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Notes on Babbitt and More

THE following notes deal with the essays by Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More in the Humanist symposium, *Humanism and America.*

"HUMANISM: AN ESSAY AT DEFINITION," BY IRVING BABBITT

(1) *The law of measure on which it* [*Humanism*] *depends becomes meaningless unless it can be shown to be one of the "laws unwritten in the heavens" of which Antigone had the immediate perception, laws that are "not of to-day or yesterday," that transcend in short the temporal process.*

This seems to me a grotesque misapplication of the famous speech from Sophocles. Let me point out, in the first place, that what Antigone says is "ἄγραπτα κἀσφαλῆ θεῶν νόμμα"—"unwritten and unfailing laws of the gods"—and that Professor Babbitt, in changing "gods" to "heaven" (which is particularly inappropriate in this case, as Antigone has just specified the gods of the underworld), is following the Victorian tradition of Jebb and Jowett, who, by substituting such Christian words as "God" and "heaven" for the pre-Christian conceptions of the Greeks, almost succeeded in giving Sophocles and Plato the aspect of pious English dons. But Babbitt has turned

Sophocles into something worse and even more alien to his true nature: he has turned him into a Harvard Humanist. In the scene in question, Antigone is not talking about the law of measure or anything remotely resembling it—she has disobeyed Creon's edict by performing funeral rites for her brother and she is justifying herself for her insubordinate conduct. There is no self-control about Antigone's behavior: she has committed an act of passionate personal loyalty, regarded as excessively rash and wrong-headed by everybody else in the play, including her own sister, whose "inner check" is more highly developed than Antigone's. When Creon demands how Antigone has dared to break the law, she replies fiercely that such a law as his edict is contrary to the laws of the gods.

The Romantic might, in fact, turn this scene against the Humanist with more appropriateness than the Humanist can use it against the Romantic. Antigone has the same hasty intemperate insolent nature as her father Œdipus—we are told so explicitly in the play—and she is asserting her individual will in defiance of law and expediency—she is making an impulsive and desperate gesture. Aristotle—"a true Humanist," according to Babbitt—says of this passage, in showing the distinction between conventional and natural law, that Antigone vindicates the latter in asserting "*ὅτι δίκαιον, ἀπειρημένον,*

θάψαι τὸν Πολυνείκη, ὡς φύσει ὂν τοῦτο δίκαιον,"—that her act, though it violated the prohibition, had the sanction of natural right, was "right according to nature." Now Antigone, of course, is not a nineteenth-century Romantic, and Aristotle does not mean by "nature" quite the same thing that Rousseau does. But what Rousseau means does have something in common with what Aristotle means that Antigone means, whereas what Antigone means can't by any possible stretch be associated with Babbitt's "law of measure." Babbitt grossly misrepresents Sophocles when he applies Antigone's speech in this way: "The laws unwritten in the heavens" is one of Babbitt's favorite quotations: he has used it again and again in order to give us the impression that Sophocles has endorsed the Humanist "will to refrain." Yet, as I say, if it is a question of slinging classical texts, the old-fashioned Romantic who is Babbitt's bugbear—if there be any such still alive—might turn Antigone's outburst against Babbitt—and might even add, as Antigone does:

> *σοὶ δ' εἰ δοκῶ νῦν μῶρα δρῶσα τυγχάνειν,*
> *σχεδόν τι μώρῳ μωρίαν ὀφλισκάνω.*

Babbitt elsewhere in this essay says that Sophocles "ranks high among occidental Humanists," though he admits—making reservations in regard to the opinion of Matthew Arnold—that "perfect poise is no doubt

