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# History, Social Science, and the "Literary Conscience"

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*It is quite easy to see why a legend is treated, and ought to be treated, more respectfully than a book of history – G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*<sup>1</sup>*

## **Introduction**

As social science has grown more sophisticated, so has its awareness of its own methodological shortcomings. Many of the leading journals publish extensively (sometimes, exclusively) on new devices to circumvent these difficulties. At least some social scientists, though, seem aware that they will never devise mathematical tools capable of overcoming certain ceilings on their knowledge. There is an increasing demand for other ways to ask and answer questions.

As the social sciences knock vainly against these ceilings—and as they dwindle into increasing policy irrelevance—more humanistic scholars recommend a return to history. This remedy, though, is incomplete. The old saw that “those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it” has hidden history’s most difficult problem: its lessons are not obvious. History is too contingent, and its cases too few, for the statesman to derive general lessons with any confidence. The statesman must learn from it, but what he must learn is not often clear.

Irving Babbitt foresaw these problems.<sup>2</sup> Writing near the dawn of

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I am grateful to David Clinton, Claes G. Ryn, and two anonymous reviewers for their detailed feedback on drafts of this essay. Any remaining errors are, of course, my own.

<sup>1</sup> Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Lane, 1908), 84.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps Babbitt’s arguments fell on deaf ears because they were made within *History, Social Science, and the "Literary Conscience"*

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modern social science, Babbitt recognized many of the methodological problems social science would face before its practitioners had invented the jargon to describe them. Big Data, he knew, would always lead to a superficial understanding of human beings.<sup>3</sup> Less remembered, but no less important, he also saw the limits of history when educating the statesman. Without a strong commitment to the moral imagination, the study of history would tend to degenerate into the trivial or the sociological, into scientific antiquarianism or relativism.<sup>4</sup> A genuine historical consciousness requires a dramatic awareness that history alone cannot supply.<sup>5</sup> Following Aristotle, Babbitt therefore stressed the “literary conscience” as indispensable when forming a democratic leader.

Drawing on Irving Babbitt’s ideas, this article elaborates several reasons why the literary mind, no less than the historical or the scientific, is a vital attribute for the statesman, the professor, and the citizen. It focuses on how the study of fiction can complement both social science and history, and it seeks to explain these contributions in ways accessible to both the social scientist and the humanistic scholar. This article is thus an effort at bridge-building. It continues the project Babbitt set out for the Humanist movement when engaging the radicals of his day and ours:

The humanist must meet him [the radical] on his own ground and give a clear account of the faith that is in him, and then perhaps he will have a valuable auxiliary in the instinctive good sense of many who are not directly interested in his generalizations.<sup>6</sup>

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a language that presumed a certain commitment to the liberal arts. If so, it is doubly valuable to discuss the value of the liberal arts in terms its sceptics understand.

<sup>3</sup> William S. Smith, *Democracy and Imperialism: Irving Babbitt and Warlike Democracies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019), 32.

<sup>4</sup> Smith offers a good paraphrase of what Babbitt means by imagination: “imagination is that quality that can find the universal standard embedded in the ever-changing circumstances of life.” Smith, *Democracy*, 125. In this definition, note the implicit critique of a purely historical method.

<sup>5</sup> Claes G. Ryn defines the historical sense as “an awareness of the extent to which the past continues to stir in the present. . . . Historical consciousness is also an acute sense of the specificity and uniqueness of historical moments. It is an apprehension of the simultaneous variability and continuity of human life.” Claes G. Ryn, *America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 86. See also Ryan Holston, “Burke’s Historical Morality” *Humanitas* 20, nos. 1-2 (2007).

<sup>6</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College: Essays in Defense of the Humanities* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1908), 86. He also wrote, “I hold that . . . one should strive to emulate him [the scientist] in one’s dealings with the human law; and so become a complete positivist . . . The proper procedure in refuting these incomplete positivists is not to appeal to some dogma or outer authority but rather to turn against them their own

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My effort is not the first to urge political science to pay greater attention to fiction. Yet this attention is usually confined to psychological and constructivist accounts of how it might have influenced policymakers.<sup>7</sup> I think our focus should be elsewhere: on how the study of fiction might avoid the methodological pitfalls currently plaguing the discipline, and how it might offer a different kind of remedy than the study of history as ordinarily conceived.

In its broad contours, the argument in this article will be familiar: it is a Burkean defense of fiction as a store of wisdom. Its novelty lies, I hope, in four contributions: to explain to the social scientist, in his own language, the value of fiction as a way to learn about the world, including how it escapes many of the traps currently ensnaring him; to draw the humanist's attention to deficiencies in the study of history and how literature corrects them; to suggest to the professor implications for teaching literary classics; and to celebrate and elucidate an underappreciated aspect of Irving Babbitt's thought.

The argument will not rely on any special inspiration or genius of novelists or poets. Indeed, to bowdlerize Burke, we might allow that "the author is foolish, but his readers are wise." The argument instead draws attention to a Burkean selection process. Fiction—which, at its best, already aims at expressing the universal—also undergoes a competitive selection that will tend to punish the "improbable," i.e., plots that are outlandish, freakish, or contrived. As a result, the works of fiction that survive as classics have an objective claim to authority in their descriptions of cause-and-effect. Kari Konkola has made a similar argument about religious tradition versus psychology. He quotes Donald Campbell: "On purely scientific grounds, [a religion's] recipes for living might be regarded as better tested than the best of psychology's and psychiatry's speculations on how lives should be lived."<sup>8</sup> Similarly here: on purely scientific grounds, we can regard the causal stories in classic fiction as "better tested" than those of political scientists or revisionist historians.

