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Irving Babbitt as I Knew Him

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Amer. Rev.

My first sight of Babbitt was two decades a I had read his publications with mixed feelin with admiration for his scholarship and force but wi irritation at his roughshod treatment, as it seemed me, of poetic imagination. Nor was that annoyan soothed away by a kind note which he had writt to me upon an early essay of my own. I was a you professor of English literature in Bowdoin Colle and certainly words of commendation from Profes Babbitt were welcome; but he accompanied the words with other words urging that I should modi my point of view; and the proposed modification a peared to boil down to this, that I should adopt point of view. This was not what he consciously i tended to say; it was what I decided, upon reflectio that his note meant. I replied with critical sharpn and personal irritation. He wrote again, with a critic sharpness far surpassing mine, but with no person irritation. That was irritating. I resolved to get a sig of this man who, like the Unmoved Mover of his ma ter Aristotle, could cause an emotion which he did n feel or which, at least, he could fully repress. Durin my next visit to the Harvard Yard I joined the strea of students entering his classroom (having been i formed that he was quite oblivious to foreign partic in that stream) and took a chair at the rear.

The man who presently entered the room an seated himself behind the desk was of big fram

slightly stooped. The face was craggy, the jaw obtrusive, the voice vibrant, the gestures quick and angular. And certainly when he spoke he laid down the law; but not as though the law were his own. It belonged to humanity, so he made one feel; it had been enacted by the parliament of history and he was a clerk announcing it. He did so in tones full of its importance but empty of his own. I had known many professors who were modest because they were mild, and some who were not modest because they were professors. But Babbitt was neither mild nor officious. The moral laws were for him too clear, urgent, and fateful to permit of gentle circumspection in the enouncing of them; but also they were so transcendent as to belittle his office.

He spoke to the students as if they were on his own level. The fact that they were not was sufficiently apparent to most of them, but not to all. A certain youth, sitting reclined with half-closed eyes, folded arms, and supercilious smile, interrupted the lecturer with a drawling objection. My professorial nerves gave a sympathetic twitch: such a youngster ought to be told that the brilliance of his mind could be heightened by an erect and becoming posture of his body. But Babbitt, showing no irritation and scarcely any cognizance of the young man's physical presence, descended upon his notions like a courteous bomb-shell. In this classroom as in Europe a war was unde way, but a warfare of ideas, hard, polite, impersona Freedom of speech was the rule, but the master manner intimated that true freedom of speech r quired freedom from personalities. There was som thing aloof in the shooting glances with which

surveyed his class. Incessantly his eyes and hand dived into the untidy heap of books and papers on his desk. That heap was his ammunition-dump. One watched fascinatedly while he extracted from its depths with inerrant dispatch the particular missile he wanted. He loaded his guns with citations; if you loaded yours with personal feelings, so much the worse for you. Piques and parades were negligible; personal inspirations were heavily discounted. To return his fire with any effect you had to let off an impersonal idea charged with solid fact.

But solid fact, for him, was apparently always moral fact; whereas I cherished the belief that there was such a thing as solid poetic fact. Was that belief merely a youthful illusion which a man who had passed his thirtieth birthday ought to leave behind him? Such was the question that forced itself upon me as I sat there silent. My answer was No, a loud internal No; which sounded there, however, like a rifle-shot amid bursting shells. When the bombardment ceased, that is when the class-hour ended, I advanced to the professor's desk and waited till a buzzing cluster of students had dispersed. Then I tackled him upon what seemed to me the least defensible assertion he had made during the hour. I forget now what it was, except that it had to do with poetic imagination. But I remember that presently I experienced the sensations of an outpost of soldiery who, on approaching a supposedly unguarded spot in the enemy's line, are greeted by a pretty nest of machine-guns. An amicable parley ensued, however; and a friendship began.

