
Irving Babbitt and Postmodernity: Amplitude and Intensity

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There are many ways to re-read a classic. One can go to it to participate again in something permanent. One can use it as a measure of one's own growth or decline. One can mine from it that which is useful for enlightening the present cultural situation. Irving Babbitt's *Rousseau and Romanticism* repays re-reading in all of those ways. The following remarks are pointed toward the last one: How might we deploy the criticism in *Rousseau and Romanticism* to enhance and subvert postmodern discourses?

The publication of a new edition of *Rousseau and Romanticism* with a fine critical introduction by Claes Ryn presents a good opportunity to rediscover this work or to encounter it for the first time.¹ Ryn's extensive commentary ranges over the major philosophical themes informing Babbitt's writings, with special emphasis on *Rousseau and Romanticism*. Ryn is a reliable commentator, which is the highest compliment one can pay in Babbitt studies. As he points out, Babbitt has been misunderstood from every angle. The most important reason for this is that Babbitt's actual thought is so subtle, flexible, and deep that it requires an intellectually sensitive reading to be understood. Ryn has such intellectual sensitivity and gives us a refreshingly undogmatic and genially humanistic Babbitt, the one whose voice we

¹ Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, introduction by Claes G. Ryn (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1991). Further references to this work are noted in the text.

hear in *Rousseau and Romanticism*. Ryn's Babbitt belongs to no sect. He is a Babbitt who should appeal to a broad spectrum of readers concerned about contemporary life.

I will engage Ryn's text on the issue of the role of reason in Babbitt's thought, offering an alternative to his interpretation. The only point on which Ryn severely criticizes Babbitt is the latter's failure to do justice to reason. Ryn (xxxii) notes that Babbitt's statement that "the goal of being cannot be formulated in terms of the finite intellect, any more than the ocean can be put into a cup" "appears to push intellectual humility to an extreme." Ryn asks: "But if reason is as powerless as Babbitt here seems to think, by means of what faculty is Babbitt expressing the shortcomings of 'finite intellect'?" The answer, of course, is reason or, to use Babbitt's preferred term, the intellect. What kind of reason is another question. In order to express the limitations of the finite intellect that intellect has had to criticize itself, that is, to find its limits in something like a Kantian analytical sense. Ryn, however, does not want to stop at critical reason, but goes on to argue that Babbitt's position also presupposes a reason capable of discerning ends. He observes that Babbitt himself sometimes formulates the goal of being and in those cases "must be relying on a type of reason that is philosophically more capable and comprehensive than the 'finite intellect' mentioned in the quoted sentence." It is only here that I part company with Ryn in Babbitt interpretation.

The work of formulating the goal of being does not have to be done by reason, but is the province in *Rousseau and Romanticism* of the "concentric imagination." Babbitt's defense of the rights of the imagination in human life is one of the greatest treasures in his legacy. Babbitt alone among all of the great American thinkers of the golden age (Josiah Royce, C.S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and George Santayana) broke through the received modern philosophical discourse of reason and experience, and rehabilitated the imagination. Indeed, Ryn (xxi) remarks that Babbitt regarded "imagination, rather than reason or sense, as forming the base of human consciousness."

The "concentric imagination."

Babbitt (259) brings out the role of the concentric imagination in providing purpose: "Here . . . is the supreme role of the imagination. The man who has ceased to lean on outer standards can perceive his new standards or centre of control only through its aid. I have tried to show that to aim at such a centre is not to be stagnant and stationary but on the contrary to be at once purposeful and progressive." Babbitt (259) goes on to reveal why the imagination plays such a decisive role

in his thinking: "Life is at best a series of illusions: the whole office of philosophy is to keep it from degenerating into a series of delusions. If we are to keep it from thus degenerating we need to grasp above all the difference between the eccentric and the concentric imagination." According to Babbitt (262) the eccentric imagination ends in "disintegrated and multiple personality."

*Wise fictions
as ends.*

If we are not simply the stuff that dreams are made of, we are in an important measure made up of dream stuff. That is, we are co-constituted by fiction. The problem is not to break through to some description of true being, which is unavailable to us, but to overcome the tendency to multiple personality by exercising the concentric imagination to create wise fictions that will stand for ourselves and that we will finally grow into through the beneficent power of habit. "Illusion," for Babbitt, is not the all-embracing "imaginary" or "simulacrum" of some postmodernists, but is subject to intuitive and pragmatic tests of experience, which themselves are not ultimate but are the best we have. In this map of the mind a special ends-conferring reason is not required and might introduce an undesired element of dogmatism into reflection.