In short, this article will contend that fiction is a useful way to evaluate causal arguments and that, while it suffers a few obvious drawbacks,

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principles." Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1947), 5.

<sup>7</sup> J. Furman Daniel III and Paul Musgrave, "Synthetic Experiences: How Popular Culture Matters for Images of International Relations," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (September 2017): 503–16.

<sup>8</sup> Donald T. Campbell, quoted in Kari Konkola, "What Psychology Might Learn from Traditional Christianity," *Humanitas* 32, nos. 1-2 (2019): 147.

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it also avoids some of the most stubborn and intractable methodological problems besetting social science and history. Before developing this argument, though, I first turn to those shortcomings that fiction will be able to avoid.

### *Two Common Methodological Problems*

Humans are imaginative creatures. This truism seems innocuous, but its implications for the scientific study of human behavior, and especially of international politics, are severe. Human beings can imagine the future and calibrate their actions in light of these imagined scenarios. A given human action is thus not only a response to its current environment but a response to its potential environment. Put simply, and in stark contrast to the merely physical world, human behavior is shaped by things that *don't happen*.

Humanistic scholars often criticize the treatment of human beings as rational agents. Rightly, they recognize that simplifying assumptions of mathematical rationality obscure profound sources of human behavior. The debate over rationalism in the social sciences is typically fought between proponents, who argue this simplification is useful (though potentially misleading), and opponents, who argue it does too much damage to reality.<sup>9</sup> In opposing rationalism so staunchly, though, this humanistic critique may have missed an opportunity. Precisely, human rationality is what, when combined with human imagination, makes human beings so difficult to study scientifically. Were man a mere "basket of neuroses," his behavior could be explained by reference only to observable phenomena: his upbringing, his culture, his genes, etc. Because man is rational, his behavior must be understood in terms of choice. Understanding the choices that a person perceives, therefore, is essential to understanding how he acts.

In this section, I discuss two common methodological problems in the study of politics: selection effects and reverse-causality. Both are well-known. By and large, current solutions to these problems remain partial and unsatisfying. Here, I want to outline them briefly and discuss

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<sup>9</sup> Hans Morgenthau wrote, "The difference between international politics as it actually is and a rational theory derived from it is like the difference between a photograph and a painted portrait. The photograph shows everything that can be seen by the naked eye; the painted portrait does not show everything that can be seen by the naked eye, but it shows, or at least seeks to show, one thing that the naked eye cannot see: the human essence of the person portrayed." *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 4th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 7. See also David A. Lake and Robert Powell, *Strategic Choice in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

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an underappreciated source of these problems: human rationality combined with human imagination. Given this source, it should not surprise us that the study of fiction might offer a remedy.

Here is an important question for the statesman: do sanctions work? That question is popular among scholars and pundits, but it is very difficult to answer. If leaders perfectly understood how sanctions worked, we would never observe them working: a leader who feared sanctions would be deterred; he would select out of the process. As a result, regardless of whether or not sanctions work, we will tend to observe situations in which they fail. The observed world in which sanctions work, and the observed world in which they don't, look remarkably alike.

The language of game theory is helpful here. With sanctions, their effectiveness would usually occur *off-the-path*, i.e., in the calculations of the actors about what would happen if they behaved differently than, in fact, they do. Because actors behave (somewhat) rationally, the effectiveness of a sanction would occur in a world that is unobserved and unobservable. Consequently, a scientific analysis of observational data would suffer severe selection bias.

It is not clear whether a truly robust quantitative analysis of sanctions will ever be possible. Econometricians sometimes call such a problem an FUQ (fundamentally unidentified question).<sup>10</sup> A statesman, though, needs to know whether sanctions would work in a given situation. His only option, therefore, is to work through an imaginative thought experiment. He must put himself in his adversary's shoes, with his adversary's background and strategic environment, and try to guess what he would do.<sup>11</sup>

Here is a second question: when do alliance commitments cause war? This question, too, is almost impossible to answer, in this case because it suffers from reverse causality. Reverse causality occurs when a researcher wants to study the effect of X on Y, but it might be the case that

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<sup>10</sup> Joshua D. Angrist and Jorn-Steffen Pischke, *Mostly Harmless Econometrics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 5. For a recent piece on selection effects and violent conflict, see Colin Vance and Nolan Ritter, "Is peace a missing value or a zero? On selection models in political science," *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 4 (2014): 528–540. Scholarly research on audience costs has appreciated this problem since James D. Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (1994): 577–592. For a recent piece, see Matthew Hauenstein, "The conditional effect of audiences on credibility," *Journal of Peace Research* 57, no. 3 (2020): 422–436.

<sup>11</sup> "We look over [the statesman's] shoulder when he writes his dispatches; we listen in on his conversation with other statesmen; we read and anticipate his very thoughts." Morgenthau, *Politics*, 5.

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Y affects X. For instance, a student of intrastate conflict might want to know if an increase in policing reduces violence, but an expected spike in violence probably leads to more policing. Were this researcher to run a simple regression, he could easily observe a positive correlation (i.e., policing would seem to increase violence), even if the effect is, in fact negative.<sup>12</sup>

A run-of-the-mill econometric analysis assumes that causation works in only one direction: the independent variable affects the dependent variable, but not *vice versa*. If this condition is not satisfied, the condition of exogeneity is violated, and the analysis is invalid. To repeat: if a reverse-causality problem is not addressed by the research design, the analysis is not even “better than nothing.” The magnitude, direction, and significance of the estimated effect are all unreliable.

