

---

---

# Was Irving Babbitt an Educational Counterrevolutionist?

**Eric Adler**

*University of Maryland*

Admirers of the work of Irving Babbitt (1865-1933), the chief figure associated with an informal school of literary and social criticism called New Humanism, have long recognized that many of Babbitt's critics have failed to take seriously—or even to understand—his ideas. According to the political philosopher Claes Ryn, for example, even during Babbitt's lifetime "reckless distortions of his ideas gained wide currency."<sup>1</sup> The caustic debates surrounding New Humanism that took place in the early decades of the twentieth century, it seems, encouraged critics to contribute tendentious and careless appraisals of Babbitt's work.<sup>2</sup> Such partisan and misleading critiques continue to influence assessments of Babbitt today.

The one hundredth anniversary of *Rousseau and Romanticism*, arguably the author's quintessential monograph, provides an excellent opportunity to revisit assumptions about Babbitt's ideas.<sup>3</sup> This article will make the case that some scholars of American higher education have proved especially egregious distorters of Babbitt's thought. Although in his first book, *Literature and the American College*, Babbitt presented the

---

ERIC ADLER is Associate Professor of Classics at the University of Maryland.

<sup>1</sup> Claes G. Ryn, "Introduction to the Transaction Edition," in *Rousseau and Romanticism*, by Irving Babbitt (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991), xi.

<sup>2</sup> Chief among such appraisals are numerous contributions to C. Hartley Grattan, ed., *The Critique of Humanism: A Symposium* (New York: Brewer and Warren, 1930), a polemical book whose contributors were often far more interested in landing blows against New Humanism than in providing accurate analysis.

<sup>3</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991; first published in 1919).

---

---

fullest description of his pedagogical ideals, *Rousseau and Romanticism* supplies the most detailed examination of the philosophical movement Babbitt conceived as the chief threat to a vibrant, meaningful humanism.<sup>4</sup> Thus, this will give particular attention to *Rousseau and Romanticism*, as supplemented by an analysis of other relevant writings, to argue that education scholars have incorrectly pigeonholed Babbitt as a pedagogical reactionary, a thinker on educational matters nostalgically attached to an antiquated model of higher learning. Although scholars have routinely dismissed Babbitt as an elitist nostalgic, this article will demonstrate that he was nothing of the sort. In fact, in part by reflecting on the role Babbitt assigned to ethical and aesthetic education in *Rousseau and Romanticism*, it will stress that Babbitt presented a novel approach to higher learning that reveals that he was a thinker well ahead of his time.

The article will argue that, while partly anchored in a clear-sighted understanding of the humanistic tradition, Babbitt's educational views are in an important respect innovative, even "revolutionary." They envisioned a novel humanism that significantly expanded its scope. Indeed, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, along with Babbitt's other monographs, provides a valuable blueprint for those aiming to rescue the humanities from oblivion on American college campuses. Babbitt anticipated many of the troubles besetting the humanities today, and his vision of a proper approach to education can help us better understand and rectify the vicissitudes of contemporary higher learning in the United States.

## I

Before we detail the farsighted nature of Babbitt's educational philosophy, we must first get a sense of how formative scholars of American higher education have viewed Babbitt's work. Wrongheaded and dismissive impressions of Babbitt's pedagogical philosophy appear to stem largely from the fact that a rival school played the foundational role in explicating the history of higher learning in the United States. Toward the conclusion of *Rousseau and Romanticism*, Babbitt provided a characteristically critical assessment of John Dewey and so-called educational progressivism. Babbitt wrote: "The notion that in spite of the enormous mass of experience that has been accumulated in both East and West we are still without light as to the habits that make for moderation and good

---

<sup>4</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College: Essays in Defense of the Humanities* (Washington, DC: National Humanities Institute, 1986; first published in 1908).

---

---

sense and decency, and that education is therefore still purely a matter of exploration and experiment is one that may be left to those who are suffering from an advanced stage of naturalistic intoxication—for example, to Professor John Dewey and his followers.” It has been argued that Babbitt actually had more in common with aspects of Dewey’s thought than he recognized, but going into that issue is not necessary to accomplish the limited purpose of this article.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately for Babbitt, Dewey’s followers were the most influential historians of American higher education in the early and mid-twentieth century. Thus, for example, among the most authoritative early accounts of the transformation from the antebellum classical colleges to the American research universities is R. Freeman Butts’s book *The College Charts Its Course*.<sup>6</sup> Butts (1910-2010) spent most of his academic career as a faculty member at Columbia University’s Teachers College. Dewey had taught in the philosophy department at Columbia from 1904 until his retirement in 1930, and Columbia’s Teachers College was a hotbed of Dewey-style progressive education.

Toward the start of *The College Charts Its Course*, Butts forthrightly announced his perspective on educational matters:

It should be pointed out here that the author of this book believes that the progressive approach in general is the one that holds the more promise for the future of American college education. This does not mean that all that is labeled conservative is bad or that all that is labeled progressive is good. It merely means that any acceptable theory of higher education must be one that most adequately takes cognizance of the best evidence and the most thoroughly supported theories of modern society and modern science in so far as they have influenced our conceptions of knowledge, truth, learning processes, social relationships, and human nature. By and large, the conservative point of view looks to the past for its solutions to college problems, whereas the progressive position looks to modern science and modern social developments as beacons along the road that education must travel if it is to improve itself.<sup>7</sup>

Given the views Butts articulated in this passage, it should come as no surprise that his book treats Babbitt’s thought dismissively.

Butts was just one of the formative Deweyan scholars of American higher learning. His work deeply influenced the historian Frederick

---

<sup>5</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 388. For an argument that Babbitt had a good deal in common with Dewey, see Folke Leander, *The Philosophy of John Dewey: A Critical Study* (Gothenburg: Göteborgs Högskola; Elanders Boktryckeri Aktiebolag, 1939).

<sup>6</sup> R. Freeman Butts, *The College Charts Its Course: Historical Conceptions and Current Proposals* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1971; first published in 1939).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

---

---

Rudolph (1920-2013), whose books *The American College and University: A History* and *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636* were for decades standard accounts among education scholars.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Deweyan notions have shaped the historiography of higher education in the U.S. in profound—and often unacknowledged—ways. Although as far back as the late 1960s revisionist scholars began to challenge the progressive stance on the antebellum American colleges,<sup>9</sup> this revisionism appears not to have included a reassessment of Babbitt and New Humanism. And, thus, there has been little corrective to earlier progressive scholarship that has misunderstood Babbitt’s approach to education.

