

# *A Troubled Institution*

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**Literature and the American College: Essays in Defense of the Humanities**, by Irving Babbitt; with a Major New Introduction by Russell Kirk, *Washington, D.C.: National Humanities Institute, 1986.* xii + 228 pp. \$25.00.

THIS NEW EDITION of Irving Babbitt's first book (1908) comes appropriately at a time when mounting evidence of failures at all levels in American education has brought sharp criticism of colleges and universities. The head of the Carnegie Foundation report on teaching concludes that "the undergraduate college, the very heart of higher learning, is a troubled institution." The Secretary of Education has charged even the most prestigious colleges with a failure of mission.

Eight decades ago Babbitt, a professor of comparative literature at Harvard, observed educational and cultural pathologies, and with prophetic vehemence warned that "the American college, with most of the things it has traditionally represented, is threatened with utter extinction." The new publishers have recognized that the insights in this book "are in many ways more pertinent now than in Irving Babbitt's own time." For contemporary readers the value of this volume is substantially enhanced by Russell Kirk's vivid portrayal of developments that have brought American higher education "eighty years closer to that total collapse of humane disciplines which Bab-

bitt . . . already discerned as a grim possibility."

For Babbitt, as for his great Hellenic masters, the governing purpose of education—and especially the education of those who should be the leaders in a healthy society—is the cultivation of wisdom and good character. Babbitt saw the undergraduate college as it had developed in America—as distinguished from secondary or graduate school—as the place where that purpose is best fulfilled. Aware that wisdom and virtue require what Burke called "the moral imagination," he believed that the study of great literature should be the heart of the college curriculum, introducing the student to "that golden chain of masterpieces which links together in a single tradition the most permanent experiences of the race."

Babbitt is remembered as the leader of the movement he called the "New Humanism," and the first essay in this book is a definition of traditional humanism, tracing its classical origins and its Renaissance and neo-classical developments, distinguishing it from the humanitarianism with which it has often been disastrously confused. He sees humanitarianism in two destructive movements which may be represented by two men of flawed genius but massive influence. The first is Francis Bacon, whose exaltation of experimental science—valuable and necessary as it has been—has unfortunately led to a domi-

nance of "scientific positivism, with its purely quantitative standards." In higher education it has replaced training for wisdom and virtue with training for power and service—often for power and success. But Baconianism would have been comparatively ineffective in the overthrow of humanism had it not been aided by the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose exaltation of an individual and eccentric sensibility has led to the disintegration of traditional disciplines and standards in society and in the arts.

Agreeing with Tocqueville that "the final test of a democracy . . . will be its power to produce and encourage the superior individual," Babbitt confronts cant and confusion in the application of the term "democracy" in education, bluntly insisting that "the purpose of the college is not to encourage the democratic spirit, but on the contrary to check the drift toward a pure democracy." What is needed is "an aristocratic and selective democracy." Respectful of the role of time in the selection of a sound curriculum, Babbitt saw both Baconian and Rousseauistic abuse of the democratic idea in the elective system introduced at Harvard by President Eliot, whereby "the wisdom of all the ages is to be as naught compared with the inclination of a sophomore."

A recurrent theme in all the essays is that the role for the college is distinct from that of the graduate school. In this country serious graduate work for the training of scholars was rapidly developing in the later decades of the nineteenth century, and at major universities like Harvard the models for the study of literature—to Babbitt's regret—were the German universities. An abuse of methodologies derived from the natural sciences infected study of the ancient classics in both graduate school and the college. Leading departments of modern literature were typically dominated by a "philological syndicate" which emphasized medieval philology in graduate programs for the preparation of college teachers, and the new emphasis on the Ph.D. degree imposed a premature and narrow specialization. In Babbitt's view,

the college teacher of modern literature needed a wide and reflective reading and a familiarity with Homer and Virgil rather than Caedmon and *Beowulf*. He observed that when prospective teachers were repelled by the aridity of narrowly specialized studies they too often became mere aesthetes or dilettantes, turning to a Rousseauistic alternative of an impressionistic rejection of standards.