Those who don’t work with quantitative methods often don’t realize just how fatal reverse causality can be. Even those who have received technical training in econometrics often believe—erroneously—that simply adding “control variables” can solve the problem. This is not correct. In fact, overcoming reverse-causality is monstrously difficult. One recent article complains that, “the number of suggestions seems to equal the number of critics,” and sometimes advice “does not address the question what researchers *can* do.”<sup>13</sup>

The study of statesmanship is riddled with reverse causality. Perhaps arms races cause war, but the threat of war surely causes nations to build arms; trade may make two countries allies, but an alliance surely makes them more likely to trade; in-person negotiations may promote friendly relations between leaders, but surely friendly relations encourage meeting in person. “Wars beget treaties; treaties beget wars.”<sup>14</sup> And so on.

Like selection problems, reverse causality seems most problematic when it results from the human capacity for rational imagination. In the example of policing above, the capacity of police departments to envision futures that have not happened changes their behavior in the present. For instance, a commissioner who expects a surge in crime next year

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<sup>12</sup> For a famous solution to this problem, see Rafael Di Tella and Ernesto Schargrotsky, “Do police reduce crime? Estimates using the allocation of police forces after a terrorist attack,” *American Economic Review* 94, no. 1 (2004): 115-133. As subsequent studies have pointed out, though, it is difficult to generalize from their results because they are so specific to the circumstances the authors were able to study rigorously.

<sup>13</sup> Lars Leszczensky and Tobias Wolbring, “How to Deal With Reverse Causality Using Panel Data? Recommendations for Researchers Based on a Simulation Study,” *Sociological Methods & Research*, (November 2019): 3.

<sup>14</sup> Drew Griffin, “The Reality of Peace,” *Providence* Issue 13 (Winter 2019): 25.

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would begin hiring new officers today. Not even a time-lagged analysis can solve the problem, because the perception of an event at time  $t+1$  is determining action at time  $t$ . (For obvious reasons, this is a problem the natural sciences do not ordinarily have to address.)

Ideally, we would attempt to solve these problems through experiments. This route is usually closed to the student of politics. (Even when open, it often depends on the rather extravagant hope that college freshman or MTurk respondents behave in comparable ways to presidents and despots.) Political scientists turn instead to tools like instrumental variables. These tools, though, are only partially satisfying. An instrumental variable, when available, allows the researcher to isolate causation, but at a high cost: the researcher must assume the character of the relationship between the instrument and the other variables, imposing a preconceived, theory-laden narrative on top of the empirical analysis. Moreover, instrumental variables can often be employed only in very particular circumstances, and this narrowness creates a problem of external validity: the analysis might be peculiar to its context, and the researcher often has little reason to suppose it will generalize to others.

I think it is safe to say that, at least within international relations, selection effects and reverse causality are ubiquitous. If our knowledge is to progress, social science needs an experimental method that can study off-the-path behavior, and it needs to have confidence that the results of this experiment will generalize beyond their original context. Later, I will draw on Irving Babbitt to show how imaginative fiction can satisfy these desiderata. First, though, I turn to the limits of history.

### *The Limits of History*

Unsurprisingly, historians prefer the study of history as the best preparation for the statesman. John Lewis Gaddis, probably the leading historian of the Cold War, insists on the superiority of history to social science when educating statesmen and citizens. Unlike many historians, though, Gaddis does not recommend history only. Recognizing the limits of his own discipline, Gaddis pairs the classics of history with the classics of fiction. He is unsparing in his disdain for social science, but he does not let his colleagues (or himself) escape, either. He is worth quoting at length:

Historians, knowing that their field rewards specialized research, tend to avoid the generalizations upon which theories depend: they thereby deny complexity the simplicities that guide us through it. Theorists, keen to be seen as social “scientists,” seek “reproducibility” in results: that replaces

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complexity with simplicity in pursuit of predictability. Both communities neglect *relationships* between the general and the particular—between universal and local knowledge—that nurture strategic thinking. And both, as if to add to this insufficiency, too often write badly.<sup>15</sup>

These relationships, Gaddis argues, can be studied only through “dramatizations” that “reconstitute” the past.<sup>16</sup> His argument could have come straight from Babbitt. The limits of history, when confined to an enumeration of events, are well-known to the humanist. History, uninformed by a larger imagination, is ultimately sterile and self-defeating. It retreats into the mere accumulation of facts and trivia or into empiricist sociology. It becomes encyclopaedic or ideological rather than dramatic.

A well-developed “historical sense” requires dramatic intuition, but this intuition cannot be supplied by history as a mere recording of occurrences. In what follows, I will argue that, to develop a full historical sense, history *must* be accompanied by humane literature. This argument will draw primarily on Irving Babbitt’s critique of modern education, but it will draw as well from modern social science. Before proceeding, I want to emphasize that I am *not* criticizing the historical sense, which is perhaps the most consistent hallmark of great statesmen, only widening its meaning.

For the statesman, the study of history is especially fraught. The lessons he should learn from it are not obvious, in part because the uniqueness of each historical event leads to a small-N problem. The language of mathematics is useful here. To solve a system of equations, there must be at least as many equations as variables. The same is true when identifying causality. To determine the effect of one thing versus another, an observer must have more cases than causes. For instance, if we believe five variables plausibly determine the wisdom or folly of appeasement, we must have at least five cases to study. Of course, the number of variables affecting appeasement is in fact much larger—but not, unfortunately, the number of cases. As a result, any conclusion we draw is often little more than an educated guess. In fact, with something as infrequent as appeasement, no conclusion drawn purely from history can even be called well-justified.

The small-N problem is especially pronounced for the statesman because he has so few cases to examine. The economist can study billions of data when explaining labor market behavior over the past century. The student of statecraft, though, has no such luxury. The number of

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<sup>15</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 23.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.



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great powers rarely exceeds six; the number of major wars, while larger, is still much smaller than the average number of respondents for an opinion poll.