Let us take Butts’s monograph as a case in point. Although Butts discussed elements of Babbitt’s views in a variety of places in his book, he never offered a complete picture of Babbitt’s philosophy of education. In most instances, he was content to provide short quotations from Babbitt’s writings, without presenting the context requisite to understand Babbitt’s broader points. For example, Butts quoted the following sentence from *Literature and the American College*: “The democratic spirit that the college needs is a fair field and no favors, and then, the more severe and selective it is in its requirements the better.”<sup>10</sup> This uncontextualized quotation allowed Butts to label Babbitt an elitist proponent of the genteel tradition. Butts contended: “Babbitt believed that the humanitarians and democrats were on the wrong track when they thought of democracy as the uplift of the many and of the college as something for everybody; the college should rather return to its former estate, when it was a careful selection for the social elite and a thorough training for the few.”<sup>11</sup>

On its own, this description of Babbitt’s educational philosophy is misleading. It is true that Babbitt’s humanism was semi-aristocratic in spirit, based on a concern for the proper education of a group he labeled

---

<sup>8</sup> Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1977).

<sup>9</sup> On revisionist attempts to counter traditional scholarship on the antebellum colleges, see, e.g., the contributions to Roger L. Geiger, ed., *The American College in the Nineteenth Century* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000); Michael S. Pak, “The Yale Report of 1828: A New Reading and New Implications,” *History of Education Quarterly* 48.1 (2008), 30-57; Paul H. Mattingly, *American Academic Cultures: A History of Higher Education* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 381 n. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Butts, *The College Charts Its Course*, 347. The original quote appears in Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 112.

<sup>11</sup> Butts, *The College Charts Its Course*, 347.

---

---

“the saving remnant.”<sup>12</sup> Yet Butts's assessment of Babbitt's ideas makes it appear as if Babbitt longed for a return to the “good old days” of American higher education, when the colleges were supposedly open only to those of an appropriate social and economic background. As we shall see, Babbitt's vision of higher learning was actually distinctly different from that of many educational traditionalists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In part for this reason, it seems wrongheaded to conclude that Babbitt pined for the colleges to return to the way they had operated in early America. Also, Babbitt's personal background demonstrates the inaccuracy of Butts's view. Babbitt had graduated from a public high school in the Midwest and he barely scraped the money together to attend Harvard College.<sup>13</sup> It was thus peculiar for Butts to presume that Babbitt aimed to keep a college education the sole prerogative of an economic and social elite. In fact, Babbitt explicitly rejected this notion in the pages of *Literature and the American College*. If the small American college can stay true to humane standards and liberal culture, Babbitt averred, it “will do its share toward creating that aristocracy of character and intelligence that is needed in a community like ours to take the place of an aristocracy of birth, and to counteract the tendency toward an aristocracy of money.”<sup>14</sup>

Norman Foerster (1887-1972), one of Babbitt's most prominent followers, attempted to refute the notion that New Humanism was needlessly elitist. About the sort of students who should be encouraged to study the liberal arts, Foerster wrote: “The intellectually robust are, I think, a much larger body than is usually supposed. The mind that is capable of enough liberal education to justify the effort is not rare; it is common.”<sup>15</sup> New Humanists such as Babbitt and Foerster aimed to

---

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Irving Babbitt, “Humanistic Education in China and the West,” *The Chinese Students' Monthly* 17 (Dec. 1921), 89; *Democracy and Leadership* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), 278; and *Spanish Character and Other Essays*, edited by Frederick Manchester, Rachel Giese, and William F. Giese (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1940), 63.

<sup>13</sup> On Babbitt's biography, see, above all, the biographical sketch his widow, Dora D. Babbitt, contributed to *Irving Babbitt: Man and Teacher*, edited by Frederick Manchester and Odell Shepard (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1941), ix-xiii.

<sup>14</sup> Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 127. On this topic, see the valuable contribution of Folke Leander, *Humanism and Naturalism: A Comparative Study of Ernest Sellière, Irving Babbitt, and Paul Elmer More* (Gothenburg: Göteborgs Högskola, 1937), 94: to Babbitt, the humanist “is not aristocratic in the social sense, although, as Babbitt remarks, the humanistic ideal of a gentleman has often been warped by traits that were notable only in the lower sense of the term.”

<sup>15</sup> Norman Foerster, *The American State University: Its Relation to Democracy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1937), 185.

---

---

attract undergraduates who were sufficiently intellectually engaged to gain from the rigorous, inner-focused humanism they advocated. As the historian David Withun has perceptively noted, Babbitt's regard for an intellectual aristocracy had much in common with W. E. B. DuBois's concerns about the humanistic education of his so-called Talented Tenth.<sup>16</sup> Yet Butts portrayed Babbitt and his followers as snooty revilers of the great unwashed. Careful attention to the ideas of New Humanism demonstrates the inaccuracy of Butts's characterization. But undoubtedly his mischaracterization possessed polemical value, since it could help denigrate Babbitt as an aristocrat out of touch with the democratic spirit of then-contemporary America. Butts thus portrayed Babbitt as eager for a return to an older tradition, whereas, as we shall see, Babbitt aimed in great part *to transform this tradition*, hoping for it to become capable of meeting the needs of the present.

In addition, it must be noted that while some historians such as Butts harped on the elitism of New Humanism,<sup>17</sup> they typically soft-pedalled—or even ignored—the objectionable views of their opponents. Thus, for instance, in his book Butts provided a supportive portrait of Charles W. Eliot (1834-1926), the president of Harvard from 1869 to 1909, and the most energetic among the founders of the American university movement.<sup>18</sup> Eliot, whose educational views had been greatly shaped by the social Darwinist Herbert Spencer,<sup>19</sup> supported segregated schools

---

<sup>16</sup> David Withun, "W. E. B. Du Bois and Irving Babbitt: A Comparative Evaluation of Their Views on Education, Leadership, and Society," *Phylon* 54.1 (summer 2017), 25-42.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Michael R. Harris, *Five Counterrevolutionists in Higher Education: Irving Babbitt, Albert Jay Nock, Abraham Flexner, Robert Maynard Hutchins, and Alexander Meiklejohn* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1970), 57-61. For more on Harris's views of Babbitt, see below. Cf. Hugh Hawkins, "University Identity: The Teaching and Research Functions," in *The Organization of Knowledge in Modern America, 1860-1920*, edited by Alexandra Oleson and John Voss (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press), 303; Andrew Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University: From the Civil War to the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 198-99.