Babbitt's concluding essay on "Academic Leisure," careful to distinguish true leisure from idleness or recreation, deprecates the quantitative measures of productivity that required college and university professors to become "hustling scholars" who have neither time nor disposition for that contemplation which Aristotle—no quietist or mystic—exalted as the highest moments of the mind.

Russell Kirk's purpose in his introduction is to show how "Babbitt's concept of humanism has been assailed by forces peculiar to our own time." Among these forces are a variety of "humanisms," including those set forth in the "Humanist Manifesto" by John Dewey and others—"socialists of a sort, though not ordinarily Marxists; Instrumentalists in education nearly all; hostile toward churches; rationalistic; progressivists. . . ." In short, these were "extreme humanitarians who preferred to be styled humanists." Discussing "secular humanism" (at this writing much in the news and even in the courts) Kirk shows that it is "quite unrelated to either classical or Christian humanism," and points out its "obsession with contemporaneity in school readers and anthologies."

Proceeding to the abuse of the democratic idea, Kirk sees the most rapid disintegration of traditional standards in the period after World War II which brought "a frenzy of educational imperialism and indiscriminate expansion." At the graduate level the hasty establishment of new and inadequate doctoral programs cheapened and trivialized the Ph.D. degree. Vast increases of undergraduate enrollments, especially in public institutions, brought pressures for "open" or reduced admis-

sion standards, and the phenomenon of "remedial" courses at an elementary level. A collapse of academic integrity became manifest in grade inflation and the proliferation of cafeteria-style course offerings, including "boondoggle programs" yielding to the militant demands of aggrieved minorities. The "philological syndicate" had disappeared, and in many departments and national associations power was seized by ideologues—Marxists or "feminist ideologues or 'gay liberation' zealots." The destructive disorder of the counter-culture which engulfed campuses in the late 1960s provided a validation of Babbitt's warning as it swept through the Rousseauistic phase of the idyllic imagination to its sequel of barbaric violence. Although there is currently less turbulence in the colleges, the liberal arts have not profited, for there has been a massive turning away of students from humanities departments to programs inspired by utilitarian materialism.

Deeply committed as he is to Babbitt's principles, Kirk agrees "for the most part" with T.S. Eliot, who regretted Babbitt's unwillingness "to proceed beyond 'tradition' to the religious sources of tradition." Eliot, the most eminent of Babbitt's former students who admired and were deeply influenced by their teacher, came to believe that "the underlying cause of decadence in any society has been the decay of religious belief and the religious imagination. With the loss of an apprehension of a transcendent order and of the myths and dogmata of traditional religion, moral imagination gives way to the idyllic imagination and in turn to the diabolic imagination." These effects Kirk sees in a general decline in literary culture and in many works admirably reviewed every week in the major media.

Kirk notes that "at the end of his life Bab-

bitt was not cheerful about prospects for the regeneration of the moral imagination, and Eliot had foreseen the coming of dark ages through which the faith must be preserved alive." Although he has himself drawn a grim picture of depravity in educational institutions and the surrounding society, Kirk is unwilling to end his comments without the hopeful note that "yet the classical humanism of Babbitt and the Christian humanism of Eliot may be renewed." Observing that some defenders of sound values remain, especially in the best of the independent colleges, and reflecting that "civilizations commonly pass through alternating periods of decay and renewal," he suggests that "in the dawning era of the twenty-first century, it may be ancient orthodoxy, or the great works of Greece and Rome that come to seem original. . . . It may be that the third century of the American Republic will grow into a regenerate Augustan age."

In the light of Kirk's own account of conditions in academia and the general culture, these suggestions may seem too optimistic—at least in the short run. However that may be, Babbitt's learned exploration of the deep roots of pervasive modern ills is a summons to look to "the wisdom of all the ages" for guidance in what must be a slow process of recovery. In the nearer future, and in the colleges themselves, the current criticisms of higher education are already bringing pressure for some reconsideration of the curriculum. It may be hoped that this renewed statement of Babbitt's principles will encourage defenders of the humanities to reject "the democratic absurdity of asserting that all studies should be free and equal," and at the same time to resist the threatened intrusion of programs sponsored by militant ideologues.