Let me put this problem more definitely. Surely there are few more clear-cut mistakes in world history than Munich. But was Munich a fluke or a typical case? Since the precise configuration of causes had never happened before, and will never happen again, that question cannot be answered definitively. The best we can do is compare Munich to other cases of appeasement, such as when Britain appeased a rising America. Yet each of these cases, too, is unique, and separating the essential from the incidental can only be called an impressionistic guess. History, even when surveyed over thousands of years, almost never offers sufficient degrees of freedom (roughly, more data points than potential explanations) for the statesman to draw a firm conclusion.

Yet the statesman *must* answer such questions. How a U.S. president interprets Munich can determine whether he starts the Vietnam War.<sup>17</sup> Throughout his career, Babbitt fixated on a similar question: was Bonaparte an accident or a necessary effect?<sup>18</sup> He worried—in 1924—that romantic optimism was about to repeat the same tendencies it evinced in 1789. He insisted that his contemporaries should attend to questions such as these. And yet, these are questions that history as empirical fact-gathering cannot answer. It is simply too contingent.

There seem to be three responses to the problem of history's contingency. Authors like Babbitt and Burke insist that, to make sense of it, history must be read through the lens of tradition—the wisdom of mankind—and, Burke might add, Providential intention.<sup>19</sup> This stance approaches history with narrative structures already in hand. The other two responses are either postmodern, using relativism to make of history whatever one wants, or resignation, throwing up one's hands and dismissing history as "one d---ed thing after another."

Babbitt recognized both errors. They correspond, roughly, to what

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<sup>17</sup> Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), 128.

<sup>19</sup> Russell Kirk emphasizes the role of Providence for Burke's political thought. He stresses that, while many attribute an "organic" approach to society to Burke, in fact Burke treated society as a "spiritual unity"; summarizing Burke's thought, Kirk goes on to say that "knowing history and nature, a man may humbly aspire to apprehend Providential dispensations." Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953), 18, 36. It should be noted that Kirk's interpretation of Burke is not without its critics.

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he called the two forms of “naturalism”: emotional Romanticism and scientific rationalism.<sup>20</sup> Throughout his career, Babbitt insisted that scientific man and romantic man—so often appearing to be at odds—were in fact two sides of the same wayward philosophy dominating the modern West. Most provocatively, he was “tempted to define [this] civilization” as “a mixture of altruism and high explosives.”<sup>21</sup> The demand for a scientific history, i.e., history employing methods derived from the natural sciences, Babbitt saw, would undermine its ability to make causal arguments. This incapacity would drive the historian, haunted by his still insufficiently scientific methods, to retreat either to ideology or to the mere accumulation of facts: he would fall back on generalizations about gross domestic product, demography, and raw catalogues of telegrams and replies; or, he would hide behind relativism while privileging his own ideology.

Education based on the former, Babbitt condemned as “encyclopaedic.”<sup>22</sup> This “literal obedience to facts has extinguished every spark of that light by which man is truly man” and leads to a “dehumanized” history.<sup>23</sup> Like Gaddis, Babbitt traces this kind of history to academic overspecialization, especially to research imperatives and narrow Ph.D. training.<sup>24</sup> “The risk we run nowadays is that of having our minds buried beneath a dead-weight of information which we have no inner energy, no power of reflection, to appropriate to our own uses and convert into vital nutriment.”<sup>25</sup> He quotes Bacon on the futility of this kind of study: “It

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<sup>20</sup> Chapter 2, “Modernity as Naturalism,” of Smith’s *Democracy and Imperialism* is an excellent overview of Babbitt’s argument.

<sup>21</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 134.

<sup>22</sup> Babbitt’s critique here is related to his critique of Dewey. George Panichas, comparing Babbitt and Richard Weaver, says “Weaver sees Dewey’s impact on educational theory and policy as one that above all discards the significant place of the concepts, signs, and symbols through which man has created cultural achievements”; George A. Panichas, *The Critical Legacy of Irving Babbitt* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 1999), 137, 141.

<sup>23</sup> Babbitt, *Literature*, 90, 144-45. Note that in part Babbitt is quoting Emerson (approvingly). Babbitt expands on the point: “The historians, likewise [to philologists], have been too exclusively occupied with the phenomena of their subject, and have failed to adjust the rival claims of the absolute and the relative.” Babbitt, *Literature*, 125. See also the beginning of Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> While the bulk of his critique is leveled at his own and sister disciplines (comparative literature), he does take care to identify the same trends as they apply to the study of history. To combat the dangers of overspecialization, “the maiming and mutilation of the mind that come from over-absorption in one subject,” Babbitt insists, “we must be men before being entomologists.” Babbitt, *Literature*, 108, 107.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 161. Note here that Babbitt is in *favor* of knowledge as useful—but not merely in the utilitarian sense.

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is not good," [Bacon] says, "to look too long on these turning wheels of vicissitude."<sup>26</sup> An excess attention to empirical facts distracts scholars and statesmen from attending to universals.<sup>27</sup>

The quarrel here is not just between Babbitt and Dewey or even between twentieth-century conservatives and progressives. James Matthew Wilson traces it to the early history of Western civilization. He writes, "Herodotus and Solon suggest that inquiry is purely a matter of knowledge gained through wide experience; it is merely empirical, we would now say . . . [but Aristotle] thinks wisdom, rather than a kind of wide-ranging reason, is the virtue that guides true inquiry."<sup>28</sup> Here Babbitt, as in most things, sides with Aristotle, and this verdict leads him to align history with literature, so that sound history derives its sense of reality *from* great fiction.