<sup>18</sup> See esp. Butts, *The College Charts Its Course*, 175-83. Summing up Eliot's career, for example, Butts wrote: "He did much more than promote the elective system; he was one of the most outstanding educational spokesmen for adapting the American college to the forces of modern America. He represented in his career the changing status of the college from an institution of strict discipline over the religious, moral, and intellectual life of students to an institution that boasted of its secular character and the great amount of freedom allowed to the activities of its students" (183).

<sup>19</sup> On Spencer's intellectual and political influence on Eliot, see, e.g., William Boyd, "President Eliot and Herbert Spencer," *Harvard Teachers Review* 4 (Feb. 1934), esp. 34; Hugh Hawkins, *Between Harvard and America: The Educational Leadership of Charles W. Eliot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 143; J. David Hoeveler, Jr., *The New Humanism: A Critique of Modern America, 1900-1940* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977),

---

---

for whites and blacks,<sup>20</sup> opposed co-education,<sup>21</sup> and touted Zionism's potential to "contribute to the eradication of the undesirable qualities in Jews."<sup>22</sup> Nor was Eliot himself immune to charges of elitism. According to the historian Samuel Eliot Morison, in response to concerns that the free-elective system would turn some students into dabblers, Eliot countered that such students were unserious and thus of minimal concern to a university.<sup>23</sup> Nowhere in his monograph did Butts explore these stances or relate them to Eliot's Spencerian philosophy of education.

## II

Another revealing example of earlier educational scholars miscasting Babbitt's ideas can be found in Michael R. Harris's book *Five Counterrevolutionists in Higher Education*. Harris devoted a chapter of this monograph to Babbitt, whom he grouped among a mix of supposed educational "counterrevolutionists."<sup>24</sup> He deemed such men counterrevolutionists insofar as they opposed something dear to Harris: the use of higher education to promote what he called "operational utility." In the opening chapter of his book, Harris defined operational utility thus: "Put in the briefest terms, higher education for operational utility is the education to equip a student to operate in society at large or to perform specific tasks demanded by his job. In such an education, a person acquires the knowledge and techniques necessary for modern society to function. He seeks to understand his physical and social environment so he can control it."<sup>25</sup>

Babbitt was an opponent of the pedagogical dominance of what Har-

---

115 n. 15; Kieran Egan, *Getting It Wrong from the Beginning: Our Progressive Inheritance from Herbert Spencer, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 122, 141-45.

<sup>20</sup> William P. Few, "President Eliot and the South," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 8 (1909), 185; Hawkins, *Between Harvard and America*, 190-93: "He [Eliot] approved . . . of segregating the races in Southern schools, an arrangement which he wanted the federal government to subsidize, and he even predicted that separate schools would be needed in the North if there were ever large numbers of blacks there" (191).

<sup>21</sup> Charles W. Eliot, *A Turning Point in Higher Education: The Inaugural Address of Charles William Eliot as President of Harvard College, October 19, 1869* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 17-18; Hawkins, *Between Harvard and America*, 193-97.

<sup>22</sup> Charles W. Eliot, *A Late Harvest: Miscellaneous Papers Written between Eighty and Ninety* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1924), 253.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard, 1636-1936* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942), 344.

<sup>24</sup> Harris, *Five Counterrevolutionists in Higher Education*, 49-79.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 31.

---

---

ris labeled “operational utility,” which Babbitt may have called *scientific naturalism*.<sup>26</sup> Thus, Harris’s chapter on Babbitt is less an attempt to understand Babbitt’s thought than an opportunity to pillory New Humanism for its supposedly antiquated elitism. Although Harris discussed the basics of Babbitt’s educational views, the bulk of the chapter amounts to an attempt to refute and condemn Babbitt’s ideas. Thus, for example, Harris portrayed Babbitt as a lapsed Calvinist desperate to find a secularized approach to Calvinist theology.<sup>27</sup> He also obsessed over Babbitt’s elitism.

Harris’s summation of Babbitt’s educational philosophy seems like an almost willful attempt to miss the point. He contended: “He [Babbitt] should not be excused from his failure to deal with the issue of meeting society’s current operational problems. In his critique of higher education he neglected to consider the relationship between operational complexities and the improvement of society. By objecting to education directed toward operational utility, he implied that operationally useful education is unimportant.”<sup>28</sup> Had Harris presented a more nuanced portrait of Babbitt’s thought, he could not have offered this conclusion. To be sure, Babbitt feared the eclipse of an inward-directed education based on humanist precepts. In a memorable phrase from *Rousseau and Romanticism*, he worried that scientific naturalism and sentimental humanitarianism, without the balancing work of humanism, would turn the typical person into “an efficient megalomaniac.”<sup>29</sup>

But this does not mean that he saw no place in society for the scientific naturalism Harris equated with “operational utility.” Indeed, in *Rousseau and Romanticism*, Babbitt noted, “I have no quarrel, it is scarcely necessary to add, either with the man of science or the romanticist when they keep in their proper place. As soon however as they try, whether separately or in unison, to set up some substitute for humanism or religion, they should be at once attacked, the man of science for not being sufficiently positive and critical, the romanticist for not being rightly imaginative.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Harris’s conception of Babbitt as a Calvinistic

---

<sup>26</sup> See esp. Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 89-101.

<sup>27</sup> Harris, *Five Counterrevolutionists in Higher Education*, 50. The impetus to link New Humanism to Calvinism appears to stem from Santayana’s criticism of the movement as an exponent of what he labeled “the genteel tradition.” See George Santayana, *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays by George Santayana*, edited by Douglas S. Wilson (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 153-96.

<sup>28</sup> Harris, *Five Counterrevolutionists in Higher Education*, 79.

<sup>29</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 366.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 368.

