
Dialogue on Babbitt and Epistemology

Babbitt, Literary Positivism, And Neo-Positivism

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In a recent issue of this journal Professor Claes G. Ryn has raised the question of the legitimacy of classifying Irving Babbitt as an adherent to the method of literary criticism known as positivism.¹ His remarks were stimulated by my own advocacy of restoring to common use a critical methodology, positivism, widely designated under that name, which Babbitt looked upon with favor. Labelling my renewed version neo-positivism, I described it as “a method of objective description allowing for esthetic and moral evaluations and welcoming multiculturalism as represented by Babbitt at the beginning of the century and Etienne at its end.”² Seeking a compromise between approaches based on analysis of technique and those on culture, I proposed that “such a neo-positivism could embrace both stylistically-oriented studies and those tending toward history.” I also described Babbitt as “a self-proclaimed positivist.” Professor Ryn objected to my proposal on two principal grounds: 1) that positivism is a system appropriate to the natural sciences, but not to the humanities; 2) that Babbitt used the terms “positivist” and “positivism” loosely and that he did not in his own practice follow positivistic methodology.

Before venturing an opinion on whether Professor Ryn’s objections are well founded, I shall give a brief sketch of the meaning of positivism in history and a somewhat more extensive sketch of Babbitt’s treat-

¹ “How We Know What We Know: Babbitt, Positivism and Beyond,” 8:1 (1995), 6-25.

² “Jonathan Swift’s Message for Moderns,” *Modern Age* 37 (1995), 170-75.
Babbitt and Positivism

ment of the concept. The system along with its name derived from two works by the French philosopher Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830-42) and *Systeme de politique positive* (1851-54), the first an exposition of a method of scientific inquiry and the second a vision of reorganizing society on the basis of this method. As a result of the wide divergence between the aims of these two books, there has been an equally great divergence among the historical definitions of positivism. According to John Stuart Mill, positivism is essentially the scientific method, "not a recent invention of M. Comte, but a simple adherence to the traditions of all the great scientific minds whose discoveries have made the human race what it is."³ According to a later disciple, Frederic Harrison, however, "Positivism is at once—a scheme of Education, a form of Religion, a school of Philosophy, and a phase of Socialism."⁴

*Scientific
positivism.*

At first glance, Comte's scientific method seems to be essentially the same as that which Babbitt describes as Baconianism, or the empirical and utilitarian currents of thought. But Comte gives a philosophical or epistemological buttress to his concept. As summarized by John Stuart Mill: "We have no knowledge of anything but Phenomena; and our knowledge of phenomena is relative, not absolute. We know not the essence, nor the real mode of production, of any fact, but only its relations to other facts in the way of succession or of similitude. These relations are constant, that is, always the same in the same circumstances. The constant resemblances which link phenomena together, and the constant sequences which unite them as antecedent and consequent, are termed their laws. The laws of phenomena are all we know respecting them. Their essential nature, and their ultimate cause, are unknown and inscrutable to us."⁵ This is essentially what could be called "scientific positivism," and I have seen no evidence in Babbitt's works to indicate that he would have objected to the method when applied experimentally to observable phenomena. Babbitt had no objection to Baconianism in this sense. He opposed only the failure to extend the positive method beyond observable phenomena, a limitation that he called incomplete positivism since it did not comprise what he himself called "spiritual positivism" and "moral positivism."

Comte by no means limited the positive method to the laboratory, but envisioned bringing all or nearly all knowledge to the positive

³ *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte* (New York, 1887), 10.

⁴ *Positive Evolution of Religion* (London, 1913), p. xix.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

stage through a process of gradual enlightenment. According to his theory, human knowledge has already progressed toward the positive state through a series of three stages. In the first or theological stage, a personal or volitional explanation is offered for everything in nature. This personal approach has three divisions: fetichism, polytheism, and monotheism. The second stage, the metaphysical, is ontological and abstractional. Nature is given consciousness, and abstract Force rather than a personal god is thought to control the universe. The third stage is that of positivism, which is entirely experimental, as described above. In the theological stage, all institutions of the state were thought to be divinely established. In the metaphysical stage, moral rules and political institutions evolved from the conception of Natural Rights, which people regarded as an entity, or one of the imaginary laws of the imaginary being, Nature. The Positive stage represented "all theories in which the ultimate standard of institutions and rules of action was the happiness of mankind."⁶ As a substitute for the traditional Religion of Nature, Comte projected a Religion of Humanity, requiring love and service of the human race and worship, both private and public, of the *Grand Etre*, an entity consisting entirely of all human beings in every age and social position who have played their part worthily in life.