impossible; not even Sophocles succeeded in seeing life steadily and seeing it whole." I don't know in precisely what respect Professor Babbitt considers Sophocles to have fallen short of perfect poise; but it is certainly true that Sophocles' characters are usually remarkable for anything but poise—they are as violent and as harsh as the people in the plays of Eugene O'Neill. Where the "law of measure" comes in is certainly not in the conduct of Sophocles' characters—the hot-headed over-confident Œdipus; the "fierce child of a fierce father," Antigone; the relentless and morbid Electra, etc.—but in Sophocles' handling of his material—the firmness of his intellectual grasp, the sureness of his sense of form, the range of psychological insight which enables him to show us spending themselves against each other the rages, the ambitions, the loyalties, of so many passionate persons, and all to die in the clear air, leaving only with the echo of their tirades the vibration of the taut verse. In a world dominated by the law of measure, however, there would be no Humanist masterpieces such as the tragedies of Sophocles—since Babbitt claims them, with reservations, as Humanist masterpieces—because there would be no violent passions to write about. This might be a good thing—perhaps we ought to be glad to do without the Sophocleses if we could get rid of the unruly passions. But, on the other hand, we ought perhaps to think twice before

letting ourselves in for a world where the sole masterpieces were Humanist symposia.

(2) *It would not be easy to argue with any plausibility that the typical modernist is greatly concerned with the law of measure; his interest, as a glance at our newspapers should suffice to show, is rather in the doing of stunts and the breaking of records, in "prodigies, feats of strength and crime," the very topics that, according to the traditional report, Confucius banished from his conversation.*

In this respect, our age is no worse than any other. What is done to-day for the people by the newspapers was done formerly by the composers of ballads, and ballad literature has always been occupied with prodigies, feats of strength and crime. The *Iliad* itself was presumably made out of ballads—and, in any case, there can be no question that it deals with prodigies, feats of strength and crime. The Greek dramatists, including Sophocles, got their themes from Homer or similar sources. It is true that the genuine poet is able to do with such stories something which the reporter is not usually able to do, but the material that he deals with is the same. And the general run of the ballads of any age has been as crude as newspaper stories. The sages of our own time—Professor Babbitt, for example—are, I should say, as little preoccupied with the prodigies and crimes of the news-

papers as Confucius was with the common gossip.

(3) *In the case of such encroachments* [*of Naturalism upon the domains of Humanism or religion*] *there is not only a quarrel between the Naturalist and the Humanist, but a quarrel of first principles. When first principles are involved the law of measure is no longer applicable. One should not be moderate in dealing with error.*

It has apparently never occurred to Professor Babbitt that one should be moderate about being too sure that one is oneself absolutely right and that others are absolutely wrong—though Mr. More, in his companion essay, quotes from Whitehead against the dogmatists of Darwinism, Cromwell's, "My brethren, by the bowels of Christ I beseech you, bethink you that you may be mistaken!" We might have thought that if the law of measure were valuable anywhere, it was valuable in the domain of ideas, where the failure sufficiently to observe it has notoriously bred war and persecution from the beginning of the world. Babbitt surely did not learn from Plato, whom he invokes in the next paragraph, that we should be so sure of our own opinions that we need not be moderate with people who happen to have different ones. The hero of Plato's novel of ideas is Socrates, but Plato's dialogues are a novel, none the less, and the

impression, I think, which most people get from them, though they may be persuaded by Socrates' opinions, is that the world has a good many aspects and that there is a good deal to be said on all sides. The people in Plato who follow Babbitt's preeept that we "should not be moderate in dealing with error" are the judges of Socrates. I doubt whether even Aristotle was so sure that he was right as Babbitt. If Babbitt wants to find a tradition for his policy in dealing with error, he must look not to the Academy and the Lyceum, but to the councils of the Inquisition, the revolutionary tribunal of the Terror and—to come closer to Professor Babbitt's home—Dedham Courthouse and Boston State House.

(4) *Positively one may define it* [*the higher will*] *as the higher immediacy that is known in its relation to the lower immediacy—the merely temperamental man with his impressions and emotions and expansive desires—as a power of vital control* (frein vital).

So Paul Elmer More asserts (in *Aristocracy and Justice*) that if a man "retires into himself and examines his own motives and the sources of his self-approval and discontent . . . he will discover that there is a happiness of the soul which is not the same as the pleasure of fulfilled desires, whether these be for good or for ill, a happiness which is not dependent upon the results of this or that choice among our

desires, but upon the very act itself of choice and self-control."