But our meetings were not very frequent until the academic year 1927-28 which I spent on sabbatical

leave in Cambridge, partly to be near the Harvard library, partly to be near Babbitt. Earlier I should doubtless have been afraid to expose myself to his fire at such close quarters for so considerable a period. But now I was middle-aged; my art of defence was better; and Babbitt, growing old, was less explosive than formerly. Not that his vigor showed any signs of diminution. He was as full of labors as ever, and much of his scanty leisure was devoted to strenuous walking combined with strenuous thinking. One who wished to talk with him extensively had to walk with him extensively; thus he economized his time, killing two birds with one stone. Often I felt like one bird killed with two stones: physically and mentally exhausted I would totter home after parting from him, wondering whether I should be able three or four days later to keep our appointment for what he termed, euphemistically, "another little walk together". Never have I been so exercised, in several senses of this word, as I was during those three seasons, autumn, winter, and spring, in and about flat Cambridge. The sequel, the fourth season, was the summer of 1931 when I rented a vacation cottage not far from his among New Hampshire hills.

That was his last season of unbroken health. On an afternoon of July two years later his body lay silent in the chancel of the new Harvard chapel. That final scene was strange, hard to believe; though all of the externals were congruous enough. The service was austerely plain. Passages of excellent moral scripture Christian and non-Christian, were recited from the high reading-desk; which closed a vista of white walls made whiter by the light of day. But the casket,

neath the desk, was covered with a crimson pall; a
the sentences that were uttered above it, had in the
frequent words of rich and deep color. There can
to me and doubtless to others who were present
mysterious, overmastering sense of a glow of life i
white light. . . . Presently I remembered hearin
Babbitt humorously excuse himself for seldom atten
ing the sermons delivered in this very chapel: the
were not such, he had said, as to enable him wit
clear conscience to desert whatever piece of work h
had on hand at the time. Then, instead of that place
which seemed to me a glorified lecture-hall rather tha
a church, I saw again in memory Babbitt's own lec
ture-room with himself at the desk. I began to recal
him vividly in all the scenes wherein I had known hi
in life.

Walking on the hillsides of southern New Hamp
shire he would sometimes pause to call my attentio
to a scene that he loved. Not that he would *say* h
loved it: the first person singular of the verb "love"
was regularly omitted from his oral declensions
Whether and to what extent the words "I love" took
form in his mind, God only knows; I cannot recal
ever hearing them fall from his lips. Yet he was a man
of strong and constant loves. He was very fond of the
landscapes of New England. The ways we trod in
that summertime, quite new to me, were very familiar
to him; and he would interrupt a discussion, even a
warm dispute, to make sure that I was not missing
some or other beautiful prospect. It was the view as
a whole, the composition of it, that he liked to em-
phasize; for instance, a valley below us ascending
slowly on our left through meadows to wooded

heights, but descending sharply on our right to where
there was a glimpse of a lake deep-set among hills,
with the bald cone of Monadnock towering close be-
hind. After brief and definite comments given in a
low voice, he would contemplate the scene in silence
for a moment, then turn abruptly away from it;
carrying it in his eyes, however, as he walked along.
But soon the resumed discussion would bring to the
fore an idea that he loved, and then the whole look of
his face would change, withdrawing and concentrat-
ing; as though, instead of the beautiful valley below,
he was seeing an unseen star in front: he would pause
to watch it. There were those two sorts of pause, the
pause for the scene and the pause for the idea. He
absorbed the scene; the idea absorbed him. For him
the scene, as not for Wordsworth in the famous walk-
ing sonnet, was just some happy tone (of Maya?)
slipping in between the idea coming and the idea gone.

In exposing an idea he would often use a peculiar
and significant gesture. His right hand, rising beside
its shoulder with spread fingers and outward palm,
would make short lateral pushes in the air. There was
not the slightest volitant or undulatory motion of the
arm — no concession to flying, no fluent gracefulness.
Those shoves of the open hand off into space — into
the spaces of thought — were rigid and impersonal.
They insisted that the principle of which he was talk-
ing was patently universal, belonging to everyone and
no one. As for wrong opposing notions, his fingers
would sweep them down and away, one after another,
while his tongue attacked them. In assailing a tend-
ency which he considered "nothing less than pe-
nicious" (one of his favorite phrases) his aspect would

become nothing less than predacious. The claw-like swoop of the hand, the metallic ring of the voice, the gnashing movement of the large irregular mouth, the thrusting jaw and commanding beak, would strike me into a dumb fascination as though I myself were the hapless prey. However, one noted also something indefinable in Babbitt's mien that stayed always above the combat, something that one associated with the upper part of his face, the large forehead and large blue eyes. I have never seen a pair of eyes that could so glint with the lust of battle while remaining at the same time so deeply imperturbable. They would fill with reverence when he was expatiating upon a great saint or sage. And sometimes the spread hand beside its shoulder would tilt slightly backwards as in a repressed or inchoate gesture of adoration.

