
Reviews

The Variety of Historical Minds

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The Historical Mind: Humanistic Renewal in a Post-Constitutional Age, edited by Justin D. Garrison and Ryan R. Holston. *SUNY Press*, 2020. 320 pp. \$95.00.

In “Modern Currents,” an essay featured in his 1928 collection titled *The Demon of the Absolute*, the literary critic, philosopher, and academic Paul Elmer More (1864-1937) lamented the minimal impact of the so-called New Humanism on the American reading public.¹ Elsewhere in this essay, More took various then-contemporary writers to task for their “emancipation of art from the responsibilities of life” (57). He criticized such authors as Amy

Lowell, James Branch Cabell, and Theodore Dreiser, saving his fiercest shot for John Dos Passos, whose novel *Manhattan Transfer* More likened to “an explosion in a cess-pool” (63). Why are these American writers, More fretted, so popular, whereas the country’s literary and social critics—especially Irving Babbitt, the progenitor of New Humanism—are largely unread? When a New Humanist “produces a book which ought to bring him recognition as a leader of public opinion,” More grouched, “what is the result? In most cases there is no result; nothing happens; voices calling in the desert” (75).

Perhaps More spoke too soon. Almost a century after he penned those words, much of the enthusiasm felt for some of the authors he pilloried

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¹ Paul Elmer More, *The Demon of the Absolute: New Shelburne Essays, Volume I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1928). This piece originally appeared in the December 1927 issue of the *Revue de Paris* and then in the January 1928 number of the *Forum*; see Malcolm Young, *Paul Elmer More: A Bibliography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 16.

in “Modern Currents” has surely faded. (Does anyone read James Branch Cabell anymore?) Babbitt, on the other hand, although by no means a household name, has quietly continued to inspire numerous academics and intellectuals of various stripes. Justin D. Garrison and Ryan R. Holston’s new edited collection, *The Historical Mind: Humanistic Renewal in a Post-Constitutional Age*, provides the latest case for Babbitt’s enduring influence. The volume’s contributors have supplied essays that acknowledge their intellectual debts to Babbitt and Claes G. Ryn, a political philosopher and Babbitt’s foremost interpreter. This collection illustrates the richness of Babbitt’s and Ryn’s thought and its great value for those concerned about the fate of our politics and culture.

It is one of the many virtues of *The Historical Mind* that its editors have attempted to make their subject as accessible as possible to the interested lay reader. In a helpful and detailed introduction (xi-xl), Garrison and Holston both set the stage for the chapters to come and spell out the basics of Babbitt’s and Ryn’s political philosophies. They place these philosophies in the context of an increasingly unrestrained and selfish America. “Many . . . American leaders and Americans in general seem to chafe under even the most modest legal barriers or ethical limitations standing between them and the realization of their momentary desires,” they contend. “Despite the appearance of stark differences within the United States, the extent to which

living in the error of the unlimited has come to define American politics and life in the twenty-first century is astonishing. This has serious implications for the continued existence of the United States as a constitutional republic in any meaningful sense” (xiii).

Garrison and Holston argue that Babbitt’s and Ryn’s humanism offers a compelling diagnosis of what ails the contemporary U.S. and can help suggest ways out of this morass. They stress these thinkers’ insistence on the moral dualism of human existence. According to Babbitt and Ryn, human beings possess both higher and lower potentialities; they must foment their ethical impulses and restrain their base ones in order to live happy and sound lives. This conception of human nature—which Babbitt and Ryn link to thinkers as diverse as Aristotle, Buddha, Confucius, and Cicero—also informed most of the Founding Fathers, who crafted a constitutional democracy for the U.S., foregrounding the necessity of limited government, checks and balances, and the separation of powers precisely due to their fears of humanity’s moral indolence and will to power.

Yet a rival tradition among some of the Founders, rooted in a disparate conception of human existence, has ultimately won favor among most Americans. Babbitt and Ryn connect this view in large measure to Rousseau, the most powerful voice in the romantic movement. Rousseau believed that human nature was intrinsically good and blamed

society and its institutions for the world's ills. He consequently conceived of human existence as monistic, based on beneficent impulses that one should without exception embrace. Eschewing the individual's responsibility for self-improvement, Rousseau and his epigones fixated on ways to reconfigure our economic and political institutions as the sole means to improve lives.