Recognizing the poverty of encyclopaedic history, historians in our own day have embraced the subjectivity of narrative to tell what stories they please. Before its time, Babbitt criticizes this postmodern response on the same grounds that he criticizes Romanticism: it ignores the wisdom of the ages to live instead in an "empire of chimeras."<sup>29</sup> His response to this nascent postmodernism is instructive. "Every fact is already a theory," said Goethe,<sup>30</sup> and Babbitt agrees. The way to adjudicate competing claims, though, is not to retreat into a mindless relativism but "to submit them to a searching Socratic dialectic."<sup>31</sup> Babbitt grants the need to bring outside narratives to bear on historical facts; he does *not* grant the equality of all narratives. Some are better, more truthful, than

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 125. Bacon's heirs are often villains for Babbitt, but he gives Bacon himself credit as a great thinker.

<sup>27</sup> Quincy Wright, *A Study of War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), which collected facts about war, seems to fall into this trap. Wright began his project in the 1920s, but I do not know whether Babbitt was aware of it.

<sup>28</sup> James Matthew Wilson, *The Vision of the Soul: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the Western Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 304-305. Wilson continues: "The modern attempts by Rene Descartes to set up a new criterion of true reason as self-grounded certainty and, later, by David Hume to cordon off the rational from human experience, can be understood as tortured attempts to reason without the use of fictional and real myths. . . . Method narrows intellectual vision to the smallest of apertures." Wilson, *Vision*, 307.

<sup>29</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau*, 46. To describe such an attitude, Babbitt quotes Vergil: "Is each man's God but his own fell desire?" Babbitt, *Rousseau*, 285.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Kenneth N. Waltz, *Realism and International Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 84.

<sup>31</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy*, 193. In an especially modern turn for his philosophy, Babbitt lays special emphasis here on the subjectivity of words themselves, which can create a kind of "tyranny."

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others.

To resist the romantic impulse to “begin by setting aside all the facts,”<sup>32</sup> Babbitt agreed with the scientist that history should be objective and rest on evidence. Babbitt suggests that politics, and the moral life generally, must rest on an “objective,” “cause-and-effect philosophy,” and this philosophy must be assembled “as a matter of positive observation [that] there is a constant association between certain phenomena in time or space.”<sup>33</sup> Thus far, Babbitt seems to endorse the positivist project of the social sciences. He breaks with it when he insists that human knowledge is more integrated, and its necessary foundations more varied, than empirical science allows. For instance, he maintains that ethics and etiology cannot be divorced.<sup>34</sup> To learn what is right requires learning how the world works; and learning how the world works without considering the human condition and what is right, leads to the impoverished modern man.<sup>35</sup> A crucial remedy for this poverty, Babbitt suggests, is to form a “literary conscience,” or ethical imagination.<sup>36</sup> “The final test of a scholar must be his power to penetrate his facts and dominate his impressions, and fuse them with the fire of a central purpose”—a “fusion of the reason and the imagination.”<sup>37</sup> This fusion requires as much inner observation as external, and it cannot stop at the merely empirical world.<sup>38</sup>

We may sum all this up as follows. History is where the universal be-

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<sup>32</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy*, 79.

<sup>33</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy*, 234. Relatedly, when critiquing the scientific turn of contemporary philology, Babbitt said “the historical method is invaluable, but only when it is reinforced by a sense of absolute values”; Babbitt, *Literature*, 123.

<sup>34</sup> Babbitt’s use of a “more complete positivism” may be misleading. Claes G. Ryn argues that Babbitt is not sufficiently a student of philosophy and epistemology to realize that he is not merely trying to *expand* the range of evidence to be examined but is, in fact, rejecting the positivist definitions of “fact” and “evidence.” See Claes G. Ryn, *Will, Imagination, and Reason: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality*, 2nd. exp. ed. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997); Claes G. Ryn, “Introduction” in Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1991).

<sup>35</sup> For Babbitt, the core weakness of a merely encyclopaedic education was that it failed to train the moral imagination (Panichas, 158).

<sup>36</sup> See Smith, *Democracy*, 23. Smith is drawing primarily on Babbitt’s *On Being Creative*.

<sup>37</sup> Babbitt, *Literature*, 133, 179. Similarly, “the original man for the Greek was one who could create in the very act of imitating the past”; quoted in Panichas, *Critical Legacy*, 60.

<sup>38</sup> Claes G. Ryn and others emphasize that Babbitt does not endorse any kind of narrowly positivist project confined to the external world; rather, “the inner life of humanity is concrete and immediate and offers evidence of the nature of human existence that must be taken seriously by honest representatives of the critical attitude.” Claes G. Ryn, “How We Know What We Know: Babbitt, Positivism, and Beyond.” *Humanitas* 8, no. 1 (1995): 12.

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comes particular.<sup>39</sup> To apprehend the universal in the particular, though, requires more than historical knowledge in the ordinary, empirical sense; facts never speak for themselves. It requires what Burke called the moral imagination. An historian, a citizen, or a statesman must already have a sense of narrative if he is to understand the lessons of history. Babbitt turned to classic fiction to supply this necessity. By complementing history with literature, the student can introduce the narrative structure he needs to make sense of the facts of history, and he can do so without resorting to something purely subjective. The study of classic literature thus forms a kind of bridge between the particular (the facts of history) and the universal (the “law for man”).<sup>40</sup> In the next section, I explain in greater detail how fiction performs this role.

### *Classic Fiction’s Grand Experiment*

Translated into modern jargon, Babbitt argues that classic fiction is mean-preserving, low variance, experimental, large-N, and externally valid. Because of these attributes, classic fiction can solve the three main obstacles outlined in this article: it overcomes history’s small-N problem by supplying a narrative structure that is objective rather than subjective, reverse-causality by isolating and testing causal arguments, and selection effects by evaluating off-the-path behavior. It offers a replicable, experimental process whereby we can test causal claims without having to rely solely on observational data.