Now why the deuce is virtue, with the Humanists, always made to reside exclusively in what Babbitt calls the "will to refrain"? "Humanism," says Professor Babbitt, in making a distinction between Humanism and religion, "is not primarily enthusiastic." So far as I can see, it is not enthusiastic at all. Professor Babbitt goes on to say that the Humanist, though he "cannot afford to be an enthusiast in Rousseau's sense, on the other hand should not neglect the truth of Rousseau's saying that 'cold reason has never done anything illustrious.'" But the writings of the Humanists strike us with a chill even more mortal than that of reason. And how can one take seriously a philosophy which enjoins nothing but negative behavior?—as if humanity were not, now as always, as much in need of being exhorted against coldness and indifference and routine as against irresponsible exuberance—especially Anglo-Saxon humanity. As if Boston and New York, Manchester and London, were not obviously suffering from a lack of normal human fellowship and normal human hope and joy rather than from the demoralizing effects of unbridled "humanitarian" sympathies, indiscriminate emotional "expansiveness" or universal orgiastic dissipation—as if our clerks, our factory workers and our respectable professional and business classes were all in danger of

falling victims to the rhapsodical enthusiasm and the lawless individualism of Romanticism! If it is a question of refraining, these people are all good Humanists: they have either been compelled by society to refrain from most of the enjoyments, from the exercise of most of the faculties, which make the amenity of human life at its best, or they refrain because their educations have been too limited to enable them to conceive their own esthetic and emotional possibilities, or because their natures are too poor to have any.

As a matter of fact, however, Professor Babbitt, as I have noted above, has managed to exempt his own professional activities from the law of measure, the obligation to refrain. He has made it plain that, in "dealing with error," we are no longer under the necessity of being moderate; and as Professor Babbitt, in his writings, is always engaged in "dealing with error," it is never necessary for him to be moderate. Professor Babbitt—and the other Humanists—are relieved of the obligation of being decorous as soon as they put pen to paper. It is not decorous to look for nothing but mistakes in the writings of your contemporaries, it is not decorous always to call attention to these mistakes with a sneer; it is not decorous to take a word like Humanism, which has always formerly been applied to the great scholars, philosophers, satirists and poets of the Renaissance, and to insist

that it ought to be regarded as the exclusive property of a small sect of schoolmasters so fatuous that they do not hesitate to assign schoolmasters' A's, B's and C's in Humanism to "Homer, Phidias, Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, Paul, Virgil, Horace, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, Matthew Arnold, Emerson and Lowell"—it is not decorous to assume that you yourselves are the only persons who have taken seriously the vices and woes of your own time and that everybody else except yourselves is engaged either stupidly or perversely in aggravating them. But as all this comes under the head of dealing with error, and as, in dealing with error, one should not be moderate, the Humanists are unfortunately obliged to confine the pursuit of their ideal of decorum to the transactions of their private lives, where comparatively few of us are able to benefit by it.

(5) *This movement [the modernist movement] has, from the eighteenth century and in some respects from the Renaissance, been marked by a growing discredit of the will to refrain. The very word renunciation has been rarely pronounced by those who have entered into the movement. The chief exception that occurs to one is Goethe (echoed at times by Carlyle). Any one who thinks of the series of Goethe's love affairs, prolonged into the seventies, is scarcely likely to maintain that his* Entsagung *was of a very austere*

character even for a man of the world, not to speak of a saint.

It seems to me that assumptions are here being made in regard to sexual morality which require a good deal of proving on Babbitt's part. He goes on to say, a little further down the page, that "the real Humanist consents, like Aristotle, to limit his desires only in so far as this limitation can be shown to make for his own happiness." If one disapproves of Goethe's love affairs, but if the end to be achieved is happiness, one should first show that these love affairs did not make him happy. It seems to me that Professor Babbitt should shoulder the burden of proof and show that it did not do Goethe good at the same time that it did the ladies no harm for him to fall in love after he was seventy. But these are questions which Babbitt and More will never argue, as to which they will always simply make assumptions, just as they assume that virtue should consist mainly of the exercise of the will to refrain, because these opinions are not really conclusions from any sort of evidence, but merely the unexamined prejudices of a Puritan heritage which Babbitt and More have never outgrown, in spite of all their fascinated and tireless voyages among the varied countries of the mind, and which they mistake for universal and eternal moral laws because—they have themselves put this forward as their final and overwhelming justification—when they look into themselves, they find them there.