Allied with scientism, Garrison and Holston note, this idyllic vision encourages a particular approach to politics, according to which "a mixture of technical sophistication and a deep if ultimately vague sense of sympathy for other human beings" can permanently resolve the "problems that have afflicted humanity for generations" (xxi). In fact, Babbitt and Ryn stress that those beholden to this vision support what Ryn calls "plebiscitary democracy," "in which popular sovereignty is conceived of as the exercise of undiluted power by an undifferentiated mass in the pursuit of the political whim of the moment" (xxii). From this stems what Garrison and Holston deem the chief problem confronting contemporary America: a lack of personal and national restraint that manifests itself in, for example, a debased popular culture, an imperialistic foreign policy, and rampant acquisitiveness. *The Historical Mind* is dedicated to using these and kindred insights to revivify the outlook on human life Babbitt and Ryn support, without which the United States cannot remain a constitutional democracy.

As another instance of the edi-

tors' inclination to grant their book wide appeal, Garrison and Holston chose to commence its chapters with one essay apiece from Babbitt and Ryn, thereby granting readers a taste of their respective approaches to politics and culture. Their selection from Babbitt's *oeuvre* seems especially well chosen. Although his complex and meandering style eludes quick encapsulation, Babbitt's "What I Believe: Rousseau and Religion," which previously appeared in the posthumous collection *Spanish Character and Other Essays*, amounts to arguably the most concise and straightforward expression of his overarching philosophy.²

Ryn's contribution, originally published in a 2013 issue of *Humanitas*, uses a largely Babbittian framework to pinpoint the problems ailing the United States. Although routinely genuflecting to the importance of the U.S. Constitution, he avers, Americans embrace a view of life so dissimilar to that of the Founding Fathers that their constitutional democracy is eroding. To reinvigorate the American Constitution, he concludes, we must nurture the "constitutional personality"—a personality that views human nature in the dualistic manner of the Framers.

Babbitt's and Ryn's reflections serve as the starting point for the

²Irving Babbitt, *Spanish Character and Other Essays*, edited by Frederick Manchester, Rachel Giese, and William F. Giese (Boston: Houghton Mifflin), 225-47. As Garrison and Holston note (ix), an earlier version of this essay appeared in the February 1930 issue of the *Forum*.

essays that make up the remainder of the book. These essays commence with Bradley Birzer's investigation of an important example of Babbitt's political legacy. In "Russell Kirk and the Romance of Babbittianism" (45-60), Birzer highlights the deep influence Babbitt had on Kirk, a formative figure in the American conservative movement. Especially in the realm of education, Birzer demonstrates, Babbitt's thought shaped many of Kirk's views. But this does not mean that Kirk's ideas were a carbon copy of Babbitt's. Rather, Birzer notes that Kirk exhibited much greater esteem for romanticism, the potentially Burkean and conservative qualities of which he deemed an antidote to the excessive rationalism of contemporary life.

Justin Garrison's thoughtful chapter, "The Pillars of Hercules: Babbitt, Warren, and the Dangers of Scientific Naturalism" (61-87), does not argue for Babbitt as an influence on the poet, novelist, and critic Robert Penn Warren. Rather, it suggests that the two had parallel concerns surrounding the impact of pseudoscience on contemporary political life. Through shrewd analysis of Warren's Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel *All the King's Men* (1946), Garrison spies in Warren similar worries about the project to extend science beyond its intrinsic limitations. Babbitt's and Warren's critiques of scientific naturalism imply, he concludes, the need to determine "a new set of civilizing conventions that give the right amount of focus to the natural and the human law" (83).

"Luminosity, Imagination, Truth: On Voegelin and Ryn" (89-104), S. F. McGuire's contribution, provides a partial defense of the philosopher Eric Voegelin's approach to the imagination in his account of the human condition, which Ryn has criticized as inadequate. McGuire notes the haphazard and unsystematic references to the imagination in Voegelin's early writings. But he maintains that Voegelin ultimately reveals a concern for the imagination similar to that of Ryn. In fact, McGuire concludes, Voegelin's attention to the "luminosity" of the imagination "might even surpass Ryn's" (91).