But his moments of solemnity, even in intimate conversation, were very transient. Gravity was always there, but so was cheerfulness sparkling with quick and various wit. Certainly his style of talk (as in the case of Doctor Johnson) was far more flexible and alluring than his written style. His books have some passages of misplaced solemnity — owing, as one reviewer put it, with vast and solemn exaggeration, to "his attempt to apply philosophic first principles to every detail of modern life".* In his conversation,

* *The Times Literary Supplement* (London), December 8th, 1932. Regarding the "higher will" — an old datum of human experience and treated as such by many careful thinkers before Babbitt — the reviewer asserts: "it seems necessary to wait upon psychology before one can decide whether there is such a thing". Well, a reviewer who can wait thus solemnly upon current psychology, towards which Babbitt's attitude was very far from solemn, would naturally be opaque to Babbitt's grave wit. And this case is typical. Many of Babbitt's reviewers, though writing

however, many a "detail of modern life" was treated with indulgent if satiric humor. One day I found him chuckling over the memory of a high Boston banquet at which he had been a guest on the previous evening. By way of appetizer and in spite of Prohibition, dashes of rare old rum were served in the bottoms of beautiful goblets. And many professorial faces at the table expressed a double question: what of the law of the land? and why so little drink in such a large container? The proper technique of course was, before sipping, to cherish the goblet in one's hands while inhaling the choice aroma with intruded nose. The awkwardness with which the guests performed, or omitted, this fine but then there unaccustomed rite, was rendered by Babbitt with exquisite ludicrousness. I asked, "How did you yourself make out?"—"Oh, I sniffed the stuff properly enough."

His chief self-indulgence, perhaps, was laughter at self-indulgence. Gourmets tickled him immensely. And minor comfortablenesses that conventional people took for granted could set his big eyes twinkling. Once when we were discussing the subject of conditions favorable for literary composition, I let slip a piece of personal information that caused him to stare. "So you actually find it possible," he exclaimed, much amused, "to smoke while engaged in writing?" I was unable to see the joke. But presently I laughed when my fancy conjured up the impossible picture of Babbitt himself smoking while inditing, let's say, *Rousseau and Romanticism.*

with modernistic lightness, had solemnly swallowed some or other current doctrine which he attacked with witty penetration; and their response was, "He is hopelessly solemn"! Their solemnifer levity slubbered his witty gravity.

After dinner he would smoke a cigar, but not with any succulency. The thing continually went out; and, perched as it was between two fingers of an open, jerkily gesturing hand, it seemed ever on the point of catapulting into space, if not into somebody's eye. However the eyes of others were not in much danger from Babbitt. His demeanor was carefully polite, sometimes too carefully; for, sociable by nature, he had also a moral conviction of the value of polite society. One could watch that conviction sustaining him in parlors when his temper was being sorely tried. His sometime attitude at teas brings to my mind a line from Lear, "Pour on, I will endure." At teas or after dinner when the company's conversation waxed oppressively conventional, he would gaze thoughtfully at the carpet to hide the satire of his eyes. In extreme cases he was seized by a sudden elaborate interest in his neglected cigar; turning it about and pondering it; perchance scraping the burnt end with the edge of a match and then, unless the stub proved to be hoplessly short and soggy, relighting it with meticulous fingers. His voice all the while applied similar treatment to dull interlocutors. They were not butts for his ridicule, they were beings to be relighted, if at all possible, with all possible patience.

That sort of person would often play up to him, praising his doctrines to his face, but then drawing narrow conclusions or adducing empty instances, prefaced maybe with a "Yes, Professor Babbitt, and don't you also think that" — etc.