Various critics have cited the writings of Sainte-Beuve and Matthew Arnold as typical examples of positive procedures applied to literature, but the best illustration is probably Gustave Lanson. In the early twentieth century, *Lansonism* was often used as equivalent to positivism. Following is his notion of French literary scholarship: "Our principal operations consist in understanding literary texts, in comparing them to distinguish the individual from the collective [a manifestation of the Platonic doctrine of the One and the Many that is vital to Babbitt's thinking], in grouping them by genres, schools and movements, in determining finally the relationship of these groups with the intellectual, moral and social life of our country, as well as with the development of European literature and civilization."⁷ Lanson, moreover, sharply separated the subject matter of literature from that of science, the latter of which, he affirmed, concerns itself with the general and excludes the "particular, individual, and consequently the concrete, the sensitive, in short vitality." (Babbitt is ambiguous on this point, but usually seems to place the general above the particular.) Lanson also indicated that the literary historian cannot experiment, but merely observe, and that the

*Literary
positivism.*

⁶ Mill, *op. cit.*, 64

⁷ *Essai de methode de critique et d'histoire litteraire*, ed. Henri Peyre (Paris, 1965), 102.

facts he observes cannot be measured or weighed or made to repeat themselves. Further comment on the gathering and use of facts is provided by a pioneer in the discipline of comparative literature, Paul Van Tieghem. In his words, "the character of genuine comparative literature like that of all historical science is to embrace the largest number of facts of different origin in order best to explain each one of them; to enlarge the basis of knowledge in order to discover the causes of the greatest possible number of effects. In short, the word 'comparative' must be drained of all esthetic value and receive a scientific value."⁸ I do not personally agree with Van Tieghem that the positivist method must reject esthetic considerations, but it is possible that Babbitt would have raised no objection to that position, for he characterized esthetics as "a nightmare subject."⁹

*Babbitt's
"complete"
positivism.*

In his published works Babbitt has little to say about Comte personally. Indeed the major passage concerning him merely repudiates the Religion of Humanity. "The persons who have piqued themselves especially on being positive have looked for leadership to the exponents of physical science. Auguste Comte, for example, not only regarded men of science as the true modern priesthood, but actually disparaged moral effort on the part of the individual. I scarcely need to repeat here what I have said elsewhere—that the net result of a merely scientific 'progress' is to produce efficient megalomaniacs. Physical science, excellent in its proper place, is, when exalted out of this place, the ugliest and most maleficent idol before which man has as yet consented to prostrate himself."¹⁰

Babbitt's most direct reference to positivism occurs in the introduction to *Rousseau and Romanticism* in connection with his treatment of such terms as modern and the modern spirit. He affirms that these words do not always refer to that which is most recent, for writers like Goethe, Sainte-Beuve, Renan and Arnold mean by the modern spirit "the positive and critical spirit, the spirit that refuses to take things on authority." He goes on to say that he wishes to be thoroughly modern in this sense. "I hold that one should not only welcome the efforts of the man of science at his best to put the natural law on a positive and

⁸ *La Litterature comparée* (Paris, 1911), 21.

⁹ *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New York, 1930 [1919]), 207. In the next few paragraphs quotations are from Babbitt's introduction, pp. ix-xxiii; later, the book is cited in the text as "RR."