*The eccentric
imagination
and illusion.*

Perhaps the differences between Ryn's position and mine are not as great as I have made them seem to be. The use of the concentric imagination to produce general descriptions and strategies of life, that is, to define identities and to clarify the conditions of identity might just as well be called an operation of reason. Yet it still remains a question as to why reason should be split off from imagination if not to endow it with the privileged role of seeing into the goal of being. Toward the end of his commentary Ryn (lix) acknowledges that his criticism that "Babbitt underestimates the potential contribution of reason . . . does not undermine his argument regarding the non-intellectual sources of civilization." As Ryn aptly notes: ". . . 'brain power' by itself offers little or no protection against mesmerizing but dangerous illusions that shape the imagination and through it society's fundamental outlook and aspirations. Today, many of the most intelligent and highly educated have the most wrong-headed, naïve, or superficial beliefs about central questions of life. Babbitt explains this apparent anomaly." Babbitt, one might add, is the only participant in the discourse of the golden age who explains that anomaly because he is the only one who understands the root predicament of twentieth-century life: increasing numbers of people no longer find traditional accounts of self to be credible and compelling, and must rely on their

own concentric imaginations to confer coherence on themselves. If they cannot rise to the occasion they give way to the eccentric imagination and, finally, to madness, most often today the madness of the eccentric and externalized imagination of television and more generally the mass information/entertainment media.

I am particularly concerned to defend Babbitt's substitution of imagination for reason because it is that move which allows him more than any other thinker of the golden age to meet postmodernism on its own ground. The discourses within the formation called "postmodernism" have in common a substitution of criticism or "critical theory" for philosophy, and a profound distrust of metaphysics. Along with those tendencies goes a proclivity for describing the self as co-constituted by fiction that runs from Jacques Lacan's totalizing claim that we constitutively misconstrue ourselves (*méconnaissance*) to more moderate stances like Michel Foucault's play among "subject-positions" and Jean-Francois Lyotard's "drifting" through "archipelagoes" of "language-games." In one sense postmodernism is a proper element for Babbitt, one in which he comes into his own, not as an adherent before their time of any of the currently fashionable theories, but as a potential internal critic of them. That is, the Babbitt who insists on the rights of the imagination, who, as Ryn (xix) elegantly puts it, views works of imagination as "integral to and even constitutive of human life in general," fits right into the postmodern scene without having to assume any camouflage. In the sense of its widespread acknowledgment of the importance of illusion (*imaginaire*), contemporary cultural theory has caught up to Babbitt. One can find decidedly postmodernist passages in *Rousseau and Romanticism*, such as one that comes at the end of that work (374-75): "One may affirm, indeed, not only that man is governed by his imagination but that in all that belongs to his own special domain, *the imagination itself is governed by words.*"

The self co-constituted by fiction.

Babbitt would have had a field day with recent French thought and with its American counterparts such as Richard Rorty's riot of "re-description." Postmodernism contains some of the most extravagant examples of the eccentric imagination that have ever appeared in literature. Romanticism remains one of the most powerful currents in contemporary life; only now, in the realm of criticism, it is no longer the emotional romanticism dominant in Babbitt's time, which was devoted to inflating the feelings of the private subject, but an intellectual romanticism that "decenters" the subject and thereby makes experi-

"Decentering" the subject.

ence the “site” of cultural “inscription.” That is, the neo-romanticism of postmodernity surrenders “the whole tragedy of interiority” (Gilles Deleuze) of modern romanticism but not the eccentric imagination, which it carries to new extremes.

*A vision
of life as
nomadic
drift.*

Deleuze would surely come in for a good deal of Babbitt’s playfully serious lampooning. One of the leading appropriators of Nietzsche into postmodernist discourses, Deleuze is the realization of Babbitt’s prognosis, written in a discussion of Nietzsche, that the eccentric imagination leads to “disintegrated and multiple personality.” What Babbitt calls the “vagabond” appears in Deleuze as the “nomad” whose experience is a medium that takes on the impress of vagrant cultural forces and registers their intensities. Deleuzian existence is a grotesque idyll of drifting: “We embark, then, in a kind of raft of ‘the Medusa’; bombs fall all around the raft as it drifts toward icy subterranean streams—or toward torrid rivers, the Orinoco, the Amazon; the passengers row together, they are not supposed to like one another, they fight with one another, they eat one another. To row together is to share, to share something beyond law, contract, or institution. It is a period of drifting, a ‘deterritorialization.’”²