Babbitt’s argument hinges on two propositions: (1) good fiction must be typical; and (2) over time, a Burkean process eliminates bad fiction. Every reader is a test. As the number, variety, and difficulty of these tests approach infinity, our confidence in the causal structure of the work should approach 1. The more tested the work, the more universal it is likely to be.

The first proposition Babbitt takes from Aristotle.<sup>41</sup> In the *Poetics*, Ar-

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<sup>39</sup> Ryn, *America*, 87.

<sup>40</sup> “The great achievement of tradition at its best was to be at once a limit and a support to both reason and imagination and so to unite them in a common allegiance.” Babbitt, *Rousseau*, 45. See also Claes G. Ryn, *A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003).

<sup>41</sup> “Babbitt pointed to Aristotle: ‘The final test of art is not its originality, but its truth to the universal.’” Smith, *Democracy*, 141. Babbitt’s interpretation of Aristotle is not without its critics, but for my purposes here I am less interested in whether Babbitt understood Aristotle than whether he understood the nature of fiction. I believe he did. In any case, it may be worth noting that Aristotle, perhaps, thought tragedy reached its highest art in a “sequence of likelihoods leading to a conclusion which is unlikely because so full of *History, Social Science, and the “Literary Conscience”*

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istotle makes the rather startling claim that poetry “is of graver import than history.”<sup>42</sup> History, because it is contingent, necessarily includes both the probable and the improbable; the atypical often happens. (“Fact is stranger than fiction.”) The same is not true of good literature; it must hew strictly to the probable. A work that relies on random chance or implausible causes offends its readers: they recoil when someone acts out of character or an unlikely turn of events resolves the plot. In reality, of course, history does turn on improbable chances, like Lee’s orders at Antietam or the Miracle of the House of Brandenburg. But good literature must exclude them: “creative art, in distinct ratio to its dignity, deals not with what may happen in isolated cases but with what happens according to probability or necessity.”<sup>43</sup>

Precisely because good fiction should be typical, Babbitt excoriates Romantic excess. He objects, above all, to the Romantic willingness to set aside plausibility for sentimentality. This willingness leads to stories that are “wonderful rather than probable” because they “violat[e] the normal sequence of cause and effect.”<sup>44</sup> Hence, Babbitt deplored the Romantic idealization of social reprobates.<sup>45</sup> His logic here should be followed carefully. He criticized the idealization of “sublime convicts,” “glorious rascals,” and prostitutes with hearts of gold *not* because they are not factual but because they are not *typical*.<sup>46</sup> A sentimental, factually accurate story of a real-life Jean Valjean was just as dangerous as a fictional one—indeed, perhaps more dangerous—because it misleads its audience. It leads them to mistake as ordinary what is, in fact, unusual.

Like good fiction, the essence of most social science is a quest for a mean. Randomized trials are valuable because they are mean-preserving: in expectation, the sample average is identical to the population average. Social science runs into difficulties because, ethically and practically, it cannot execute this gold standard in scientific inquiry to answer many questions it wants to ask. As a result, econometric research seeks tools by which the social scientist can manhandle non-representative, obser-

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meaning.” Michael Davis, *The Poetry of Philosophy: on Aristotle’s Poetics* (South Bend: St Augustine’s Press, 1999), 63. The worst plot, for Aristotle, was thus “episodic” in the sense that it was a string of improbable accidents (1451b).

<sup>42</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. I. Bywater, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1451b.

<sup>43</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau*, 141.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>45</sup> Smith, *Democracy*, 45.

<sup>46</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau*, 118-119. See also Smith, *Democracy*, 81.

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vational data into yielding up a true average. When such tools cannot be found, social science breaks down.

Fiction is, by its nature, an experiment in the imagination. This experimental process can evaluate causal narratives in ways history and social science cannot: "True moral fiction is a laboratory experiment too difficult and dangerous to try in the world but safe and important in the mirror image of reality in the writer's mind."<sup>47</sup> Because good fiction is a self-contained whole,<sup>48</sup> it isolates causal pathways, disallowing causes external to itself. Because good fiction must adhere "to the probable," it is mean-preserving and low-variance; successful fiction cannot draw from the tail of a distribution without compromising its illusion. For these reasons, literature can hope to be a more reliable guide than merely empirical history.

Aristotle alone, though, cannot explain why anyone should rely on fiction to learn about the world. Ideally, poetry would offer a better resource than history, but not all fiction is good. The reader must have some grounds for confidence in the work he consults. Were he to rely on his own taste, he would be thrown back on relativism, and classic fiction would have no more claim to a superior understanding of cause-and-effect than Marxism. Babbitt therefore introduces his second proposition.

Babbitt's second proposition, that bad fiction is weeded out over time, is inspired by Burke. It sees a collective wisdom in the process by which one poem or novel survives and another does not.<sup>49</sup> It assumes that, over time, readers desire literature that corresponds to their own experience and is not merely diverting. "By innumerable experiments the world slowly winnows out the more essential from the less essential, and so gradually builds up standards of judgment . . . The good sense of the whole people tends to triumph in the long run—this is true democracy according to Lincoln."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1978), 107. Like Babbitt, Gardner thought art should be *centric*, not freakish (Gardner, 19); that it should be "essentially serious and beneficial, a game played against chaos and death, against entropy" (Gardner, 5). He echoed Babbitt's confidence in art as the ultimate storehouse of human wisdom about the human law: "myths are not mere hopeful fairy tales but the products of careful and disciplined thought . . . a properly built myth is worthy of belief, at least tentatively. . . . Art is our way of keeping track of what we know and have known, secretly, from the beginning." Gardner, *On Moral Fiction*, 116, 135.

<sup>48</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451a.