From these chapters, focused chiefly on culture and the imagination, the volume turns to matters of ethics and character. This commences with William F. Byrne's "Politics, Moral Judgment, and the Enlightenment Project" (109-125), a fascinating attempt to explain the political and social conflict that increasingly roils the United States. A bevy of political scientists, historians, and political psychologists has explored the increase in partisanship among American citizens, often focusing attention on the ways in which the Democratic and Republican parties have become more ideologically rigid.³ Byrne, by contrast, identifies a different cause for our contemporary strife: the popularity of a simplistic

³ See, e.g., Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Sam Rosenfeld, *The Polarizers: Postwar Architects of Our Partisan Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

view of human judgment, according to which reason alone determines one's thinking. Beholden to this watered-down legacy of the Enlightenment project, he asserts, Americans typically surmise that those who come to different conclusions from their own are either irrational or evil. Byrne insists that this dangerous perspective greatly misconceives the nature of human understanding, stripping it of the pivotal roles played by the will and the imagination. Channeling Babbitt and Ryn, he argues, "Our problems are at root largely problems of imagination, and, secondarily, of will. That is, they are ultimately problems of character" (120). Although it is unlikely that all readers will concur with his thesis, one hopes that Byrne's profound response to the problem of partisanship receives the attention it deserves.

Whereas Byrne's contribution relies heavily on a Babbittian-Rynian framework, the philosopher Robert C. Koons's chapter, "Natural Law, the Moral Imagination, and Prudent Exceptions" (127-44), politely finds fault with Ryn's discussions of the natural law tradition. Koons shows that Ryn has criticized this tradition—especially in its Thomistic and scholastic manifestations—for its excessive devotion to pure reason. According to Koons, however, natural law theory "does make room for the indispensable role of both experience and imagination in right moral judgment" (128). Koons presents a strong case for his perspective, but perhaps here more than anywhere

else in the book the reader hungers for Ryn's reply.

In "Irving Babbitt and Christianity: A Response to T. S. Eliot" (145-67), by contrast, Ryan Holston bolsters a position that Ryn has expressed for decades. Although Eliot, the most renowned of Babbitt's former students, repeatedly indicated his intellectual debt to his teacher, he ultimately criticized Babbitt for his purported attempt to replace revealed religion with New Humanism. In this expertly argued chapter, Holston makes quick work of Eliot's contention, concluding that Babbitt—far from the threat to Christianity of Eliot's imagination—plays a role in the intellectual history of the religion similar in spirit to that of Aristotle. In fact, Holston notes, the ethical framework of Christianity "stands to benefit from Babbitt's insights regarding the voluntative-imaginative constitution of our character for the very reason that Eliot had thought humanism to be inadequate from a Christian perspective" (157). Although unlikely to serve as the final word on its subject, Holston's chapter should help put to rest the wrongheaded conclusion that Babbitt was hostile to organized religion.

The next two chapters home in on the U.S. Constitution and the constitutional spirit. Michael P. Federici's "Can Constitutions Preserve the Engendering Experiences of Order?" (173-200) contends that Babbitt's and Voegelin's views on human nature offer critical insights for those worried about the erosion of the consti-

tutional personality. Federici stresses that the vibrancy of the U.S. Constitution relies on its implicit dualistic understanding of human nature. Thus, the dominance of progressivism—an outlook Federici links to a Rousseauistic monism—amounts to an existential threat to our political system and way of life. To make its case, the chapter supplies a persuasive account of the political ideals of two paradigmatic progressives: the writer and editor Herbert Croly (1869-1930) and the author and activist Edward Bellamy (1850-1898). Federici's analysis of Bellamy's famous utopian socialist novel *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888) seems especially nuanced and convincing. He notes, for example, the oddly Victorian portrait of private life Bellamy advanced in the book, which clashes with its otherwise rosy estimation of human nature. Federici also offers a valuable critique of constitutional originalism, deeming it insufficient to reanimating the constitutional spirit. "The American Constitution cannot preserve the engendering experiences of order because its underlying moral realism has ceased to be a living force in American culture" (195), he writes. Accordingly, the problems we face require cultural solutions, not narrowly political ones.

The legal scholar and political theorist Bruce P. Frohnen looks to local associations to ameliorate the disintegration of constitutionalism in the U.S. In "On the Moral Necessity of Constitutionalism: Claes Ryn and Ethical Democracy" (201-20), Frohnen observes that American

republicanism relies "on a people possessing an appropriate constitutional morality" (208). Unfortunately, however, progressives, advancing an approach to government favorable to plebiscitary democracy, have helped undermine this morality, thereby threatening the nation's political culture. Frohnen's delightfully wide-ranging chapter (which even includes a potted history of ancient Athenian and Roman constitutionalism) concludes that "only by eschewing grand projects and maintaining the authority of natural associations can the mechanisms of the modern state serve constitutionalism and the ethical life" (216).