The above is Deleuze’s fantasy picture of what goes on in a Nietzschean text. More directly Deleuze argues that Nietzsche’s aphorisms are moments of an exotic journey. They are not meant to signify anything but are sheer expressions of forces. All that matters in an aphorism is novelty, which is gained by an endless exterior movement: “An aphorism is a play of forces, the most recent of which—the latest, the newest, and provisionally the final force—is always *the most exterior*. Nietzsche puts this very clearly: if you want to know what I mean, then find the force that gives a new sense to what I say, and hang the text upon it.” (145) That is, there is no moment of self-gathering, just an abandonment to whatever cultural forces are in the milieu. Nietzsche becomes what Roland Barthes called the human being, a “rhetoric machine,” in this case an aphorism factory.

*Surrendering
to cultural
vicissitudes.*

As a result of embarking on the journey to the extremities of culture Deleuze’s Nietzsche becomes the suffering and joyous body of cultural conflict and play. The proper names “that come and go” in Nietzsche’s texts “are not intended to be representations of things (or persons) or words,” but “are designations of intensity inscribed upon a body that could be the earth or a book, but could also be the suffering

² Gilles Deleuze, “Nomad Thought,” in David B. Allison (ed.), *The New Nietzsche* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 144. Further references to this work are noted in the text.

body of Nietzsche himself: *I am all the names of history.*" (145) What it means to be all the names of history is to lose any sense of one's own name, even though one still remains as a process of feeling culture and producing expressions of its intensities: "There is a kind of nomadism, a perpetual displacement of intensities designated by proper names, intensities that interpenetrate one another at the same time that they are lived, experienced, by a single body. Intensity can be experienced, then, only in connection with its mobile inscription in a body and under the shifting exterior of a proper name, and therefore the proper name is always a mask, a mask that masks its agent." (145-46) One might add that in such a mode of experiencing one never crafts one's own mask, much less, as Babbitt desires, a mask that would put one on the way toward participating with others in a common humanity. Instead, for this intellectual romanticism, the self is reduced to a body ego that makes itself available to the vicissitudes of culture, a sacrifice to cultural conflicts and a registrar and proclaimer of cultural forces. Here Culture is King rather than the "Nature" of the emotional romantics. Deleuze's intellectual romanticism is a project of "decodification": "One cannot help but laugh when the codes are confounded." (147)

Babbitt might laugh at all this, but not at the confounding of the codes. He might laugh, as he was wont to do, at the absurdity of the romantic project, in this case of surrendering one's identity to whatever "names" are being transmitted through the cultural environment. He might point out that no one actually can live as a Deleuzian nomad without going mad. He might suspect that this kind of postmodernism is a parlor game of textual adventures, played in the name of political resistance and even revolution; a retreat from the streets to the texts by survivors of the emotional romanticism of the 1960s who refuse to or cannot resist the appeals of the eccentric imagination. He might conclude by applying to postmodernism his idea that the first wave of romanticism is optimistic (the "consciousness expansion" of the 1960s) whereas the second wave is pessimistic (the displacement of life and experience by culture in the 1970s and 1980s).

Perhaps one can usefully take a Deleuzian voyage to increase the comprehensiveness of one's experience, but if one is not a multiple personality one always returns to a home base, a discourse of one's own, let us call it a "home discourse," which is more or less guided by the concentric imagination, which is more or less sane, depending upon how much work the person has done to make clear and cogent

*Self-formation
as "home
discourse."*

distinctions. Babbitt's statement that "*the imagination itself is governed by words*" is embedded in a discussion of the importance of making distinctions when there are genuine differences. In an age of the triumph of culture the work of self-formation is as important as it was in Babbitt's time, but now it must be centered far more directly in discourse; that is, the proximate object of the concentric imagination, with its requirement of proportion (decorum), is one's own discourse. How one accounts for oneself, others, and the world to oneself determines in an age of cultural supremacy one's possibilities for achieving sanity.

The intellectual romanticism of postmodernism is confused in a way that Babbitt would understand well. In discovering that the self is co-constituted by illusion, the intellectual romantics have assumed that the self cannot be concentric but must surrender to eccentricity. However, a life-strategy of cultivating a concentric imagination in the service of a sane home discourse is no less consistent with the role of illusion in forming the self than is the nomad's strategy of becoming an arena of cultural warfare. *Rousseau and Romanticism* is an enhancement and a subversion of postmodern discourses. Babbitt answers Deleuze's penchant for intensities with a celebration of amplitude.