<sup>49</sup> "The test of the genuineness of this elevation and distinction in any particular literary work is its long-continued and universal appeal." Irving Babbitt, *On Being Creative and Other Essays* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1968), 180.

<sup>50</sup> Babbitt, *Literature*, 83. He continues: "Both our colleges and our preparatory History, Social Science, and the "Literary Conscience"

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This democratic character of the process is worth emphasizing.<sup>51</sup> Causal arguments in history and the social sciences are adjudicated by experts—and these experts are increasingly overspecialized. By contrast, classic fiction rests its authority on the breadth and depth of its readership, which testifies to its staying power. Because of this broad “democratic” appeal, the experiments portrayed in classic fiction are more replicable than any in social science. These experiments are assessed whenever a reader asks himself “does this match my own experience?” and especially if the reader acts on what he has read. A story has no authority when it is first published, no matter how learned its author and how extolled in the press. It could be true to life; it might be sentimental nonsense, pseudo-philosophical drivel, or misleading propaganda. A story gains authority because it corresponds to its readers’ understandings of reality.<sup>52</sup> Of course, any given reader may be a poor judge. Yet works that have been read 400 million times in a dozen languages over hundreds of years are better-tested than any scientific theory and more vetted than any peer-reviewed article. Therefore, “we may take our bearings with reference to them and be guided by them in deciding what is essence and what is accident in human nature.”<sup>53</sup>

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schools need to concentrate on a comparatively small number of standard subjects in this democratic way, that is to say, so as to register the verdict and embody the experience of a large number of men extending over a considerable time;” as a result, “our colleges . . . are [instead] falling into that ‘encyclopaedic smattering and miscellaneous experiment’ which according to Plato are especially harmful in the training of the young.” Babbitt, *Literature*, 84-85.

<sup>51</sup> Babbitt is not known for sympathy with unqualified democracy. He insists that democracy has an unacceptable lower form. It is possible that his argument about a kind of democracy of the ages, or my interpretation of it, goes beyond what Babbitt might have been willing to maintain. When writing *Democracy and Leadership* (1924), which concerns politics rather than literature, he stresses the danger that the common man will succumb to the lower passions and that a people needs sound leadership: “There is undoubted truth in the saying that there is somebody who knows more than anybody, and that is everybody;” Babbitt grants, but “one must allow everybody sufficient time to sift the evidence and add that, even so, everybody does not know very much” (*Democracy*, 262). That said, he seems charitable to “everybody” in *On Being Creative* (1932), and his warnings in *Democracy* concern the need to protect against the popular desires of the moment, not the judgment that emerges over a long time.

<sup>52</sup> Of course, some stories, such as science fiction, will deviate radically from reality in certain ways. To be convincing, the characters in these stories must be that much more true to life. After all, *Harry Potter* is about three of the most common types of people. What it sacrifices in bending the laws of physics, it compensates in the ordinariness of its heroes. And so, while a student would not read *The Sorcerer’s Stone* to learn geometry (though one might read *Flatland*), he could read it to learn about friendship and loyalty.

<sup>53</sup> Babbitt, *Literature*, 195.



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In stressing the gradual emergence and trial-and-error nature of human wisdom, Babbitt anticipates F.A. Hayek's claims about the evolution of knowledge. Like Burke, Hayek celebrated the common law and the gradual evolution of constitutions because they contain more wisdom than any rational theory.<sup>54</sup> Hayek also recognized the limits of any social science, and he went so far as to claim that "statistics [are] impotent to deal with pattern complexity."<sup>55</sup> And, like Babbitt, he suggested that, instead, the social sciences should confine themselves to "describing kinds of patterns" rather than searching for physical laws.<sup>56</sup>

Importantly, Babbitt's argument goes beyond that of Burke and especially that of Hayek. For both, the evolution of social knowledge tends to produce a wisdom that no one mind can articulate; it results in knowledge of *what* works, but not of *how*.<sup>57</sup> Babbitt, by contrast, suggests how classic fiction might offer a larger understanding. Because a great work of literature is in a sense complete, its causal structure can be grasped in its entirety, unlike the determinants of a market price or successful constitution. Moreover, because fiction is portable, it can be tested easily in a variety of circumstances and cultures, thus solving the econometric problem of external validity. That Shakespeare's work became more than one classic opera, or that *Emma* became *Clueless*, speaks to the universality of their causal structures. If Babbitt is right, classic fiction can give us a more complete understanding than an economic model (Hayek) or an inherited prejudice (Burke) because it communicates the logic by which it operates. It offers the *how* alongside the *what*.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> "Cicero quotes Cato as saying that the Roman constitution was superior to that of other states because it 'was based upon the genius, not of one man, but of many: it was founded, not in one generation, but in a long period of several centuries and many ages of men.'" F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 113.

<sup>55</sup> F.A. Hayek, *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 29.

<sup>56</sup> Hayek, *Studies*, 39.

<sup>57</sup> Hayek reiterates few points more often than the impossibility of fully understanding a spontaneous order; such a thing can only be "imperfectly understood"; "we must take for granted much that we do not understand. We must always work inside a framework of both values and institutions which is not of our own making." Hayek, *Constitution*, 108, 124. Hence, Hayek observes that, "by guiding the actions of individuals by rules rather than specific commands it is possible to make use of knowledge which nobody possesses as a whole." F.A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, vol.1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 49.

<sup>58</sup> In *Will, Imagination, and Reason*, Claes G. Ryn draws on Babbitt's understanding of imagination to develop an epistemology for the humanities and social sciences. The "moral imagination" anchors consciousness in the world and directs its attention accordingly.