¹⁰ *Democracy and Leadership*, rpt. in George A. Panichas, ed. *Irving Babbitt: Representative Writings* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1981), 148

critical basis, but that one should strive to emulate him in one's dealings with the human law; and so become a complete positivist." This passage seems to suggest wholesale acceptance of positivist methodology, but as Professor Ryn correctly points out, Babbitt goes on to affirm that "my main objection to the movement I am studying is that it has failed to produce complete positivists." This Professor Ryn interprets as a general renunciation of positivism beyond the boundary of science. The passage, like many others in *Babbitt*, is ambiguous. It seems to me that the clue to correct interpretation resides in the phrase "the movement I am studying," the only possible grammatical antecedents of which are in Babbitt's text the modern spirit or Romanticism. The modern spirit, however, is not applicable since this phrase incorporates Goethe and the other writers whom Babbitt favors. Romanticism also seems inappropriate since Babbitt gives as his example of the incomplete romanticist, Diderot, who was not a romanticist but rather as Babbitt indicates "a chief source of naturalistic tendency." Babbitt, however, may in this passage be associating naturalism with romanticism, and then no incompatibility exists. His following remarks make clear, moreover, that he is establishing a dualism between the individual and nature (or the cosmos), a duality which resembles a more familiar one of spirit and body, although Babbitt does not use the latter formulation. At any rate, he accuses the incomplete positivist of concerning himself with nature alone without taking account of human individuality (a position closely resembling Lanson's objection to experimental science which excludes the individual and in consequence vitality). Babbitt, however, does not use dualistic terms such as conscience, soul or spirit, but defines an individualist as "the man who plants himself, not on outer authority, but on experience." The incomplete positivist is "positivist only according to the natural law." Babbitt next affirms dogmatically that "what prevails in the region of the natural law is endless change and relativity; therefore the naturalistic positivist attacks all the traditional creeds and dogmas for the very reason that they aspire to fixity." It could be maintained to the contrary that in the realm of science, change takes place only through experiment—when it has been proved that what has been taken for truth is actually mistaken. Natural laws do not fluctuate even though theories to account for them may vary, but fluctuating theories have never been established experimentally. Babbitt gives a striking example later in his text of the Chinese opinion in 1870 that coming down with small-pox was an auspicious sign (RR, 246-47). This attitude Babbitt calls "a convention" rather than

a creed or dogma, but he compares it to Pascal's view that sickness is the natural state of the Christian. Other subjects about which traditional creeds and dogmas have varied immensely from one chronological period to another or from one culture to another are monogamy, slavery, the status of women, and natural rights.

What kind of standards?

Babbitt in his introduction separates "the ethical values of civilization" from "fixed beliefs," but he does not label the latter as either conventions or traditional creeds and dogmas. He argues that since ethical values have been associated with the fixed beliefs of naturalism, "the ethical values themselves are in danger of being swept away in the everlasting flux. Because the individual who views life positively must give up unvarying creeds and dogmas 'anterior, exterior, and superior' to himself, it has been assumed that he must also give up standards." The phrase "anterior, exterior and superior" referring to creeds and dogmas is another ambiguity.¹¹ Does Babbitt have in mind merely natural laws or received moral and religious opinion in general? If he is thinking of traditional religions such as Christianity, does he assent to their being given up? If he means merely secular moral values, how do they differ from standards? This ambiguity, however, does not interfere with the broad outline of Babbitt's argument. In the next step he affirms that "standards imply an element of oneness somewhere, with reference to which it is possible to measure mere manifoldness and change. The naturalistic individualist, however, refuses to recognize any such element of oneness. His own private and personal self is to be the measure of all things and this measure itself, he adds, is constantly changing. But to stop at this stage is to be satisfied with the most dangerous of half-truths." Without stopping at this stage, I should like, nevertheless, to pause and underscore that Babbitt is here portraying the positivist as confronting ethical values, not merely the world of scientific truth. The complete positivist must not only confront ethical values, but take a stand. This may be what Babbitt had in mind when he condemned Comte for disparaging "moral effort on the part of the individual"; otherwise there might seem to be an inconsistency in his thought over whether the individual or an exterior authority should control in ethical questions.