"Uh — not precisely," he would respond and then proceed to formulate a scrupulous distinction. He had much to endure from such querists. Sometimes they

forced him to laugh, but the laugh, even when behind their backs, was restrained and considerate. He wished not to damage any thread of conventional thought that had any validity to it. Such threads were the social warp, and he wished them, instead of being broken after the modernistic fashion, to be rewoven into a firmly modern pattern; particularly in America, where there was special opportunity for just such a pattern and special danger without it. "Pestiferous" was his word for American visionaries who naïvely echoed the subversive doctrines that had grown so noisy in older countries by way of reaction from old intrenched habits. Those doctrines when transferred into new and mobile America were, he often exclaimed, "thoroughly pestilential". He ridiculed the "imported notion" that the *chief* danger of modern America was moribund conventionalism. Radicals who cherished that notion stirred him to raucous mirth; which would subside into a gentle chuckling when his mind turned to the opposite sect, hidebound respectable persons. These pestered him considerably; but they were not "pestiferous".

"Of course," I heard him say more than once, before I noticed the same epigram in his writings, "where there is no vision the people perish, but where there is sham vision they perish even faster." Accordingly he attacked wrong visions rather than wrong actions. For him all conduct in the long run was the result of vision, of imaginatized ideas. The Great War was the foreseen result of certain bad ideas that he had been tracing down through the nineteenth century; and the course of the War interested him less than the course of those ideas. He was never

tired of declaiming upon the unethical twist in the imagination of the time of Wordsworth, so fruitful, he thought, of ill results at the present day. But he poohpoohed the fuss that arose upon the discovery of that poet's liaison with Annette Vallon. Why refuse to recognize a malady in the plant and then get loudly excited over the withering of a petal? He was far more intolerant of warped ideas than of irregular conduct.

He was tolerant of Bohemian ways in persons who were at once sincere and large. Unable to conceive of himself as large, he wished to be socially regular, even personally unobstrusive; and perhaps he succeeded as well as nature would permit. In this connection I recall his first visit in my home when I subjected him, in right American fashion, to an overdose of entertainment. Between two sieges of company he informed me very brusquely that he was going for a solitary walk. As the time was short, the vicinity new to him, and his love of walking notorious, I warned him against straying too far. Rejecting the warning as entirely uncalled for, he turned his back and marched away. When, close upon dinner-time, he failed to reappear, I made search with an automobile in the gathering twilight and came upon him, not very far off, returning at hot-foot speed. With difficulty I persuaded him to get into the car. He was much annoyed at being mechanically retrieved, engined into a status of social delinquency. He laid claim to punctuality, arguing the point with Johnsonian sophistry.

In his later years his side face reminded me often of the miniature of Doctor Johnson made familiar to

Americans by Professor C. B. Tinker. But while highly admiring Johnson's character, Babbitt had no fond indulgence for his rude obtrusiveness, any more than he had for the subtler arrogance of his Victorian successor, the admirable Arnold. As for the moody egotism of minor British celebrities visiting in America, accentuated as it was by modern Bohemianism, he could ridicule it deliciously. He wished America to retain the moral robustness of the Anglo-Saxons while leaving behind their insular arrogancy. In social attitude we Americans could well take lessons, he would urge, from the French and the Chinese. He dubbed the Chinese "the English of the Orient" on account of their innate good sense, but he loved to enlarge upon the superiority of their religious tradition of good manners. He deplored the current decline in China of Confucian scholarship; he conferred much upon this matter with the Chinese students who came to work under him. The rehabilitation of China seemed to him an extremely important task for the sake, not just of that country, but of society at large.

His talk passed rapidly from land to land, from age to age, and from sage to sage. His listeners came to realize, far more vividly than those who knew him only in his writings, that here was a man who habitually thought of the world as a unit and of human history as a single world-wide process. American cosmopolitanism — a phrase which he disliked because of its cheap connotations — attained in him a high and firm level. It freed him from that deep-set European mentality which accentuates, even while trying to override, the line between East and West. It sanctioned his mind, as naturally as the American con-

tinent, between Europe and what Europe has term "the far East". It enabled him to talk of Confuc and Buddha with the same unforced intimacy as Aristotle and St. Paul. It freed him of course fr nationalism, but not from nationality. Sentimental i ternationalism, especially the American brand, seem to him an even greater danger than occidental jingo ism. And he loved America with a love as deep a working as it was unproclaimed. Often after a lou jibing pessimistic analysis of some or other Americ evil, he would lean his head towards me and say in low tone, "But of course my hope for America i better than my words." And here let it be recorde that though he admired the French language, knew thoroughly, and spoke it fluently, he spoke it ev with an accent that was nakedly Yankee and utter unashamed.