B & M → just assumptions

"THE HUMILITY OF COMMON SENSE," BY PAUL ELMER MORE

(1) *It is a nice question to ask whether belief in the absolute irresponsibility of the artistic temperament has engendered the modern ideal of absolute art, or the contrary. . . . The point I would make is the falseness and futility of the logical deduction that art can . . . dispense with the stuff of humanity or nature, or can weigh anchor and sail off into a shoreless sea of unreality.*

In the first part of Mr. More's essay, marked by his usual intellectual arrogance, which he incongruously entitles "The Humility of Common Sense," he is occupied with the old "art for art's sake" doctrine as it has been formulated by some of its most recent champions. Now I should agree with Mr. More that the artist should not be irresponsible and that he cannot dispense with humanity and nature—I should even agree that "art for art's sake" has given rise to a good deal of nonsense, as indeed what doctrine has not? But it seems to me that Mr. More has failed to understand how this point of view has been inevitably produced by a particular situation. Art is, of course, like market-gardening, road-building and banking, a means of supplying certain human needs—it is one of our devices for adjusting ourselves to the world, and, as the Humanists are so zealous to insist, raising

our condition above that of the animals; and it is preposterous for artists to talk as if they were able to work *in vacuo*, or as if it were possible for them to remain indifferent to the effects of their work on human life. But in the course of the nineteenth century, they began to be driven to talk in this way, to make a cult of art for its own sake, by the progress of the industrial revolution and the rise of the middle class. It was one of the fatal defects of the kind of society to which these events gave rise that it neglected or discouraged the esthetic appetites for which the artists had formerly provided. And as they found esthetic values depreciating, as they found themselves becoming almost outlaws, the artists grew desperate and embittered. They swore, if they had any spirit, that they were going on to practice their craft in spite of the fact that nobody wanted their wares, and they thus arrived at the slogan of "art for art's sake." The fact that they should have felt the necessity for asserting the value of what they were doing was a witness to their maladjustment, to the abnormality of the situation in which they found themselves—but, given this situation, the very assertion of one's faith in esthetic values, the dogged devotion to the practice of art, not infrequently called forth qualities of the highest heroism. It is true that the isolation of the artist, his consciousness of swimming against the current, had sometimes—especially toward the end of

the century—the effect of deforming his work. But, none the less, what student of literature who is not content merely to praise or blame a work of art, referring it to ideal moral and esthetic standards, but who makes an effort to see it in its relation to the other forces of the society in which it was produced, will assert that even the *fin de siècle* poet could or should have done otherwise? In the generation of the middle century, even so great a man as Flaubert had found it possible to save his soul only through the cult of art. Yet the idea that, despite the cynicism of a Flaubert or the perversity of a Baudelaire, their novels and poems might show the application of an austere and triumphant discipline, the exercise, in dealing with the materials supplied them by their imaginations, of a rigorous will to refrain, and might thus fortify their readers as well as entertain them—this is something which Mr. More seems incapable of conceiving. He apparently believes that the only way in which it is possible for a writer to discipline himself in these bad days is to write literary criticism like his own and Babbitt's, which, though it is distinguished by thorough reading and sound writing, has obviously not required a discipline a fifth as exacting as that which has gone to produce some of the works of which it so superciliously complains.

Aside, however, from its special significance in this

special situation, the slogan of "art for art's sake" has a further validity which would continue to hold good even in an age which did not, like our own, freeze out the artists and make them defiant. From this point of view, Mr. More's attitude is open to the same sort of criticism as that of the imaginative but rather unintelligent socialist of the type of Upton Sinclair: Upton Sinclair disapproves of works of art which do not point explicitly a socialist moral, as Paul Elmer More disapproves of works of art which do not point explicitly the moral of self-control. Each insists upon denouncing as irresponsible and futile all the writers in whom it is impossible for him to find his own particular moral stated in his own particular terms. Now, aside from the fact that reality has many aspects and may be expected to suggest more than one kind of moral, and aside from the fact that fine workmanship itself must always convey an implicit moral, it is further true that in the arts as in the sciences a certain freedom for experimentation is necessary—one must allow a good deal of apparently gratuitous, and even empty or ridiculous work, if one wants eventually to get masterpieces. Gregor Mendel was dead eighteen years before any one had even suspected that his hobby of interbreeding green peas was anything other than a harmless monastic diversion—Gauss's non-Euclidean geometry, which he had been too timid during his lifetime to publish, and