Babbitt continues: "If then, one is to be a sound individualist, an individual with human standards [that is, a complete positivist] . . . one

¹¹ The phrase itself, as I shall show later in note 16, comes from a French critic Brunetière.

must grapple with what Plato terms the problem of the One and the Many." Babbitt admits that his solution of the problem is not purely Platonic. Since an element of unity in things is immediately perceivable, one is not justified in assuming an ideal world of entities or ideas. "To do this is to fall away from a positive and critical into a more or less speculative attitude; it is to risk setting up a metaphysic of the One. Those who put exclusive emphasis on the element of change in things are in no less obvious danger of falling away from the positive and critical attitude into a metaphysic of the Many. . . . The history of philosophy since the Greeks is to a great extent the history of the clashes of the metaphysicians of the One and the metaphysicians of the Many. In the eyes of the complete positivist, this history therefore reduces itself largely to a monstrous logomachy."

Babbitt in this introduction has nothing more direct to say about the nature of a complete positivist. Instead he gives his personal attempt to solve the problem of the One and the Many, which he converts into the problem of the permanent and the changing. He maintains that both forces exist in life, resulting in a "oneness that is always changing." Looking at the problem from the individual perspective—a form of epistemology—he suggests that what is stable and permanent is felt as real and that the "side of life that is always slipping over into something else or vanishing away entirely" is associated with "the feeling of illusion." In this vein he suggests that "the most positive and critical account of man in modern literature is Shakespeare's formulation 'We are such stuff/As dreams are made on.'"¹²

*The One
and the
Many.*

To learn more about the substance of Babbitt's human standards we must look elsewhere. In the text of *Rousseau and Romanticism*, he associates wonder with the Many and wisdom with the One (RR, 365). Applying this dichotomy to the epoch in which he was living, he describes the combined effect as "that of a prodigious peripheral richness joined to a great central void" (RR, 366). In a later essay on humanism, he treats standards in connection with the One and the Many, but here again he falls short of establishing objective criteria. Instead he suggests that standards represent a compromise between the two ele-

¹² In the context of this introduction, Babbitt seems to approve of illusion, considering it as a kind of spiritual counterweight to materialism. In the text of *Rousseau and Romanticism*, however, he associates illusion with the feminine side of Rousseau. "Illusion is the element in which woman even more than man would seem to live and move and have her being" (pp. 158-59). He is deliberately ambiguous concerning his personal attitude, confessing that "in discussing this delicate topic I am prone to take refuge behind authorities."

ments. "In getting his standards the humanist of the best type is not content to acquiesce inertly in tradition. He is aware that there is always entering into life an element of vital novelty [perhaps another echo of Lanson], and that the wisdom of the past, invaluable though it is, cannot therefore be brought to bear too literally on the present. He knows that, though standards are necessary they should be held flexibly and that, to accomplish this feat, he must make the most difficult of all mediations, that between the One and the Many." Babbitt does not tell us how this can be done other than by avoiding the error of the pragmatists, who discuss the One as a metaphysical abstraction, when it is actually "a living intuition."¹³ He adds, however, that "standards result from a co-operation between imagination and reason dealing with the more specifically human aspects of experience." This is in line with his suggestion in *Rousseau and Romanticism* previously quoted that the modern spirit "refuses to take things on authority," which certainly implies that standards are internal not external. In his essay on humanism, Babbitt treats the One and the Many from the humanist's perspective; whereas in the preface to *Rousseau and Romanticism* he does so from the perspective of the complete positivist. This leads to the interesting speculation, which is rarely found in print, of whether the humanist and the positivist may be considered equivalent. I shall return later to this topic.

A restraining power.

Toward the middle of *Rousseau and Romanticism* in a section completely separate from the topic of standards, Babbitt introduces the terms "spiritual positivist" and "moral positivist," which he seems to use interchangeably.¹⁴ "The spiritual positivist then will start from a fact of immediate perception—from the presence namely in the breast of the individual of a principle of vital control (*frein vital*), and he will measure his spiritual strenuousness or spiritual sloth by the degree to which he exercises or fails to exercise this power" (RR, 153). The phrase "in the breast of the individual" is ambiguous, but it suggests an inborn instinct or moral sense. I hesitate to use the term "moral sense" since it is commonly associated with Shaftesbury, whom Babbitt criti-

¹³ Norman Foerster ed., *Humanism in America* (New York, 1930), 42-43.