He was American in his restless energy. His li was a restless campaign against American restlessne — a battling effort to turn our thinking towards th Supreme Peace. That paradox was vital, since fir when it is bad enough has to be fought with fir Hence his unfailing devotion to Harvard University even the modern Harvard, our leading American fac tory for mental mass-production. He himself was distinguished product of that mill; distinguished, be cause from the outset the Buddha, instead of Presiden Eliot, had played the dominant part in the shapin process. Babbitt once pointed out to me, with a mix of gratitude to fate, an avenue in the outskirts o Cambridge where as a young undergraduate he ha been wont to trot back and forth holding a Pâli tex to his eyes, learning its language and absorbing it

lore while exercising his legs. "A running study of Buddha," I silently reflected; the still image of that sage arose in my mind, and I marvelled at the rein carnation of the ancient Hindu spirit in a curren Harvard American. Reincarnation is not too strong a word, for Babbitt's beliefs came from within him self far more than from his studies. But this fact wa unrecognized by him because (in addition to his hu mility) he was from first to last a Harvard schol busily investigating innumerable texts. He docu mented his deepest insights as conscientiously as othe cited authorities for the shallowest facts. He want the Higher Will to be as carefully researched as, le say, the last will of Shakespeare. In his talk Harvard ian scholasticism was satirized and defended with a quickness of alternation that disconcerted his listeners. Woe to them if their criticism of his university smacked of dilettantism, for this sin was worse in his eyes than the dryasdustiest pedantry. He shared, and strove to elevate, the Germanic energia of his Alma Mater. Harvard in his view was the main station for receiving and converting the electrical currents of American thought.

"What we need today in American crit'cism," I can still hear him saying in his clipped pronunciation, "is the historical tracing of great formative tende cies." America, now inundated with contemporanei , must rediscover the noblest heights of thought in e past, the whole long past, Occidental and Oriental, f which she is the inheritor. Nor can those heights pear to us commandingly (so he would argue) un our critical thinking sets itself sharply against errors of modern naturalism, to which American

ilization, so largely a creature of the modern age, is peculiarly exposed. In other words the modern American critic, if he is to build firmly, must also firmly destroy. This point he pressed upon me in the earlier days of our acquaintance when he still had hope that I too would be warlike. Once, after a long dispute, he fell silent for a while, then thrust his head towards me and said in a grimly humorous tone, "At least it seems that you and I agree that what America needs today is a new deal in ideas?"

"Very true."

"Well, then," he exclaimed loudly, shaking his fist at things in general – and in that moment I felt like a thing in general – "why don't you get out and fight?" These words were uttered with an inward, mounting forcefulness that cannot be put on to paper. After many years, I hear an eternal echo, "get-out-and-FIGHT".

His talk forced younger academics to face their danger of yielding to the American lust for being in the swim. They might easily and insensibly lower their standards while disguising this weakness under a benevolent desire to encourage contemporary art and letters in America. But surely, his listener would urge, such encouragement is needed: we must have a native literature. He would reply satirically that our journalists could be trusted to flatter all that was second-rate in American "creative" writing. The function of the teacher and academic critic was to prepare the way for a first-rate American art to come. This could be done only by placing the emphasis on sound ideas and high standards – not on art for art's sake, not on what Babbitt called "the merely lit'r'y aspects".

His personal lack of interest in current imaginative writings was well-nigh complete. His chief recreation in solitude was the reading of classic passages of poetry and prose in various languages, above all the Greek. One day when he was on the point of setting out for a badly needed vacation in Europe, he confided to me that the finest pleasure that he proposed for himself over there, was a rereading of Sophocles while strolling upon the Acropolis. He made this confession shyly, glancing sideways at me to see if its touch of romantic-classical sentiment would bring a smile to my lips. But I could not smile: I was seeing two moving pictures – one of a cantering youth engrossed in the aphorisms of Buddha in the outskirts of flat Cambridge; the other, of an elderly and overworked scholar pondering high Greek drama among the ruins on the sacred Athenian hill. . . . Leisure for him was a change of mental work. He would laugh derisively when informed that such and such a professor of literature was accustomed at times to regale himself with detective stories. He interrogated me upon my lighter reading and chuckled immensely over some of the items I confessed. "But," I declared, "one cannot be always occupied with the grand old masters and the bards sublime. You, when you are utterly fagged after a day's work – what do you read then?"