Ricci and Levi-Civita's calculus had seemed the idlest of mathematical exercises till Einstein found them just the tools he needed ready to his hand. But, in general, the gratuitous experimentation of the scientific world is known only to its own laboratories and studies, whereas the corresponding work of the literary world is likely to be published and circulated more widely. When it happens to fall under the eye of an Upton Sinclair or a Paul Elmer More, he is infuriated by what seems to him its fatuity: he demands to know what these writers think they are good for. Well, they may not be good for anything, but, on the other hand, they may be valuable—one has to wait and see what comes of them, what other writers get out of them. Virgil, a poet held in high repute by Mr. More and the other Humanists, had laid under contribution not merely Homer but also the romantic rebel Apollonius, whose rebellion had failed at Alexandria, but from whom Virgil was to derive so much of his misty, subtle and tender feeling for humanity and nature—just as the other Alexandrians had nourished the other Latin poets, and hence the whole European tradition. The Alexandrians, like the modern poets, had been cut off by political events from participation in the life of a great society, and they had come to cultivate art for art's sake. But will Mr. More, taking into consideration their original contributions to poetry no less than the fact of their having kept alive the

poetic tradition of Greece, contend to-day that the Alexandrians were not justified?

(2) *They* ["*a few restless souls*" *among* "*the radical writers of to-day*"] *hold deliberation to be the foe of liberation. Hence the later theory, exemplified in English by James Joyce, that art shall not reproduce a picture of life as the Humanist sees it, or even from the point of view of the realist, but for its subject matter shall descend to what they call the pure* "*stream of consciousness.*" *The hero of fiction shall have no will, no purpose, no inhibition, no power of choice whether for good or evil, but shall be merely a medium through which passes an endless, unchecked, meaningless flux of sensations and memories and emotions and impulses.*

But Joyce does not exemplify anything of the sort: his characters are all going about their business like the characters of any other novelist. Bloom, Dedalus, Mrs. Bloom and the others do have their wills, their purposes, their inhibitions, and they make their moral decisions—indeed, these moral decisions are the crucial events of *Ulysses*. What has probably misled Mr. More is Joyce's method of presenting the human mind directly, as it is aware of itself from hour to hour, from moment to moment. The minds of Joyce's characters are sometimes relaxed or confused, at other times lucid and intent: it depends on the character

and the situation. The principal way in which *Ulysses* differs from the kind of novel to which Mr. More is accustomed is not in its depriving its characters of moral sense or will, but simply in its method of making us watch their consciousnesses as if they were beehives under glass, and of making us watch them through the whole of a day—it is a difference of technique, and of speed and scale. But I cannot suppose, as a matter of fact, from the inappropriateness of Mr. More's remarks about Joyce, that he has ever done anything more than look into him, and I will venture to say that the Humanists' high-handed habit of disposing jeeringly of contemporary writers whom they plainly haven't read is an even more serious scandal to their cause than their misrepresentation of the ancients, whom they have at least conscientiously studied. So Mr. More, in *The Demon of the Absolute*, has described Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* as "an explosion in a cesspool" without apparently the faintest suspicion that Dos Passos intends his novel as an indictment of the same social conditions of which Mr. More himself has always taken such a gloomy view. But not only is Mr. More unable to recognize in *Manhattan Transfer* the work of a man who, like himself, has, as he once wrote of his own state of mind, been "deafened by the 'indistinguishable roar' of the streets" and can "make no sense of the noisy jargon of the market place" and who finally

causes his hero to escape from the modern American city with as much relief as Mr. More ever did when he went into his celebrated retreat at Shelburne; he has not even succeeded in informing himself from any other sources as to Dos Passos's general point of view. If Dos Passos had been a second-rate eighteenth-century essayist, Mr. More would know everything about him, political opinions and all—if he had been the humblest New England poet (of the seventeenth century, that is) Mr. More would have read him through.