¹⁴ In his *New Laokoon*, Babbitt uses the expression "a brutal positivism," but without referring to the system as such. The expression denotes a hypothetical condition which could exist if the "sentimental naturalists" by their overindulgence in feeling should bring the higher values of human nature into discredit and leave nothing remaining but "a brutal positivism," presumably a concentration on the bestial aspects of mankind. Panichas, ed., p. 76.

cized almost as harshly as he did Rousseau. I cannot, however, conceive of a more accurate expression. The phrase *frein vital* which Babbitt uses fits the process he describes only halfway. He affirms that the “centre of normal human experience” has a twofold character—an opposition to sin in the Christian sense and an opposition to moral laziness, the recognition of which he attributes to Buddhism. The notion of moral control covers opposition to both sloth and sin, but the rendition *frein vital* is inaccurate. The word *frein* means brake or check, but man’s moral laziness requires a spur rather than a check. Modern students of Babbitt almost universally speak of his moral check, which only partially conveys his concept of moral control. Babbitt himself seems to compound the confusion a few pages later when he uses the term “moral positivist” in the following sentence: “The fact on which the moral positivist would rest his effort to rehabilitate self-control is, as I have said, the presence in man of a restraining, informing and centralizing power that is anterior to both intellect and emotion” (RR, 157). Even here, however, he does not limit the power to restraining, but includes also the aspects of informing and centralizing, which are positive forces rather than the merely negative one of a *frein* or check.

Babbitt was probably not aware of the ambiguity. In his earlier *Masters of Modern French Criticism*, he traces the concept of curbing or suppressing to Ferdinand Brunetière, “that there is needed a principle of restraint in human nature (*un principe réfrénant*), and that this principle cannot be evolved by the individual himself, but must be ‘exterior, anterior and superior’ to the individual” (RR, 329).¹⁵ In the seven-year period between the two books, Babbitt presumably became aware of Henri Bergson’s concept of *élan vital* and devised *frein vital* to counteract it.

In the last chapter of *Rousseau and Romanticism*, Babbitt affirms that “it is not enough to put the brakes on the natural man—and that is what work according to the human law means—we must do it intelligently” (RR, 372).

In an earlier publication, I have shown a paradox in Babbitt’s thought concerning the *frein vital* and the One and the Many.¹⁶ A long

¹⁵ *Masters of Modern French Criticism* (New York, 1960 [1912]). Babbitt applied Brunetière’s phrase “anterior, exterior, and superior” to unvarying creeds and dogmas in the introduction to *Rousseau and Romanticism*. Brunetière’s *réfrénant* and Babbitt’s *frein* are both related to the verb *freiner* to hold back or curb.

¹⁶ “Irving Babbitt and North American Comparative Literature” in *Comparative Literary History as Discourse, In Honor of Anna Balakian*. eds. M. J. Valdes, D. Javitch, & A. O. Aldridge (Bern, 1992), 58-59.

*Conventional
or universal
standards?*

passage in *Rousseau and Romanticism* on decorum asserts that, in order to attain this quality, one must not only have a "correct perception of what to do, but one must actually be able to do it; and this often requires a long and difficult training" (RR, 174). Babbitt then recognizes that decorum depends upon the standards of the community, and that "the good sense and decorum of one time and country do not coincide exactly with those of another time and country, therefore good sense and decorum themselves have in them no universal element, and are entirely implicated in the shifting circumstances of time and place" (RR, 175). It is hard to reconcile this behavioral relativity with the apparent absoluteness of the concept of the One and the Many, that is, the moral imperative of the One superseding the usage of the city or the Many. Babbitt cites "usage of the city" as the approved way of Socrates. He attempts to resolve the dilemma by arguing that there exists in the ethos of every country something of Antigone's "unwritten laws of heaven," or, in Babbitt's paraphrase, something of the permanent order that shines through "even the most imperfect convention." In support of this notion of universal ethos, Babbitt draws a parallel from literature—that the great works possess a common thread expressing universal truths and exercising a universal appeal. He cites Emerson's observation that "the best books of the world" seem to have been written "by one all-wise, all-seeing gentleman." He argues that no other Spanish writer has "so much human appeal as Cervantes," yet "no other brings us so close to the heart of sixteenth-century Spain"; that Confucius, writing in the remote past, expressed "maxims that have not lost their validity to-day"; and that many Buddhist documents reflect "a good sense which is even more imaginative and inspired, and therefore more universal, than that of Confucius, and which is manifested, moreover, on the religious rather than on the humanistic level." Babbitt thereupon concludes, "We are dealing here with indubitable facts, and should plant ourselves firmly upon them as against those who would exaggerate either the constant or the variable elements in human nature" (RR, 176).¹⁷ Although Babbitt in this section nowhere mentions the word "positivism" or describes himself as a critical, moral or spiritual positivist, he does use the expression "indubitable facts," which strongly suggests the foundation of literary positivism's