---

---

thinker is peculiar, given the spirit of ecumenism that pervades Babbitt's writings. In fact, Babbitt's inclination to detect broad similarities in Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism is a strong example of why it is a calumny to label Babbitt an educational counterrevolutionist.<sup>31</sup>

### III

Clearly, Babbitt worried that America's obsession with scientific naturalism would leave no room for humanism. This is why Babbitt excoriated the free-elective curriculum that came to dominate Harvard under Eliot's presidency.<sup>32</sup> And in this regard Babbitt, far from the promoter of antiquated concerns, has proved prescient. Observers of higher education have long feared the fate of the humanities on American college campuses. Especially in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, U.S. universities seem increasingly obsessed with "operational utility" at the expense of the inward-directed humanism that Babbitt so prized.

Signs of troubles for the modern humanities on American college campuses are legion. Recent attempts to shutter humanities programs at the University of Pittsburgh, Mills College, the University of Tulsa, and McDaniel College have alarmed humanists and made them fret that disciplines previously deemed the core of liberal-arts instruction could find themselves on the chopping block.<sup>33</sup>

Even those who enjoy watching college sports on television can find evidence that Babbitt's concerns about the replacement of human-

---

<sup>31</sup> Yet even Hoeveler, in his careful book-length analysis of the New Humanist movement (*The New Humanism*) concluded that Babbitt and his epigones aimed "to encourage a counterrevolution in higher education that would reverse the trends set by a half-century of major changes" (107).

<sup>32</sup> For his critique of the free-elective system, see esp. Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, esp. 95-96, 120-21, and *Spanish Character and Other Essays*, 198-225.

<sup>33</sup> On the situation at the University of Pittsburgh, see Gordon Hutner and Feisal Mohamed, "The Real Humanities Crisis Is Happening at Public Universities," *The New Republic* (Sept. 6, 2013), <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/114616/public-universities-hurt-humanities-crisis>. On the proposed elimination of various humanities and social science departments at Mills College, see Rick Seltzer, "Philosophy Department on Chopping Block at Mills," *Inside Higher Ed* (June 12, 2017), <https://www.insidehighered.com/quick-takes/2017/06/12/philosophy-department-chopping-block-mills>. On the major changes brewing at the University of Tulsa—an institution with a very sizeable endowment—see Jacob Howland, "Storm Clouds over Tulsa," *City Journal* (April 17, 2019), <https://www.city-journal.org/university-of-tulsa>. On the elimination of five majors and three minors at McDaniel College (all in the humanities and arts), see Scott Jaschik, "McDaniel College Eliminates 5 Majors and 3 Minors," *Inside Higher Ed* (Feb. 25, 2019), <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes2019/02/25/mcdaniel-college-eliminates-5-majors-and-3-minors>.

---

---

ism with humanitarianism were prophetic. These broadcasts typically include brief advertisements for the universities whose teams are competing on the program. Such advertisements offer universities the opportunity to signal to the American public what role they would like to promote for themselves in our culture. Almost without fail, the advertisements highlight the cutting-edge research projects of the university's natural scientists. A professor of robotics, say, has invented an artificial limb for three-legged canines. The emphasis is on humanitarianism (improving and uplifting the world) rather than humanism (improving oneself). In universities' ever-expanding hunt for "operational utility" and the research funding that accompanies it, the contemporary humanities, as Babbitt feared long ago, have been pushed aside.

A recent article in *The Atlantic Monthly* by Benjamin Schmidt provides a notable sign of trouble for the humanities. Schmidt, a history professor, has been among the most careful students of enrollment trends on American college campuses. In the years immediately following the 2008 financial collapse, Schmidt had cautioned against the rhetoric of crisis for the humanities. Doom and gloom about the contemporary humanities, Schmidt argued, focuses chiefly on the dwindling percentage of humanities majors in America. But, given the great expansion of new vocational majors in recent decades, this dwindling percentage should not be cause for alarm.<sup>34</sup>

Yet in August 2018, Schmidt announced a complete change of heart. He called his piece for *The Atlantic* "The Humanities Are in Crisis," and he demonstrated that the plunge in humanities majors on American college campuses was so pronounced as to be appropriately deemed a catastrophe. He wrote: "Something different has been happening with the humanities since the 2008 financial crisis. Five years ago, I argued that the humanities were still near long-term norms in their numbers of majors. But since then, I've been watching the numbers from the Department of Education, and every year, things look worse. Almost every humanities field has seen a rapid drop in majors."<sup>35</sup>

As Babbitt recognized over a century ago, the chief problem for American higher education is not the lack of emphasis on "operational utility." On the contrary, it is unclear whether the humanistic tradition

---

<sup>34</sup> Benjamin Schmidt, "The Data Shows There's No Real Crisis," *The New York Times* (Nov. 4, 2013), <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/11/04/the-fate-of-the-humanities/the-data-shows-theres-no-real-crisis-in-the-humanities>.

<sup>35</sup> Benjamin Schmidt, "The Humanities Are in Crisis," *The Atlantic Monthly* (Aug. 23, 2018), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/the-humanities-face-a-crisisof-confidence/567565/>.

---

---

can survive the country's obsession with vocationalism. Thus, for example, many professors now feel the need to write tracts extolling the virtues of the humanities in an attempt to stave off their downfall. Hence Helen Small, an English professor at Oxford, chose to compose a monograph entitled *The Value of the Humanities*.<sup>36</sup> No one seems to think that a book called *The Value of the Business Major* or *What the Study of Engineering Can Do for You* is urgently required.

According to many educational progressives, American institutions of higher learning should reject the distinction between liberal and vocational studies; the goal, Dewey and his followers thought, was to liberalize vocational studies, rather than to shut them out of the curriculum.<sup>37</sup> Recent decades have demonstrated that this has *not* happened: if anything, liberal studies have been vocationalized, as Babbitt keenly recognized. And hence the humanities now find themselves the sick man of American higher education.