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Let me sum up. In graduate school, the aspiring Ph.D. often encounters this adage: "The plural of anecdote is not evidence." Scientists distrust anecdotes because they have no claim to be typical; they may not represent the whole from which they are taken. Aristotle observes that, unlike the casual anecdote, fiction strives to achieve this representative quality; it strives to be typical. Moreover, fiction can experimentally explore questions that are closed to history and to social science. By itself, these features convey no objective authority. The best fiction acquires its authority by undergoing a Burkean selection process wherein the fittest works, i.e., the most typical, are most likely to survive. The more thoroughly this process of selection continues, the more confidence we may have in the surviving fiction. In this way, a classic story becomes a typical anecdote.

### *Conclusion: Fiction and Education*

Social science is in a better position now to appreciate its limitations. It has developed a sophisticated vocabulary to express its own shortcomings and what their solutions would require. By translating Irving Babbitt's ideas into a modern lexicon, I hope to have shown how the study of narrative fiction can satisfy many of these requirements. It ought to play a greater role in the discipline of political science, and I believe there is an increasing demand for such a role. Although this demand is still advanced by a minority, it is no longer a fringe phenomenon.

Nonetheless, I do not expect political scientists to flock to classic novels anytime soon. My last purpose here, then, is more intermediate: to apply Babbitt's argument to the scholar-as-teacher. Surely, whatever the predominant view in today's academia, our most serious responsibility as professors is the moral formation of our students. We have been warned, after all, that "we who teach will be judged more strictly."<sup>59</sup> In this article I have not mentioned the subject of determinism, which leaves the scientist "prone to look upon man as being made by natural forces and not as making himself,"<sup>60</sup> nor have I discussed the deeper meanings of the "universal," wherein all sages "are moving towards a common centre."<sup>61</sup> But these subjects, too, bring up "the central function

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Like Babbitt, Ryn also argues that the imagination is prone to following the will, and that truthfulness ultimately depends on the will not letting the imagination escape from unappealing or painful reality. See Ryn, *Will, Imagination, and Reason*.

<sup>59</sup> James 3:1.

<sup>60</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau*, 134.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

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of education," which Babbitt sees as "twofold: to form character and to preserve culture."<sup>62</sup>

Babbitt's conservative acolytes are sometimes surprised when Babbitt, who throughout his career lambasted sentimental humanitarians and their dreamy fraternity of men, claims that "the true purpose of education is to make human beings cosmopolitan."<sup>63</sup> Babbitt seeks to expose students to "the universal expressed in a new way,"<sup>64</sup> as in other societies, while keeping them firmly rooted in their own communities. Babbitt was "unmistakably" both cosmopolitan and American.<sup>65</sup> He hearkens to an older, vanished cosmopolitanism of "common literary standards" or, better still, a common discipline.<sup>66</sup>

Like Babbitt, humanist professors will want to include novels and poems on a political science syllabus to convey essential truths. I want to identify two errors, though, that they might be more likely to commit than they realize.

First, the teacher should resist aggressively pushing esoteric or revisionist interpretations of classic fiction. If the educative value of these stories is established by generations confirming that the world works the way the stories portray it, then we excavate supposedly hidden convolutions at our peril. The great author could conceivably have put them there, but if generations of readers, critics, and scholars did not notice them, those twists lose their claim to wisdom. Precisely because earlier generations have missed them, their sagacity has not been tested. These interpretations may deserve attention in the graduate seminar, but they should have a small place in the undergraduate classroom.

As professors, we have an obligation to teach a novel as it has been long understood, that is, in accord with its canonical interpretations (even if we harbor reservations about the convention). We must also, though, apply it to contemporary times by adapting its lessons to student experience.<sup>67</sup> The appropriate metaphor seems to be Burke's idea of reform. A professor, when he wishes to depart from the convention he has received, should do so cautiously, and his modification should respect what has come before—not make a revolutionary break with the

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<sup>62</sup> Panichas, *Critical Legacy*, 138.

<sup>63</sup> Smith, *Democracy*, 141.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>65</sup> "Babbitt was unmistakably and unabashedly American." Ryn, *America*, 170. See also George A. Panichas, "Irving Babbitt and the Widening Circle (Book Review)," *Modern Age* 31, no. 2 (1987): 7-8.

<sup>66</sup> Babbitt, *Literature*, 188.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 168-70.

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past. This kind of revision requires humility, which Babbitt identified as the virtue on which all others are built.<sup>68</sup> As professors, we should recognize that we are just as liable as the romantic dreamer to confuse “the odd and the original”—especially when we ourselves claim great originality.<sup>69</sup>

Second, we should, in general, be content to leave obscure works safely interred.<sup>70</sup> The same selection process that vindicates *A Tale of Two Cities* also leaves *The Old Curiosity Shop* a historical curiosity. As scholars, we love unearthing hidden treasures, but the revival of obscure works should probably be left to occur naturally. Exhumation is as likely to produce a shambling revenant as a Lazarus.

I will end by stressing that fiction is a complement to scientific and historic study, not a substitute. Babbitt did not doubt the value of science. “The humanist is not hostile to science as such,” he observes, “only to a science that has overstepped its due bounds.”<sup>71</sup> Returning to the education of a statesman, he or she should recognize the proper role of science while cultivating a mind that is at the same time historical and literary. The humanist professor might do the same. As social scientists grow increasingly discontented, it might not go amiss for the humanist to extend a friendly hand.

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<sup>68</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau*, 287.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>70</sup> Babbitt makes this point explicitly. He objected to modern scholarship which, perhaps as part of its quest for originality, tended “to disinter things to which the past had given decent burial.” Babbitt, *Literature*, 198.

<sup>71</sup> Irving Babbitt, “Humanism: An Essay at Definition,” in *Humanism and America*, ed. Norman Foerster (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1930), 32.