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## **Humanitarian and Humanistic Ideals: Charles W. Eliot, Irving Babbitt, and the American Curriculum at the Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

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I wonder how long Harvard will continue its present policy of giving me first rate responsibility with second rate recognition.

—Babbitt, letter to Paul Elmer More, October 9, 1910<sup>1</sup>

His [Charles W. Eliot's] slogan, "Education for Power and Service," matched well the materialistic and sentimental spirit of the times.

—Norman Foerster<sup>2</sup>

Irving Babbitt's (1869-1933) voice in the curricular battles of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century came from his "outsider" position in the Romance languages department at Harvard. During his 39-year tenure at Harvard, Babbitt came to be a co-founder of the New Humanist movement, which originated during the first part of the century. The New Humanists defended cultural, religious, and philosophical ideas they thought under attack from the new Modern movement. Of course, all these realms were inextricably linked with education; the New Humanists, however, focused almost solely on higher education, as universities were more closely associated with (and seen by some as the defenders of) the cultural, religious, and philosophical tenets of society. The vast majority of the defenders of the humanist curriculum in the public schools were found in universities; it was only natural, then, for these guardians of the humanist curriculum to put much emphasis on issues within higher education. Babbitt was no exception. His 1908 *Literature and the American College: Essays in Defense of the Humanities*, "which included several of his previously published essays, was not only the first full statement of the humanist

creed but a devastating attack on trends in higher education.”<sup>3</sup> Much of Babbitt’s specific criticism of education involved what he perceived to be deficiencies in American universities at the turn of the century. But Babbitt’s philosophical stances can easily be applied to the realm of the public schools too. Sometimes, in fact, Babbitt did particularly address his philosophical qualms with certain aspects and directions of public education and its curriculum. Specifically Babbitt disputed in his published works with the figurehead of American education at the turn of the century, Charles W. Eliot.

Both Babbitt and Eliot spent the vast majority of their careers at Harvard (Eliot was appointed president in 1869). Eliot was serving as president of the university when Babbitt obtained both his Bachelor’s (1889) and Master’s (1893) degrees and when Babbitt returned to teach in the Romance languages department in 1894; Eliot retired in 1909. This was the year after Babbitt decided to publish his *Literature and the American College: Essays in Defense of the Humanities*; included in it was Babbitt’s attack on both Harvard’s elective system and its gradual transformation into a research university. Eliot spearheaded both monumental changes, and Babbitt considered both as signs of Harvard’s shift from providing a humanistic education to providing one that was “humanitarian.” For Babbitt, a genuine humanistic education consisted of a curriculum primarily devoted to the Greek and Roman classics. These philosophical, rhetorical, and literary works often advocated the merits of restraint and balance, exemplified best by Aristotle’s tenet of the Golden Mean. These works encouraged and celebrated the ability to check desires and inclinations that naturally ran to excess (such as the desires for fame, material possessions, and even knowledge). Too, these works provided examples of those characters who could not restrain themselves, those characters who over-stepped their bounds and were consequently punished (often by the gods).

Babbitt believed such an education to be under assault by Eliot and others who advocated what Babbitt termed “humanitarianism.” Humanitarians looked to throw off all restraints upon the individual. This curriculum was no longer to provide models of restraint; conversely, it provided students with freedom from this classical training. For Babbitt, humanitarianism existed within the curriculum on two fronts: On one front, the student’s interests and inclinations were to reign supreme over all other factors influencing what to study. If a student felt inclined to study a certain subject at a certain time, the curriculum should be able to serve these desires. If a student’s interests changed in the course of schooling, then he/she should have the freedom to change his/her course of study as well. Students should not conform to one curriculum, but the

curriculum should serve the individual student. Such advocates Babbitt labeled as “sentimental humanitarians,” as the student’s sentiments were valued above all other considerations.