It must be admitted that contemporary professors of the humanities have often failed to help matters. As Babbitt noted, thanks to the priorities of the professionalized American research universities that were pioneered in the late nineteenth century, many humanities professors have themselves abandoned the humanistic tradition.<sup>38</sup> The English professor Stanley Fish provides a useful example. Fish discussed his recipe for good college teaching in his monograph *Save the World on Your Own Time*. On this subject, Fish averred, "College and university teachers can (legitimately) do two things: (1) introduce students to bodies of knowledge and traditions of inquiry that had not previously been part of their experience; and (2) equip those same students with the analytical skills—of argument, statistical modeling, laboratory procedure—that will enable them to move confidently within those traditions and to engage

---

<sup>36</sup> Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>37</sup> See, e.g., Butts, *The College Charts Its Course*, 371: "Dewey's recommendation . . . was that democracy could best be served by joining together the liberal and vocational studies and introducing into education a good deal more scientific and practical study in order to work toward modifying the socially obnoxious features of the industrial order. In this way, he would hope to broaden the conception of vocational education so that industrial workers would be able to find more meaning in the mechanical features of production and distribution through a larger share in social control, and so that more privileged economic groups would gain a greater sympathy for labor and a greater sense of social responsibility." Dewey openly aimed to restore the vocational mission of the colleges: see, e.g., John Dewey, *The Educational Situation* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969; first published in 1904), 103-104.

<sup>38</sup> On this topic, see esp. Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*.

---

---

in independent research after a course is over.”<sup>39</sup> He further cautioned that, “teachers cannot, except for a serendipity that by definition cannot be counted on, fashion moral character, or inculcate respect for others, or produce citizens of a certain temper.”<sup>40</sup> Thus did Fish—likely without knowing it—dismiss the spirit of Renaissance humanism that played the chief role in shaping the American college curriculum from the colonial period to the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, in part because they did not heed the warnings Babbitt offered in his writings, humanities professors in American colleges and universities have now become so professionalized that their careers have scarcely anything to do with the humanistic tradition. My own field of classical studies offers much evidence for this lamentable state of affairs. American graduate programs in classics are typically boot camps for instruction in the ancient languages. The focus throughout is on rigorous philological methods. Those who have earned classics Ph.D.s in the United States thus possess the ability to teach Latin and ancient Greek at the collegiate level and possibly to contribute to modern scholarship on the Greco-Roman world. But they seldom learn anything about the history of the humanities. As a result, while they may have a vague sense that classical studies formerly played a dominant role in Western secondary and higher education, they may seldom have any idea why this was so, other than, perhaps, an elitist obsession with cultural capital.

Petrarch had loved the ancients, relishing masterpieces of Latin literature as a means to provide models of virtue and bravery that would allow him to persevere through the grief and fear that constantly vexed him.<sup>42</sup> By comparison, the typical contemporary classicist is not taught to use the ancients as potential models for emulation. Rather, he or she is taught to love grammar, philology, and research. As a result, very few contemporary humanities professors know anything about the humanistic tradition.

#### IV

Ignorance about the humanistic tradition arose in part because the defenders of the classical humanities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provided such unsatisfying apologetics for their subject

---

<sup>39</sup> Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12-13.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., Eric Adler, *Classics, the Culture Wars, and Beyond* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 44-66.

<sup>42</sup> See, e.g., Robert E. Proctor, *Defining the Humanities: How Rediscovering a Tradition Can Improve Our Schools* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 25-58.

---

---

matter. An examination of the work of a few noteworthy apologists for the humanities from Babbitt's era will give us a sense of the weaknesses inherent in such traditionalist defenses and also underscore key differences between such apologetics and Babbitt's pedagogical philosophy. This will help demonstrate that, *pace* Michael Harris, Babbitt was not an educational counterrevolutionist.

Let us first turn to a figure from the generation before Babbitt. Andrew Preston Peabody (1811-93) was an American clergyman and writer. A Harvard graduate (class of 1826), in the course of his career he served as a pastor, the owner and editor of the *North American Review*, a professor of Christian morals at Harvard, and an interim president there too.<sup>43</sup> When Harvard contemplated dropping ancient Greek as a required subject for its admission examinations in the mid-1880s, Peabody leapt to the defense of the language, contributing an article to *The Atlantic Monthly* called "The Study of Greek."<sup>44</sup> Although Peabody presented numerous rationales in favor of obligatory Greek studies, he placed the greatest emphasis on the language's religious bona fides. In his piece he stressed, "We call ourselves a Christian people, and ill as we deserve the name, it never was so truly ours as now, if we may trust the statistics of the churches and benevolent institutions of all the leading Christian denominations."<sup>45</sup> Peabody argued that, just as Jews learn Hebrew in order to read the Hebrew Bible in its original language, Christians should learn *koine* Greek in order to read the New Testament.<sup>46</sup>

Such an argument was linked to the intellectual and religious history of the American colleges. Although it is simplifying to suggest that the nation's first colleges existed to train future ministers, the religious character of early American life deeply influenced its higher learning.<sup>47</sup> But Peabody vouched for the religious value of the ancient Greek language

---

<sup>43</sup> On Peabody's interim presidency at Harvard—which took place between the resignation of Thomas Hill in 1868 and Eliot's assumption of the office in 1869—see Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard*, 328; Hawkins, *Between Harvard and America*, 45-46. Peabody had been a candidate for the presidency in 1868, but he lost out to Eliot.

<sup>44</sup> The renewed debate among Harvard's faculty and Board of Overseers appears largely to have been a response to a famous speech that Charles Francis Adams, Jr., gave at the institution in 1883. For the text of this speech, see Charles Francis Adams, Jr., *A College Fetish: An Address Delivered before the Harvard Chapter of the Fraternity of the Phi Beta Kappa in Sanders Theatre, Cambridge, June 28, 1883*, third edition (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1884).

<sup>45</sup> A. P. Peabody, "The Study of Greek," *The Atlantic Monthly* 53 (Jan. 1884), 75.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g., W. H. Cowley and Don Williams, *International and Historical Roots of American Higher Education* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1991), 7; Eric Adler, *The Battle of the Classics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 47.

---

---

precisely when American higher education was beginning to turn away from its Christian foundation. The United States at this time was both industrializing and secularizing, as technological changes helped uproot the nation's traditional patterns of life. The pace of scientific discoveries, combined with the recent mania for Darwinism, suggested to many educated Americans that they stood at the dawn of a new era, in which religion would rightly play a much smaller role.<sup>48</sup> Thus, many of the architects of the American research universities in the late nineteenth century knowingly attempted to limit the curricular prominence of theology and the classical languages. Advocates of the natural and social sciences hoped that their subjects would supply an alternate intellectual foundation for collegiate study.<sup>49</sup> Although justifications underscoring the specifically Christian benefits to be derived from learning ancient Greek were likely to retain an appeal among some Americans, the numbers of these citizens were dwindling.