"Contemp'r'y crit'c'sm," he replied simply. And in deed he had an amazing acquaintance with that field. He perused it at once for amusement and for refu tion. Often he would snatch up from his table so brand new critical book or article, read aloud to its most wrong-headed passage, and then define

particular brand of Romanticism or Naturalism represented by the author. I averred maliciously that it was a waste of time to read such ephemeral stuff, that it ought to be allowed to die a natural death: why throw harpoons at sky-rockets? By way of reply he threw several at me. Those "skyrockets", he asserted, could dazzle and mislead a great many readers, particularly in America where the reading public was extraordinarily naïve. Surely, then, an American critic, if he was in earnest, should attack current critical errors instead of waiting for them to die or, rather — unlike "skyrockets", this being a false metaphor — to take root in the soil.

"A critic," he said, "must understand his function. He dare not aim at future readers. Of course any writer who is worth his salt hopes to be read after his death. But it is the critic's business to grapple with the age in which he lives and give it what he sees it needs."

"Very well," I said, "but some of us wish that you would write one book, just one, in which, laying aside your critico-historical methods — omitting all reference to the works of others — you would give your message in a direct, personal manner."

He stared at me and laughed. "You'd like me to essay the rôle of prophet or confessor?"

"Not exactly, but — "

"We have too many prophets and confessors already; that is just the trouble with the modern age. No, no," he concluded with sharp finality of tone, "my critical function is a humble one but, I believe, necessary."

Sometimes, as I have just suggested, Babbitt would

override or sidestep an objection; and then one would reflect how extraordinary it was that he did not do so oftener, considering his pugnacity. His principle — not consistently followed, else he had been unhuman — was *not* to "talk for victory", that is for personal triumph. He would not use his power of wit crushingly if he perceived that his questioner was impersonally seeking truth, however much at his expense. He would submit patiently to gruelling cross-examinations upon dubious passages in his writings, and in the end he would often say mildly, "I shall try to make that matter clearer in my next book." More often, however, he would respond with questions that led his questioner into a Socratic trap. As for trapping him, that was an Herculean labor. Only once in the whole course of our conversations do I recall his being nonplussed. He had been inveighing against the many who employ the slogan of "service to mankind" to advance their own selfish interests. I remarked, with studied seriousness, "As a rule you insist on a very discriminating use of categorical terms, such as 'humanist' — "

"Yes, yes?"

"But just now you have employed the term 'humanitarian' very indiscriminately." I repeated some of his assertions.

"Ye-e-es", he replied slowly, "yes, that is so." Then he went on with a rush, "But they happen to be my chief aversion, I simply cannot stand them — the humanitarian boosters." His right hand performed an orbit of comprehensive denunciation; his tone was almost a bark. "Cerberus," I murmured at him and he was mildly amused. He was richly amused by

vivid invections of H. L. Mencken against the American booster. He would quote them with delight, then proceed to criticize that writer's *Weltanschauung*; and then, mayhap, cite one of Mencken's clever thrusts at Professor Babbitt.

He could laugh at himself with entire lack of constraint, with a serene gleam in his eyes that played upon himself as one of the transient Many. I recall his mirth when there came to his ears the following local witticism upon his local status: "Babbitt's fame is going round the world; it has already left Cambridge." I remember when he repeated, chuckling, a journalist's word-picture of him searching spinsterishly under his bed each night for Rousseau. One day I came across him after his return from a large Phi Beta Kappa gathering in another city, where he and a certain prominent university president had been the only speakers. The president, of course, spoke first, taking for his subject "The Value of Ideals". This, Babbitt told me, was a trifle embarrassing since his own address was to be on "The Value of Standards as Opposed to Ideals". But he had proceeded to deliver it without any modifications. The humor with which he recounted the episode was entirely impartial; it placed the two discordant orators in the same box. I wondered just how the prominent university president felt while listening to the second speaker; but Babbitt refused to wonder.