On the other front, Babbitt perceived that the curriculum provided no sense of balance while preparing students for careers. The tendency in the lower schools was to create differentiated vocational tracks, in which students pursued training for specific careers. Again, the curriculum was to serve students and their individual interests. On the university level, Babbitt pointed to the research university and the ascension of the specialist. Students were to specialize in their research interest, doggedly pursuing their specific focus while often neglecting other facets of the curriculum. Babbitt labeled these advocates “scientific humanitarians”; included in this group were the new efficiency experts entering into the schools at this time. Both humanitarian fronts, according to Babbitt, not only ignored the models that extolled restraint, but they actually promoted students’ interests and inclinations to go unchecked as they proceeded through the curriculum. Such promotion of this excess (or what Babbitt often labeled “expansion”) encouraged by the humanitarians meant disastrous results, Babbitt thought, once these students entered fully into American society.

Of course, Babbitt’s critique of Harvard’s elective system and its transformation into a research university pointed to Eliot’s role at Harvard and not his position as the educational leader of the public schools. But within Babbitt’s criticisms of Eliot, in *Literature and the American College* and sprinkled throughout his other works, most notably his 1929 essay “President Eliot and American Education,” was a philosophical analysis developed by Babbitt concerning education on a more general scale, including the public schools. The arguments brought about by Babbitt in confronting the leader of American schooling in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century show Babbitt’s perspicuity in a time of great upheaval in our educational history, even from his outsider “perch” at Harvard.<sup>4</sup>

### “... the time is ripe for an attack”

In an April 1, 1906, letter to his fellow co-founder of the New Humanism, Princeton professor Paul Elmer More, Babbitt declared that “I believe the time is ripe for an attack not only on what the philologists stand for but on what men like President Eliot stand for if anything is to remain of the American college and of all that it has traditionally represented.”<sup>5</sup> With Eliot’s impending retirement looming, Babbitt seemingly felt confident enough to make his criticism of Eliot’s “humanitarian” policies at Harvard made known publicly. This attack within Babbitt’s *Literature*

*and the American College*, his lone book specifically concerning education, was his first public objection to Eliot's ideas. In his chapter "Bacon and Rousseau," Babbitt argued that Eliot's educational ideals perfectly encapsulated both strands of humanitarianism. For Babbitt, Francis Bacon and Jean-Jacques Rousseau "founded" and best represented the scientific and sentimental strands respectively; therefore, Babbitt used the term Baconian interchangeably with scientific humanitarian, while using Rousseauist interchangeably with sentimental humanitarian. In Eliot's encapsulation of both strands of humanitarianism, the leading educational expert of the time provided this example for American education on all of its levels. In this criticism in 1908, though, Babbitt focused solely on Eliot's role as Harvard president, leaving his attacks of Eliot's influence upon American education for later years.

This initial foray provided the foundation of Babbitt's contentious disdain of Eliot's educational humanitarianism. Babbitt first examined Eliot's place as a "good Baconian" in his particular "conception of progress. [...] Only the Baconian idea of progress has been supplemented in his case by an idea of liberty that justifies a well-known French writer on education, M. Compayre, in claiming him as a disciple of Rousseau."<sup>6</sup> Eliot's "Baconian idea of progress," according to Babbitt, mirrored Harvard's transformation from a college with its traditional curriculum followed by all students, including Babbitt's experience at Harvard as an undergraduate, towards the modern-day university's offering of a vast array of courses of study and its specialized research elements.

Of course, this was the trend pursued by many American colleges at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, so Eliot was hardly alone as Babbitt's target. But it is interesting to note, on a more general scale, how Eliot's charge to transform Harvard mirrored his charge for transforming the American school curriculum: from the humanist curriculum consisting of the traditional subjects, required for all students, to one designed with differing vocational tracks. Kliebard details this lower school philosophical shift and labels Eliot's change of heart as both "startling" and "almost inexplicable."<sup>7</sup> Earlier Eliot had advocated a humanistic curriculum for all students regardless of their probable future occupations. Many students in school in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had the means and opportunity to use the schools as a foundation to attend universities and then to become professionals—the majority of students did not need to learn a specific skill or a certain type of technical expertise to use in a career. A humanistic education was much easier to defend in this social and economic context. But once the population of the United States rose significantly, school attendance did as well. Seemingly, then, by the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Eliot recognized the quickly chang-