¹⁷ Babbitt wrote in a marginal note in a book by Henri Beaudoin a quotation from Saint Augustine, *securus judicat orbis terrarum*, "the world judges right." Aldridge, "Irving Babbitt and North American Comparative Literature," 58.

“rapports de fait” or approach through facts. Babbitt also declares a need for “the spiritual positivist who will plant himself on the facts of human law as firmly as the true scientist does on the facts of natural law, and who would look with equal disdain on the apriorist and the metaphysician.”¹⁸

There is another major element in Babbitt’s criticism which has a strong resemblance to the positivist method, even to the original statement of it by Comte. This is the concept of the interrelationship of all knowledge. In Babbitt’s words, “the economic problem will be found to run into the political problem, the political problem in turn into the philosophical problem, and the philosophical problem itself to be almost indissolubly bound up at last with the religious problem.”¹⁹

It is now possible to deal with the question of the relationship between positivism and humanism. A book dealing with neoconservative theories of education unequivocally describes Babbitt as a “positivist humanist.”²⁰ The author says that he borrowed the term directly from Babbitt, “who utilized it to designate the reliance upon critical reasoning which has generally characterized the representatives of this school of thought.”²¹ Phillips’s designation classifies positivism as a branch of humanism, a designation which is historically valid even

*Positivism
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¹⁸ Panichas, ed., p. xxii

¹⁹ *Democracy and Leadership* (New York, 1924), 1.

²⁰ Norman R. Phillips, *The Quest for Excellence* (New York, 1978), 91.

²¹ In an article in the *English Journal*, Babbitt repeats that the definition of terms is the first step in “working out a positive and critical humanism” (Panichas, ed., 69). Phillips’s portrayal of the essence of Babbitt’s philosophy differs substantially from those based on the notion of the inner check: those such as Professor Ryn’s, Professor George Panichas’s in the introduction to his edition of Babbitt, and to some extent my own in the present paper. According to Professor Phillips, Babbitt makes a distinction between man’s natural self, associated with impulse, and his human self, consisting of separate mental faculties which control impulse. To arrive at a condition of effective self-control, the individual must guide himself by a “higher imagination” that presents likenesses and forms conceptions instead of by “loose imagination” or mere sense perception (95-96). The higher imagination allows the individual to judge his experiences according to ethical values and to test them according to analytical reason, a combination described as “insight,” a form of cognition superior to unaided reason just as the latter is above instinct. This process assumes the existence of free will. Personal insight is derived in large measure from the normative aspects of the study of history and literature. Babbitt believed that these norms or values comprise the virtues of moderation, decency and common sense, the joint manifestations of the supreme humanistic virtue decorum, or “the disciplining of impulses to the proportions discerned by the ethical imagination.” In spite of Babbitt’s disclaimers, Phillips believed that Babbitt was “really a disguised rationalist” (98). I might agree were it not for Babbitt’s fervent dedication to Buddhism.

though positivism has equal relevance to the sciences. Humanism, moreover, is primarily an attitude or a philosophy; whereas positivism is a methodology. By applying critical standards to ideas and works of literature, positivism represents humanism at work. It is possible, however, to be either a positivist or a humanist without accepting the other, although the exact borderlines of separation are sometimes tenuous. Obviously a scientific positivist is not necessarily a humanist, but many are. All humanists, moreover, do not insist upon the application of the experimental method, which is one of the characteristics of positivism. In a sense Babbitt was expressing the essence of humanism when he accepted the maxim that "man is the measure of all things."²² In the same paragraph, moreover, he separated experimental knowledge from philosophical belief: "It is hard to see . . . how one can affirm, on strictly experimental grounds, a personal God and personal immortality."