He had small interest in the art of conciliation; he did not like it practised on him and would not practise it on others. Caring as little for its twin, the art of correspondence – letters are a kind of "conciliation" (literally, a drawing together) – he made his letters

as few and brief as possible, claiming that this was for him a necessary way of saving time. An old friend to whom he had occasion to forward annually a sum of money complained, "I get no word from you except the Inner Check." Not so humorous and indulgent were other would-be correspondents. As his fame increased they poured in upon him an increasing stream of mail and did not relish receving few or no words in reply. Babbitt wished his admirers to correspond with his ideas rather than with him. Once he showed me an engaging missive which I urged him to answer at once. It was from a budding critic who seemed to me exceptionally gifted and who certainly evinced an ardent interest in Babbitt and his ideas. Later on, I was astonished to come across in print a warm attack upon those very ideas by the selfsame writer. I asked Babbitt just what he had written in answer to the young man's letter. "Nothing," he replied coolly, "I did not find the time." He laughed at my blank look. But I, quoting Emerson's epigram "In youth we are mad for persons", urged that young people normally come to truth through an interest in persons who have it, an interest that should not be discouraged. He rejoined, it was equally obvious that a young man was not on the way to becoming a worthwhile critic if his interest in sound ideas could be easily discouraged and if he persisted in maintaining a youthful disposition to be mad for persons, or at the.

Persons and ideas were sharply distinguished in Babbitt's mind. Often one heard him denounce a man's ideas while expressing a sincere regard for the man himself. This attitude was inadequetely reciprocated by his colleagues in academe. When their

sonal interests were grazed by his heavy impersonal tread they were apt to discount him by declaring that he lacked the true professorial balance: preacher rather than scholar, he properly belonged outside the academic pale. At the same time, comically enough, he was being hotly consigned to the *inside* of the pale by his journalistic opponents: for them he was a dangerous incarnation of the essence of professorialism. And surely their instinct was the right one. Babbitt was turning a high-pressure hose (such was the picture that came to my mind) upon incendiary notions that threatened the very citadel of accademia—while other academics, upon whose toes he had trodden *en route* to the fire, complained that his way of holding the nozzle was quite unacademic. "Babbitt," I heard Professor X assert, "is a mere propagandist." The hiss with which the "ist" was uttered seemed to me unnatural, till I learned later that Babbitt was known to have remarked that X's ideas were "critically negligible". More than once, however, I heard Babbitt praise X highly for character and ability. Indeed, undervaluating his own talents, he was apt to overestimate those of other persons; especially in the case of his friends. He had a genius for friendship. Greatly occupied as he was, he would go out of his way to serve the interests of friends who did not do the like for him.

Unfortunately, at least from the contemporary standpoint, his personal generosity was not so apparent in his writings since there he was preoccupied with ideas and tendencies. In conversation he could praise discerningly the charms and incidental insights not only of J. J. Rousseau but of present-day "naturists". When he took pen in hand, however, all other considerations were overshadowed by his conviction that the central tendency of these writers was fatefully wrong. I was disturbed by his very sharp review of a certain popular and rather distinguished book on morals. His handling of it, I told him, was plainly lopsided and had doubtless resulted in the addition of a new battalion to his large army of enemies. He replied that the book was fundamentally wrong, built upon a confusion of humanism and stoicism; and that this fact, ignored by other reviewers, had to be emphasized by him. I retorted that he himself had ignored several good points in the book; for instance, the exceptionally sensible treatment of sex.

"A sound treatment of sex," Babbitt rejoined severely, "requires a religious background which this author does not possess. At this point, at least, I seem to put more emphasis on religion than you do." (I had recently been accusing him of not giving religion its due.) Presently he called my attention to a new work which, unlike the one just mentioned, he heartily approved of. In reading it I soon discovered that the writer had liberally helped himself to Babbitt's philosophy without once mentioning his name. I said to him ironically, "This work would naturally interest you, its ideas are your own — in disguise."

"I did not look at the matter that way," he replied with entire simplicity. "My impression is that this writer is one who thinks things out for himself." He added that, on account of his unpopularity with reviewers, new authors who were in favor of humanistic ideas could get a better hearing if they refrained from bringing in his name. That, he said, employing

one of his favorite military metaphors – that was "good tactics". On the same grounds, those who showed intentions of dedicating books to him, he urged not to do so. Even a group of his former students who planned, in accordance with a pleasant academic custom, to produce a symposium in his honor, relinquished their purpose, so unmistakably sincere was his disapproval of it.

