, he was to be concerned, as he insisted, not so much with meditation, the culmination of true religion, as with meditation, or the law of measure governing man in his secular relations. He is finally to be seen, then, as a sapiential and a prophetic critic: as one who seeks to teach the meaning of wisdom, stressing, above all, the priority of self-reform over social reform, and who warns of the dire consequences, for man and society, when standards, containing a center of judgment, are not maintained. In this critical role Babbitt was to raise questions of a

humanistic rather than an eschatological nature. His primary concern was with life and with the destiny of man rather than with faith and redemption. He himself admitted, in fact, that he did side with the naturalists in rejecting outside authority in favor of the immediate and the experimental. But for Babbitt, as a critic relying on psychological analysis supported by a growing body of evidence, his answers to questions regarding the moral and ethical life were to be radically different, and different in a tempering way. That is, he believed that, with Rousseau, the naturalists asked the right questions but gave the wrong answers. In short, Babbitt sought to show the unsoundness of answers manufactured in the liberal and democratizing contexts of "relativity" and of "the progress and service of humanity." He found in their answers (and in their time) not only a reliance on a crass materialism but also, and more importantly, a sham spirituality. He had, first and always, the unhappy and unpopular task of indicting the extremes and the excrescences of the epoch in which we are still living, at once proffering and defending the disciplining exercises of "the veto power."

The dialectical essences of this task are nowhere more advantageously or vigorously displayed than in *Democracy and Leadership*. First published in 1924, but long out-of-print, it now reappears as an inexpensive and handsome Liberty Classic. One must hope that, as far as it is possible to do so in an age of lust and grab, and of cowardice and betrayal, this reprinting of a book so long confined to ignominy initiates an act of reparation. It gives one even the smallest hope that the battle that Babbitt waged was not in vain, that it is still being waged, even if necessarily in the underground by a small band of beleaguered humanistic loyalists, those outlawed dissidents who live on both sides of "the iron curtain." As a compendium of his ideas, values, and judgments, *Democracy and Leadership*

is Babbitt's most spiritually strenuous work. In it, beginnings and endings, first principles and last principles, conjoin and cohere. If *Democracy and Leadership* can be said to be Babbitt's catechesis, it can also be said to be his *stromata*, the bedrock of his critical teachings. It is a brave and honest book, written by a saint who is as tough as a saint ought to be. It is not a book for small minds, or for spiritual loafers. Nor is it a book for the ego-ridden or -poisoned, neither for "little Napoleons" nor for academic pundits and dry-as-dust pedants so bloated with their self-importance, with what Babbitt calls "man's expansive conceit," that they are unable to see anything beyond their own noses. It is, in a very vital way, an homiletic book of ethical and moral discourse that gives a positive basis to humility; a book to be read continuously, catechetically, pondered and meditated, assimilated and synthesized—and, as Babbitt would want it, lived. It is a great book, a great critical vision, "a supreme act of analysis" that traces causes and effects and distinguishes between things which are at the center different.

Democracy and Leadership is in some ways a misnomer, for it is much more than just a study in social science and politics. All categories and conditions of human existence, in their interrelations and interdependence, are examined here with critical ferocity. Babbitt is unsparing in citing errors (e.g., relativism, humanitarianism, naturalism) that lead to indiscipline and in turn to breakdown, whether in private life or in public. Throughout his diagnosis concentrates on facts, precisely on those "facts" that Rousseau and his followers insisted on setting aside: the discarding of standards and the experience of the past; the growing evils of unlimited democracy and the eradication of the aristocratic principle; the excesses of the "idyllic imagination" as it supplants "moral imagination"; the establishment of a "civil religion," with all of its secular and material aggrandizements, and the

concomitant diminution of both a hierarchy of values and of the centripetal elements in life; the substitution of the doctrine of natural goodness for the older doctrine of man's sinfulness and fallibility; the confusion of mechanical and material progress with moral progress. The political situation, thus, is viewed, defined, and characterized in its ethical and moral contexts. Babbitt is unflinching in stressing that the lack in life of a reverence for some unifying center, or oneness, has its ancillary counterpart in man's "expansive conceit" (instanced as divers forms of "imperialism": aggressive intellect, as well as aggressive will to power—the *libido dominandi*—rejecting all forms of control). It is the decline of the inner life, of inner vision, as the voice of conscience and as the possessor of spiritual truth, that Babbitt focuses on inasmuch as public life reflects inner life. It is in the end, he keeps reminding us, a matter of perceiving and affirming the idea of value as it restrains "the cheap and noisy tendencies of the passing hour." Once this transcending and inclusive humanistic idea of value is negated, in any degree or part, the whole fabric of life is rent. For Babbitt, in this respect, the modern political movement signals a battle between the spirit of Rousseau, espousing the "law of the members," and the spirit of Edmund Burke, affirming the "law of the spirit." Appropriately, Babbitt uses as an epigraph to *Democracy and Leadership* these words, summarizing by centralizing, from Burke's *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*:

Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free.