Another problem presented itself for thinkers such as Peabody, who grounded their case for the classics in Christian theology. If ancient Greek were valuable in large measure because it offered Christians direct access to the Bible, what could justify the typical humanist pedagogical focus on so many pagan authors from antiquity? Why should good Protestants spend their time translating the works of Homer, Sophocles, and Plato?

Thankfully, these theological arguments in favor of ancient Greek did not exhaust the intellectual arsenal of apologists for the classical humanities. But other traditionalistic rationales for the ancient languages were no more likely to resonate with the American public. We can see this from an examination of the work of Paul Shorey. Shorey (1857-1934) was for most of his career a professor of classics and ancient philosophy at the University of Chicago. A Harvard graduate (class of 1878), Shorey earned a Ph.D. in classics in Munich (1884).<sup>50</sup> In the early twentieth cen-

---

<sup>48</sup> On this topic, see, e.g., Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, revised edition (New York: George Braziller, 1959).

<sup>49</sup> On this subject, see Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University*, esp. 1-108.

<sup>50</sup> On Shorey's life and work, see Walter R. Agard, "Classical Scholarship," in *American Scholarship in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Merle Curti (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 153-54; William M. Calder III, "Die Geschichte der klassischen Philologie in den Vereinigten Staaten," *Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien* 11 (1966), 222; E. Christian Kopff, "Paul Shorey," in *Classical Scholarship: A Biographical Encyclopedia*, edited by Ward W. Briggs and William M. Calder III (New York and London: Garland, 1990), 447-53; Caroline Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780-1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 112-13, 116-17.

---

---

tury, Shorey wrote numerous defenses of the ancient languages.<sup>51</sup>

One such defense can be found in "The Case for the Classics," which Shorey published in *The School Review* in 1910. In this piece, Shorey vouched for the classics in part on the grounds of the supposed cultural superiority of the ancient Greeks. He argued: "Whatever the talking delegates of science may say in their haste, thoughtful scientific men require no professor of Greek to tell them that the languages and literatures of the 1300 years of continuous civilization from Homer to Julian subtend a far larger arc of the great circle of knowledge than Sanskrit or Zend or the other specialties to which they are so often compared."<sup>52</sup>

This argument parallels another that became popular in the second half of the nineteenth century: the idea that the ancient Greeks were the founders of "Western civilization." In the mid-nineteenth century, numerous opponents of academic vocationalism began radically to alter their conception of the humanities. Thanks in large measure to the Italian humanists, the humanities for centuries had referred to the study of literary masterworks from ancient Greece and Rome. Aware of the troubled future for Latin and ancient Greek in the United States, however, some classical scholars deliberately expanded the humanities to include the study of literature, music, philosophy, and art, broadly conceived.<sup>53</sup> This was the origin of what we might call the *modern humanities*.

The modern humanities would naturally require some sort of intellectual justification if they were to have the chance to retain the status formerly accorded to the classical humanities. The most important thinker associated with this justification is Charles Eliot Norton (1827-1908), a professor of art history at Harvard. Norton became the chief architect of an intellectual rationalization for the modern humanities that ultimately earned the label "Western civilization."<sup>54</sup> To Norton, the peoples of Europe and their cultural descendants possessed a common history, which was founded in Greek antiquity. It would be the proper goal of the modern humanities, believed Norton, to trace this common ancestry throughout time. Only then could Westerners understand the development of their society and deem themselves educated. Shorey,

---

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, the pieces collected in Paul Shorey, *The Assault on Humanism* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly, 1917).

<sup>52</sup> Paul Shorey, "The Case for the Classics," *The School Review* 18.9 (November, 1910), 601.

<sup>53</sup> See Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, 117.

<sup>54</sup> James Turner, *The Liberal Education of Charles Eliot Norton* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 384-88. Turner relates (384) that Norton did not use this term, preferring to refer to "our civilization."

---

---

like the proponents of the “Western civilization” thesis, spied something unique in ancient Greek intellectual history. Thus, to Shorey, Sanskrit was a subject of value only to the specialist, whereas *all* educated people must study Hellenic culture. The dominance of identity politics in contemporary American academia has demonstrated that this was not an argument with a long shelf-life. Indeed, ever since the academic culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, this Western focus has become the object of fierce attack.<sup>55</sup> Especially since the contemporary humanities encompass subjects not traditionally viewed as part of the West (for example, the study of African history and the Korean language), Norton’s Occidental paradigm for the modern humanistic disciplines makes little sense.

But Shorey anchored his defense of the classics in the most prominent educational rationale of his time: the idea of “mental discipline.” Proponents of mental discipline theory attempted to connect the liberal arts tradition to so-called faculty psychology, an epistemological doctrine associated with the Scots Common Sense School.<sup>56</sup> They viewed the mind through the metaphor of a muscle: just as one needs to exercise one’s body in order to grow strong, one must also exercise one’s mind to increase such faculties as reasoning, judgment, memory, and the sensibilities. Shorey, like so many in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was a steadfast believer in faculty psychology. As he noted in his article from 1910, “the critical interpretation or translation of [Greek] supplies the simplest and most effective all-round discipline of the greatest number of faculties.”<sup>57</sup> Shorey believed, as he put it, “that there is such a thing as intellectual discipline, and that some studies are better mental gymnastics than others.”<sup>58</sup>

His article, however, demonstrates some of the downsides of this rationale for the classics. The theory of mental discipline allowed exponents of the social sciences to become the rightful judges of educational value. Social scientists could test empirically which subjects most effectively promoted mental discipline. About such studies, Shorey claimed, “There are in general no laboratory experiments that teach us anything about the higher mental processes which we cannot observe and infer by

---

<sup>55</sup> See Adler, *Classics, the Culture Wars, and Beyond*.

<sup>56</sup> For a useful explanation of faculty psychology and its origins in the Scots Common Sense School, see Pak, “The Yale Report of 1828,” 50. See also J. David Hoeveler, Jr., *James McCosh and the Scottish Intellectual Tradition: From Glasgow to Princeton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 101-2; James Axtell, *Wisdom’s Workshop: The Rise of the Modern University* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 262 n. 78.