No doubt his rare disinterestedness was favored by his rare defect of the artistic temperament; he was not a thin-skinned person. But he was far from impassible, and the accumulated hostility aroused by his life-work was not an easy burden for him in his last years. "Fighting a whole generation," he remarked to me in an intimate moment, "is not exactly a happy task." He added somberly, "I have had to live at a time when all the ideas which I know to be most vital for man have more and more declined." He could not see, because of his essential modesty, that his own case was a powerful instance to the contrary. I spoke of his influence, asserting that it had seeped further and deeper than appeared. But he discounted it heavily, repeating my word "seep" with a scornful grunt. Not seeping but rousing to battle was the effect he aimed at. The time was one of great human crisis: the enemy truly were plenteous, but humanistic fighters were few. In short, he wanted more Irving Babbitts – not realizing how difficult he was for Providence to duplicate – and he was distressed by their persistent refusal to appear. He had an increasing sense of loneliness in his warfare. When our walk one day took us near a cemetery he waved a finger at it and muttered with dark satisfaction, "That puts a man in mind of his rest."

Such somber notes, however, were utterly exceptional. His talk and, I am sure, his thoughts were seldom concerned with his own career. Yet the more closely one came to know him, the more one could see that he had a large capacity for personal ambition and for all the feelings, good and ill, that attend it. But one perceived at the same time that he was vigilantly at work subduing his personal desires to the "Higher Will". His incessant "inner working" was never on display; it was veiled from others by the steady cheerfulness to which it gave rise; and it was veiled from himself, so to speak, by the steady humility which gave rise to it. Never in our most intimate talks did he allude confessionally to his own spiritual efforts: I saw that he regarded them as, essentially, not his own. He looked in with humility – even while looking out with pride. He had the natural self-pride of a man of strong feelings strongly under control, a pride sometimes touched with harsh scorn of human follies and weaknesses. But the scorn was momentary, and the pride was overshadowed by his high reverence for the unseen Law. That supernatural Law and Will (for it was both of these at once) became for him in his later years ever more of a real presence. During one of our last walks, his mind dwelt exceptionally upon the old theme of human transience; till finally he exclaimed, with bent head and raised hand, with a depth of simple awe, entirely devoid of any note of fatalism or personal mournfulness, "Oh, God is very great and a man is a worm."

After a silence, I said, "But the God whom my worship is not just a Will, as in your writings, but a Being, a complete Being, who – "

"Yes, yes," he broke in with humorous impatience, "but that is beyond my province as a writer. Why do you keep wishing me to be a theologian? I am merely a critic." And surely (he proceeded) the critical point in regard to religion, especially today, was that divine reality, whatever else it might be, could not be real to men unless they found it at work in themselves as a Will commanding their own wills. . . . He spoke impersonally, with profound personal conviction. "Merely a critic", he called himself; he never knew how much more than a critic he was; and that unawareness was part of his great dedication. He would be much abashed, he would rebuke me severely, if he knew that, as I reflect upon him, I recall the parable of the man to whom the Master of the Feast said, "Friend, go up higher."

Chaucer's Boëthius

W. P. Witcutt

If it be true that civilizations move in somewhat analogous cycles, each with its birth, its time of flowering, its overripeness, and its decay, then we have not yet reached the time of Boëthius. For he was essentially one who stood between new things and old and this, as has been well said, is aptly symbolized in his actual life and misfortune – the Greek philosopher imprisoned by a barbarian king. We have not yet reached the stage when European and American civilization shows imminent signs of dissolution. If that stage is reached soon, we shall have no Boëthius; for we have no tradition to be passed on to a culture yet unborn. Scraps of scientific knowledge; a literature; the memory of a great material achievement – these will be passed on. But there will be something essentially lacking; something we do not possess; without which it will be impossible for another culture to arise. That something is a philosophy; or to speak more correctly, a philosophical tradition.

At the back of every culture lies a Tradition – an intellectual structure that gives purpose to life. We are living on the credit of a Tradition we have abandoned – the double tradition of the Greek philosophy and the Christian religion.

Boëthius was one of the formers of the Tradition more from the purely philosophical than the theological aspect; though this point must not be overstressed. Without the Christian religion Boëthius