In the modern movement of democracy Babbitt sees not "a democracy of elevation," as Russell Kirk expresses it, but

rather an unbridled political expression of naturalism that frequently results in "decadent imperialism." There is not only an absence of standards but also a confusion or inversion of standards, as Babbitt shows in his final and most profound chapter, "Democracy and Standards." The consequences of such a situation are far-reaching and damaging. The majoritarian ethos, or what he terms a "divine average," is incapable of effecting standards of discrimination. The critical process of selection or rejection is sacrificed to a utilitarian-sentimental conception of life, to what he speaks of elsewhere as "eleutheromania." Yet what this conception fails to recognize, Babbitt stresses, and here he helps considerably to distinguish between the positions of the "true and false liberals," is the constant need for ethical effort, in all of its disciplining and integrating forms. And here Babbitt reminds us of a truth that the apostles of modernity and the liberal ideologues shun: "Civilization is something that must be deliberately willed; it is not something that gushes up spontaneously from the depths of the unconscious." To resist the individualistic and centrifugal tendencies of a democracy that transposes into a dreamland, as elusive as it is illusory, Babbitt notes the related and additional need of restoring the moral struggle to the individual: the recovery in some form of "the civil war in the cave." Substituting sentiment for conscience and expansive emotion for the inner life epitomizes for Babbitt the evils of an unlimited democracy that flouts the aristocratic principle, which he associates with the traditional forms of discipline, with the "inner check," or the *frein vital*—with, in a word, *character*. "The unit to which all things must finally be referred," he maintains, "is not the State or humanity or any other abstraction, but the man of character. Compared with this ultimate human reality, every other reality is only a shadow in the mist." "One should, therefore, in the interests of

democracy itself seek to substitute the doctrine of the right man for the doctrine of the rights of man." These were, and are, brave statements that we do not now even hear from a preacher in a pulpit, preferring as we do to hear about "the power of positive thinking," still another form of utilitarian-sentimental self-deception advanced by religious and political leaders alike. Indeed, the problem of leadership was for Babbitt the major moral problem in an age, to use Burke's famous phrase, of 'sophisters, economists, and calculators,' whose 'empire of chimeras' Babbitt steadfastly countered with an altogether understandable prophetic disdain.

Democracy and Leadership discloses the austere and rigorous workings not merely of a 'conservative mind' but of a 'universal mind,' always speaking directly, and with courage of judgment, to a specific problem—"to the distinction . . . between a sound and an unsound individualism." To be regretted, the dark thought will occur to some readers, is the absence of a compassionate mind, the mind that is ever in intimate dialogue with the heart. Words like "sympathy," "love," "charity," "kindness," "pity," for instance, are not a visible part of Babbitt's vocabulary, in which we hear the blows of a hammer rather than that which, as Shakespeare tells us, "gives us more palm in beauty than we have." But Babbitt was a critic of integrity, wore no masks, had no pretensions or poses as "man and teacher," refused (as he said) to "put on sympathy a burden that it cannot bear," allowed nothing to muddle the keen inspection of facts. The pitiless facts of human history and experience (regardless of any claims for the "goodness of heart" as a substitute for moral obligations), he maintained, were incontrovertible: "What man needs, if we are to believe the Lord's prayer, is bread and wisdom. What man, at least Roman man, wanted, about the time that prayer was uttered, was bread and the circus." Ac-

cordingly, Babbitt chose to describe himself as a "moral realist," going on with emphatic forthrightness to add: "If the moral realist seems hard to the idealist, this is because of his refusal to shift, in the name of sympathy or social justice or on any other ground, the struggle between good and evil from the individual to society." Indeed, he often pointed to some disturbing similarities between the dilemma of ancient Rome, with the collapse of the traditional controls and "the disciplinary virtues," and the dilemma confronting America: "We, too, seem to be reaching the acme of our power and are at the same time discarding the standards of the past. This emancipation has been accompanied by an extraordinary increase in luxury and self-indulgence." To treat this twin process of decay and debasement in the area of education no less than in the overall social-political and cultural situation, Babbitt offered what he called an "unamiably suggestion": "The democratic contention that everybody should have a chance is excellent provided it means that everybody is to have a chance to measure up to high standards."

However heavy the burden of his troubling responsibility, Babbitt did not succumb to world-weariness, he did not repudiate the value of spiritual effort. To be sure, he viewed the future with apprehension. "The latter stages of the naturalistic dissolution of civilization with which we are menaced are," he wrote, "thanks to scientific 'progress,' likely to be marked by incidents of almost inconceivable horror." With force of insight and with ethical and moral gravamen, he wrestled with those fundamental life-questions that relate to the fate of man in the modern world. What he chose to say about this world of increasing material organization combined with an ever-growing spiritual anarchy ("power without wisdom"), and about the need for a search for a remedy, continues to make Babbitt's work and thought disturbing

and unpalatable. What modern man has chosen to listen to—one that makes for easy listening and easy living—is the doctrine of John Dewey, which, whatever its philosophical authority, as Eliseo Vivas has recently reminded us, prevents the development of piety and fails to stress nobility and dignity. Undoubtedly Babbitt was intensely aware of the braying voice of the world, but he bore his witness bravely, uncomplainingly. Nothing less could be expected of a prophet of the "madding hour," when, to quote Alexander Pope's couplet,

. . . rose the seed of chaos,
and of night,
To blot out order, and extinguish light.

King Küng

Freud and the Problem of God, by Hans Küng; translated by Edward Quinn, *New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. 126 pp. \$8.95.*

THE THEOLOGIAN'S TASK is always tortuous, particularly when he speaks to an audience of secular stripe, rather than to his religious confreres. He must state the eternal truths in new, original forms, yet he must not sacrifice the integrity of those unchanging truths. He must speak to the spirit of the age, yet he must not allow himself to fall into the trap of the *Zeitgeist*. In a word, he must be in, but not of, the contemporary intellectual world.

For Catholic theologians, whose tradition rejects the claims of secular authority, and whose Church claims the interpretative aid of the Holy Spirit, the problem is especially acute. The Catholic theologian must avoid both Scylla—an unoriginal rehash of Scholastic formulas—and Charybdis—heresy. No matter