<sup>57</sup> Shorey, “The Case for the Classics,” 598.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 607.

---

---

better and more natural methods."<sup>59</sup> But this was merely an attempt to hide the fact that he had no proof of the superior mental discipline inculcated by the study of ancient Greek. Mental discipline theory also undercut the humanities because it denied the value of specific educational content. It thus dismissed the chief justification for the study of classical literature offered since antiquity.<sup>60</sup> Without a regard for substance, educators could now argue that *any* activity was a fit subject of curricular attention, provided it proved sufficiently mentally taxing.

## V

Christian theology, Western civilization, and, above all else, mental discipline—these were the arguments the educational counterrevolutionists of Babbitt's day offered to justify the humanities. As we shall now discuss, Babbitt's case for the humanities relied on *none* of these foundations. If anything, his rationale criticized these foundations as either wrongheaded or insufficient to the task at hand. In fact, Babbitt provided a rationale for modern humanistic study that was far more persuasive than those the counterrevolutionists mustered.

This was partly the case because Babbitt linked his conception of a proper education to Renaissance humanism. He saw in authors from Greek and Roman antiquity the possibility of encountering models of virtue and wisdom that could engage students' imaginations and allow them to lead sounder lives.<sup>61</sup> Babbitt actually crafted a far more detailed rationale for this approach to education than did the Renaissance humanists. And, unlike the Italian humanists, he did so without placing the ancients on a metaphorical pedestal, as proponents of timeless wisdom whose conclusions could not be improved upon.<sup>62</sup>

In all this, Babbitt's thought directly opposed traditionalists such as Shorey. In the antebellum period, classical pedagogy had degenerated into a lifeless approach to education. By the nineteenth century (if not

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> On the crucial importance of canonical masterworks (principally Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and, for the Romans of the imperial period, Vergil's *Aeneid*) to Hellenistic and Roman education, see, e.g., Teresa Morgan, *Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 16, 51, 68-88, 93.

<sup>61</sup> On the importance and inevitability of models Babbitt noted (*Rousseau and Romanticism*, 387): "In the absence of good models the child will imitate bad ones, and so, long before the age of intelligent choice and self-determination, become the prisoner of bad habits."

<sup>62</sup> On this topic, see Thomas R. Nevin, *Irving Babbitt: An Intellectual Study* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 39.

---

---

earlier), the American colleges typically trained their students through toilsome recitations, in which ancient Greek and Latin became fodder for relentless oral quizzing on grammar. The era's pedagogical focus on rote memorization and so-called gerund-grinding likely left its classicists unable to vouch for the study of the ancient languages through humanist rationales. Their classes introduced students only to little snippets of ancient writings, which were valued largely as grammatical puzzles.<sup>63</sup>

As Babbitt bemoaned, the professionalization of American classical studies in the late nineteenth century ultimately failed to improve this situation, as narrowly trained classical philologists heralded the science of grammar.<sup>64</sup> Hence the recourse to defending the study of ancient Greek on the grounds of "mental discipline": classicists could hardly argue that their gerund-grinding offered the sort of approach to education advocated by the Italian humanists. Instead, as we detected in the work of Shorey, they were forced to portray the ancient languages as a peerless form of mental gymnastics.

Babbitt recognized the hollowness of this defense. His humanistic vision of literary study was offered in direct opposition. Perhaps the clearest example of Babbitt's thinking can be found in an essay he wrote in 1920, called "English and the Discipline of Ideas." At the beginning of this essay, Babbitt pondered the possibility that students flock to courses in English literature because they prove easier than classes in physics and the classical languages.<sup>65</sup> He asked whether one could justify English literature courses on "cultural and disciplinary" grounds.<sup>66</sup> "My own conviction," he wrote, "is that if English is to be thus justified it must be primarily by what I am terming the discipline of ideas."<sup>67</sup> More specifically, he contended that the study of English literature should focus on ideas surrounding "sound ethical standards."<sup>68</sup> Thus did Babbitt replace "mental discipline" with the "discipline of ideas." He disliked what he regarded as trivializing philology and scorned the popular notion that the value of the classical languages stemmed from their grammatical and syntactical rigor.

---

<sup>63</sup> See Roger L. Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education: Learning and Culture from the Founding to World War II* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), 192, 205-206; Axtell, *Wisdom's Workshop*, 194-95, 201-202.

<sup>64</sup> See esp. Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 134-67.

<sup>65</sup> Irving Babbitt, "English and the Discipline of Ideas," *The English Journal* 9.2 (Feb. 1920), 61.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

---

---

In his writings Babbitt disdained the lifeless way in which many traditionalists had approached the classics. About the neo-classical Jesuitical training from which Rousseau rebelled, for example, he wrote: "The Greek and especially the Latin classics are taught in such a way as to become literary playthings rather than the basis of a philosophy of life; a humanism is thus encouraged that is external and rhetorical rather than vital."<sup>69</sup> Far from issuing a call for a return to the desiccated classical study of American higher education in the nineteenth century, Babbitt aimed to provide a blueprint to jumpstart a genuinely humanist approach to literature. Babbitt *almost never* defended classical literature on the grounds that it supplies mental discipline.<sup>70</sup> For him, the literary classics were too vital to self-perfection and human flourishing to serve as a mere intellectual workout.

According to Babbitt, classical literature provided a crucial source of moral guidance. This moral approach to the humanities extended to Babbitt's discussions of aesthetics. One can see this in various passages of *Rousseau and Romanticism*, in which Babbitt highlighted the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. For instance, as part of his criticism of the Rousseauist's view of aesthetics, he argued:

But to his aesthetic perceptiveness he [the Rousseauist] failed, as I have already said, to add ethical perceptiveness because of his inability to distinguish between ethical perceptiveness and mere didacticism, and so when asked to put ethical purpose into art he replied that art should be pursued for its own sake (*l'art pour l'art*) and that "beauty is its own excuse for being." One should note here the transformation that this pure aestheticism brought about in the meaning of the word beauty itself. For the Greek beauty resided in proportion, and proportion can only be attained with the aid of the ethical imagination. With the elimination of the ethical element from the soul of art the result is an imagination that is free to wander wild with the emancipated emotions. The result is likely to be an art in which lively aesthetic perceptiveness is not subordinated to any whole, art that is unstructural, however it may abound in vivid and picturesque details; and a one-sided art of this kind the romanticist does not hesitate to call beautiful.<sup>71</sup>

Babbitt's criticism of the romantic predilection to decouple aesthetics

---

<sup>69</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 118.