(3) *"The only way of mitigating mechanism," he [Whitehead] says, "is by discovery that it is not mechanism." And so, instead of admitting humbly that mechanism is mechanism while beside it there exists something of a totally different nature, and that the ultimate nexus between these two fields of experience surpasses our comprehension, he must demonstrate mechanism out of the world altogether.*

But why *should* Whitehead admit humbly that mechanism is mechanism and that humanity exists beside it as something of a totally different nature? Why *should* he assume that the ultimate nexus between these two fields of experience surpasses our comprehension? I do not feel with Mr. More that the effect of Whitehead's metaphysics is to "make a travesty of the inorganic world," that it threatens "to deprive humanity of what is distinctly human."

Why should Mr. More take for granted that to change our idea of humanity is necessarily to degrade it? There can be no advances in philosophy without the altering of old conceptions. And I cannot, for the life of me, see that Mr. More has any other real objection to Whitehead's ideas than that they would, as he believes—and I am not sure that he is right even here—tend to discredit the distinction between "man" and "thing" upon which his own Humanistic philosophy is based. He makes no attempt to show that Whitehead's speculations are not justified, that his arguments are not sound; he makes no effort whatever to discuss the scientific findings—the conception of the "event," for example, as the ultimate unit of both the organic and the inorganic worlds—upon which Whitehead has based his metaphysics and which he did not himself invent. He merely asserts that Whitehead should never have undertaken to account for the relations between the organic and the inorganic world. He says that he "admits" this "humbly," but one gathers from his tone that he would, if he could, get out an injunction against all wanton metaphysics directed to this end, just as he would, if he could, get out an injunction against all experimentation in the arts. Yet if the philosophers of the past had been willing to accept so humbly the apparent paradoxes of experience, we should have no philosophy at all, and Mr. More would have no Plato and no

Platonists to beguile his academic retirement. I cannot avoid coming to the conclusion that Mr. More's primary objection is to having any one, either in science or in art, find out anything new, and I cannot explain this state of mind except on the hypothesis that Mr. More is really an old-fashioned Puritan who has lost the Puritan theology without having lost the Puritan dogmatism. Mr. More is more certainly than Professor Babbitt a man of some imagination; he is able to follow the thought of the modern world, as appears from his very intelligent and often sensitive expositions of the ideas of other writers (if they are not absolutely contemporaries)—but some iron inhibition always comes into play in the long run to restrain Mr. More from agreeing with anything which he finds in modern philosophy or art. Everything he encounters there seems to terrify him, even when, as in the case of Whitehead, one would think he ought to find it reassuring. One law for man and another law for thing is the whole of philosophy for More, as the will to refrain is the whole of morals. Outside these—anywhere, that is, except among the brave little band of Humanists—he sees only the abyss. It is as if Mr. More, on one of his sides, were capable of meeting on his own ground the great modern philosopher or poet, but as if some other element in his nature—which he tries to foist upon us, too, as the universal and eternal moral law of the "inner check"

—had operated to make him afraid of philosophy and poetry, so that, in spite of his vigorous intellect and his esthetic sensibility, he is unable to allow himself to profit by any book not written sufficiently long ago to have acquired an academic sanction almost equivalent to a religious one.

A certain passage from Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* is quoted by Mr. More as follows: "When Darwin or Einstein proclaim[s] theories which modify our ideas, it is a triumph for science." Mr. More is going on to criticize this passage, but in the meantime he has observed that Whitehead has been so indiscreet as to write "proclaim" as a plural verb after two subjects connected by "or," and where any ordinary critic would either have left Whitehead's sentence as he wrote it or have made him a present of the singular ending without calling the reader's attention to it, Mr. More has put it in brackets, as who should comment scornfully "[sic]!" Mr. More may not be able, or may not dare, to imagine, as Whitehead has done, a metaphysical explanation of the relations between the organic and the inorganic worlds, but he can, and, by Heaven, he will, correct Whitehead's grammar!