In its final chapters, *The Historical Mind* pivots to a discussion of international relations. This commences with the historian Richard M. Gamble's "'Let Things Be Called by Their Right Names': Difference as Constraint in American Exceptionalism" (225-40). Here Gamble draws attention to an often-overlooked tradition associated with American exceptionalism, based on a skepticism of expansionism that could differentiate the U. S. from European polities. Even before their nation's founding, Gamble shows, some American Puritans criticized those who associated Winthrop's "city on a hill" with messianic imperialism. Although typically forgotten today, this tradition of constraint has a long history, as Gamble's example of the sociologist William Graham Sumner (1840-1910) indicates. In various speeches and writings, Sumner enthusiastically endorsed self-restraint

in American foreign policy. Gamble concludes with a call to reinvigorate this perspective, to assure the future well-being of the U. S.

Justin B. Litke's crisp essay, "A Little Place and a Big Idea: The Temptation to Imperialism and the Loss of Republicanism" (241-55), reveals a perspective on foreign policy similar to Gamble's. But it pinpoints a different wellspring for our more bellicose America. Analyzing Wendell Berry's novel *Jayber Crow* (2000), Litke ponders "whether some political problems seem to be raised by the very scale on which our politics is practiced" (242). According to the Anti-Federalists, Litke writes, "Only if the scale of politics is sufficiently local . . . can a people rule itself deliberately" (ibid.). He sees Lincoln's Gettysburg Address as the key turning-point in America's approach to international affairs. Lincoln's clarion call for unity, Litke avers, "made it possible to think of America as an idea" (248). "As a big idea," he contends, "America has now become exportable—something in the service of which power, leadership, talent, genius, and money would be justifiably employed" (ibid.). As was the case with Frohnen's essay, Litke's homes in on the value of localism for America's future.

The book's final chapter highlights international affairs in an entirely different manner. Zhang Yuan and Justin Garrison's "Resistance and Renewal: Irving Babbitt and China" (257-72) presents an absorbing discussion of Babbitt's intellectual influence in early-twentieth-

century China. The authors situate this influence in the context of the New Culture Movement of 1915 to 1927, during which period Babbitt's thought served as a major impetus for Chinese intellectuals interested in integrating the most salutary elements of Chinese culture with promising Western insights. Zhang and Garrison indicate the complexities of the New Culture Movement and track Babbitt's impact on the Far East with precision and care. They also note ways in which some Chinese devotees of New Humanism—principally Wu Mi, the editor of the Babbittian *Critical Review*—strategically mistranslated some of Babbitt's key ideas, to make them seem more reliably Confucian. Anyone concerned with Babbitt's stature abroad will want to read these pages.

In their conclusion (273-75), Garrison and Holston modestly maintain that these collected essays do not so much provide solutions as suggest "ways forward" (275; emphasis in the original). Perhaps so. Many of the chapters prove more interested in diagnosing America's post-constitutional malaise than in proffering detailed directions for choosing a more salubrious path. But this should in no way detract from the many strengths of *The Historical Mind*. Like Babbitt and Ryn, the contributors to the collection consistently avoid the nitty-gritty of our quotidian politics in favor of deeper reflections on the contemporary U. S. This helps the book steer clear of narrow partisanship.

Some of the most thoughtful por-

tions of *The Historical Mind*, in fact, collectively lay bare tensions among its contributors' perspectives. As Garrison and Holston underscore, their volume is not univocal. Thus, for example, Frohnen criticizes libertarianism as incapable of jump-starting the sort of cultural renewal Babbitt and Ryn esteem. Garrison, moreover, finds fault with scientism for its potentially baleful effects on our politics. Yet in his chapter Gam-

ble advances William Graham Sumner—an unreconstructed *laissez-faire* enthusiast and Spencerian scientific naturalist—as a model anti-imperialist. The articulation of such discordant positions ensures that *The Historical Mind* is greater than the sum of its parts. Decades past the peak of New Humanism's renown, this fine volume ably demonstrates that the movement still has much of crucial value to teach us.