<sup>70</sup> For an uncharacteristic mention of the difficulty of the classical languages on Babbitt's part, see Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 169. Babbitt (e.g., *ibid.*, 164) did make occasional nods to the ability of masterworks to sharpen one's faculties, but this was always of ancillary importance to him in comparison with the messages contained in these works. Thus, Harris (*Five Counterrevolutionists in Higher Education*, 55) rightly notes, "He [Babbitt] conceded that faculty psychology was outdated." Pace Butts, *The College Charts Its Course*, 272.

<sup>71</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 205-206.

---

---

from ethics prompted him to assert a striking paradox about the nineteenth century: "No age ever grew so ecstatic over natural beauty as the nineteenth century, at the same time no age ever did so much to deface nature. No age ever so exalted the country over the town, and no age ever witnessed such a crowding into urban centres."<sup>72</sup> And yet, as Claes Ryn has demonstrated, Babbitt's approach to aesthetics did not entail an unqualified, reactionary return to the ancients. Rather, he vouched for the creative element of artistic imagination, instead of rooting his aesthetic theory in *mimesis*.<sup>73</sup> In all this, Babbitt was worlds away from the educational traditionalists of his era, who grounded their case for the classical humanities in faculty psychology.

But Babbitt also proved critical of traditionalistic vouching for the humanities through Christian sectarianism and cheerleading for the superiority of Western civilization. This allows us to see most vividly why Babbitt was not an educational counterrevolutionist. In *The College Charts Its Course*, Butts viewed Babbitt's interest in non-Western thinkers as an oddity. About the New Humanism more generally, Butts opined, "it draws for philosophic inspiration from Plato, Aristotle, medieval Scholasticism, and even, in the case of some Humanists, from Indian theosophy and Buddhism. All in all, the trend seemed to indicate a further retirement from the pressing affairs of this world in the direction of greater contemplation of the more fixed and eternal world of the supernatural."<sup>74</sup> In this rendition of the New Humanism, recourse to Buddhism becomes little more than a colorful means to back up a reactionary pedagogical program.

Yet for Babbitt it was nothing of the sort. On the contrary: attention to non-Occidental thought (which, for Babbitt, meant principally Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity) reflects Babbitt's attempt radically to expand the humanistic canon. There are sundry examples of this in Babbitt's writing.<sup>75</sup> *Rousseau and Romanticism* provides numerous passages that explicitly or implicitly point to the need for a broadened humanism. In the introduction to the book, for example, Babbitt highlighted the quintessential value of Buddha and Confucius for an understanding of

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 301.

<sup>73</sup> Ryn, "Introduction to the Transaction Edition," xvii-liii. On this topic, see also Folke Leander, "Irving Babbitt and the Aestheticians," *Modern Age* 4.4 (1960), 395-404.

<sup>74</sup> Butts, *The College Charts Its Course*, 271.

<sup>75</sup> Examples of this tendency can be found in, e.g., Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 83, 201-206, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 148, 150, 343; *Democracy and Leadership*, 34, 163; and *The Dhammapada: Translated from the Pāli with an Essay on Buddha and the Occident* (New York: New Directions Publishing Company, 1936), 65-121.

---

---

human nature:

There are special reasons just now why this background to which one appeals should not be merely Occidental. An increasing material contact between the Occident and the Far East is certain. We should be enlightened by this time as to the perils of material contact between men and bodies of men who have no deeper understanding. Quite apart from this consideration the experience of the Far East completes and confirms in a most interesting way that of the Occident. We can scarcely afford to neglect it if we hope to work out a truly ecumenical wisdom to oppose to the sinister one-sidedness of our current naturalism. Now the ethical experience of the Far East may be summed up for practical purposes in the teachings and influence of two men, Confucius and Buddha. To know the Buddhistic and Confucian teachings in their true spirit is to know what is best and most representative in the ethical experience of about half the human race for over seventy generations.<sup>76</sup>

Careful attention to Babbitt's writings demonstrates that his desire to expand humanism beyond its Occidental confines is not a peculiarity, a novel means of encouraging a return to the past. Rather, it signals a desire to broaden the humanistic canon in a way more intellectually satisfying than Norton's focus on Western civilization. In a sense, one could contend that Babbitt was arguing for a transformation of humanism akin to Cicero's transformation of Greek *paideia*. Whereas the ancient Greeks had rooted their education in their own culture's literary classics, the Romans focused on the study of a foreign culture as much as their own. At its inception, the humanistic tradition was bicultural; in Babbitt's view, it should grow more multicultural still.

Babbitt's expanded humanism would have proved too broad for the traditionalistic culture warriors of the 1980s and 1990s, who aimed to maintain the focus on a Nortonian progression of great Western writers. Even today's core curriculum at Columbia University fails to live up to Babbitt's spirit of ecumenism, as it adds a smattering of non-Western authors to the end of its Great Books sequence.<sup>77</sup> Thus, Babbitt's humanism is not the intellectual project of a counterrevolutionist, but of a thinker at least a century before his time. Broadminded educators can thus use Babbitt's work as a blueprint for a global humanities centered on the deeper, humane relevance of its subjects. We can pioneer approaches to the humanities that remain anchored in the Renaissance conception of using literature, philosophy, and history to provide sound models while including the achievements of many cultures—to present students with,

---

<sup>76</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, lxxviii-lxxix.

<sup>77</sup> For information on Columbia's core curriculum, including the texts assigned, see [www.college.columbia.edu/core/](http://www.college.columbia.edu/core/).

---

---

as Babbitt called it, “a truly ecumenical wisdom.”<sup>78</sup>

A century after the publication of arguably his chief intellectual claim to fame, Babbitt can still help provide a way forward for humanists. This is not the contribution of an educational counterrevolutionist. It is high time for revisionist scholars of American higher education to examine anew the tenets of the New Humanism. A proper understanding of Babbitt’s educational philosophy could help rescue the modern humanities.

---

<sup>78</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, lxxix.