In summary, my view that it is correct to describe Babbitt as a positivist is based on the following evidence: 1) his frequent use of the term and application of it to himself; 2) his unequivocal support of positive methodology in the sciences; 3) his insistence that in all areas one should take nothing on authority; 4) the similarity of his literary methodology to that of Lanson; 5) his partial acceptance of the view that man is the measure of all things; and , finally, 6) his emphasis on facts, comparable to the positivist notion of *rappports de fait*.

One must, of course, know what Babbitt meant by facts as well as what positivists of his time and since have meant by facts. Professor Ryn correctly affirms that "the facts of the inner life are more clearly a matter of immediate experience than are the 'external' facts of the natural sciences" and that Babbitt, in conformity with this principle, believed that "humanistic investigation should not only encompass but be centered in the facts of immediate self-experience" (13). This is in accord with everything I have so far said about Babbitt. I cannot, of course, speak for all the positivists of his time, but I believe that there were many of them who shared this view of humanistic investigation.

At this point I propose to shift attention from historical positivism to the notion of a new positivism or a method of humanistic investigation for our day. As the first step in doing so, I shall quote Professor Ryn's description of what he perceives as the tendency of positivists to

²² Panichas, ed., 237. In *Rousseau and Romanticism*, however, he affirmed that the doctrine that the private and personal self is the measure of all things is a dangerous half-truth (xii).

rely on an extra-positivistic sense of the whole. "Positivist scholars in the humanities and social studies are guided, in practice, by a sense of the larger whole of human life that is not derived mainly from positivistic methods and investigations. Specifically, these scholars bring to their work a feel for the dynamic of human existence, for the interconnections of particulars, and for what is important and relevant. In addition to their own personal experience of what it is like to be a human being, what helps them interpret and give the right proportions to evidence is a philosophical-humanistic understanding of man and society of one kind or another" (15). This is precisely the attitude toward literary research and criticism that I had in mind when I originally proposed a new positivism. The main difference in my notion from Professor Ryn's is in the label extra-positivist for his and new positivist for mine. The same essential agreement exists, I believe, in regard to what I have designated as "the factual base" of positivist scholarship and "objective description" as a major, if not the primary, tool of this scholarship. The facts to which I refer are not limited to those "that can be warrantably ascertained by approved empirical methods," but are comprised in the several passages I have already quoted from *Babbitt* concerning the multiple nature of phenomena.

*A new
positivism
needed.*

The new positivism is an all-embracing approach rather than an exclusive one. It rests upon the application to literature of concrete values, standards and principles that are in turn based upon decorum or ideals of personal and social life. New positivist standards need not be equivalent to those of Comte or even of *Babbitt*, but they must be historically respectable, not mere passing fancies. Plenty of room exists for difference of opinion, for example, on the concept of a canon. No matter how much agreement exists on the need for standards and values, two or more people rarely share exactly the same ones.

Babbitt's views on both the canon and the methodology of literary study are contrary to the trends of postmodernism, which glorifies theory and considers the critic as equal to or even the superior of original authors. My main reason for citing *Babbitt* as an exemplum for renewed positivism, however, is his sane multiculturalism, based on broad knowledge rather than emotion or personal advantage. Unfortunately what passes today for multiculturalism and its appendages such as orientalism and post-colonialism has very little to do with culture, but much to do with specifying the alleged oppression of various ethnic groups and the blaming of external forces for social conditions regarded as unsatisfactory. If *Babbitt*'s humanism is old-fashioned, his

informed multiculturalism, based on enquiry and understanding, is ultramodern. I do not consider either Comte or Babbitt an absolute and complete model for a new positivism, but look upon each as a corrective to some of the excesses of postmodern theory in general.