ing American economy and society and decided that the schools could serve a more practical, and therefore important, function for this influx of students. One aspect of this role was that “teachers of the elementary schools ought to sort the pupils and sort them by their evident or probable destinies”; in fact, he believed there was “no function more important.”<sup>8</sup> The other aspect connected with this sorting mechanism was Eliot’s call for manual education. After all, not all students’ futures involved higher education, so vocational options needed to be offered for those increasing number of students. In fact, as Kliebard points out, Eliot’s change of philosophy sounded nothing like what he reported as the head of the Committee of Ten; instead, he began to echo the sentiments of G. Stanley Hall and the developmentalists on the need to study children early in their schooling in order to create and offer the education most suited to their future needs, what eventually became known as tracking.<sup>9</sup> From Babbitt’s perspective, Eliot’s educational ideals both on the university level and within the American schools provided clear evidence of Eliot’s suffering from an excess of Baconianism. Within Harvard, and American universities in general, this meant that Eliot advocated that students choose a particular field or subject of study and to pursue it through use of extensive research in the hopes of becoming a specialist in a given field. This, of course, according to Babbitt, was the converse of the type of education a genuine humanism provided, one based on examples of restraint and balance. For American schools in general, Eliot suddenly changed from believing that all students should follow the same humanistic curriculum to asserting that education needed to sort students, through different curricula, into specific professions and roles in society.

### **Eliot and Rousseau**

But what Babbitt found so disconcerting was Eliot’s adherence to the other side of the same humanitarian coin: his mirroring of a Rousseauistic excess within both educational spheres. In the previous quotation from Babbitt, he cited Compayre and his claim of Eliot’s being a disciple of Rousseau’s. Gabriel Compayre, a French educationalist, published his *Jean Jacques Rousseau and Education from Nature* in 1907, in part of a French series entitled “Pioneers in Education.” Compayre focused almost solely on explicating *Emile* on its profound influence on modern education, a work that “deserves to remain the eternal object of the educator’s meditation.”<sup>10</sup> Babbitt cited in his book the two references Compayre made concerning Eliot. After spending approximately one-hundred pages in praise of Rousseau’s educational beliefs, Compayre turned towards

the present state of Rousseauism in European and American education. He lauded the European acceptance of Rousseau's educational ideals, but Compayre mocked the reluctance of American educators to follow fully Rousseau's ideas: this is not surprising, Compayre mused, as "How could this dreamer, this indolent idler, this heroic representative of the sensibility of the Latin races, be gifted with the power of pleasing the virile, rugged minds and busy, practical temperaments of the citizens of the New World?"<sup>11</sup> He did concede, though, that American educators were slowly accepting and putting into practice Rousseau's ideas. The one figure to whom Compayre pointed was Eliot:

One of the leaders of American education, Dr. Charles W. Eliot, the revered president of Harvard University, summarizing the progress accomplished in his country during the nineteenth century, draws attention of the two essential things into the school curriculum: nature study and manual training. The American child is no longer a logical phantom, stuffed with words and abstractions, but a living creature, working with hands as well as mind.<sup>12</sup>

Compayre immediately and rhetorically asked, "But is not all of this Rousseau?"<sup>13</sup> He went on to assert that

Similarly, Dr. Eliot points out that an improvement has come about in discipline. [...] people have come to think that the modern and more accurate conception of a good government for a nation's citizens held lessons for us on the subject of a good government for children, who also should be freed, as far as possible, from the yoke of the old tutelage, and trained in self-government.<sup>14</sup>

Babbitt's first published criticism came a year after Compayre's work, and undoubtedly Babbitt felt obligated to state a vastly different case concerning Rousseau, Eliot, and American education.

Babbitt strongly tied Eliot's Rousseauism to his elective system. He proclaimed that

President Eliot speaks as a pure Rousseauist in a passage like the following: "A well-instructed youth of eighteen can select for himself a better course of study than any college faculty, or any wise man who does not know his ancestors and his previous life, can possibly select for him.... Every youth of eighteen is an infinitely complex organization, the duplicate of which neither does nor ever will exist."<sup>15</sup>

Babbitt pointed to an inextricable bond between Rousseau's educational ideals and Eliot's revolutionary elective system. Instead of disciplining oneself to studying and following the tenets of the wisdom of the ages, the Harvard student was allowed (and encouraged) to follow any course of study, whether that included a humanistic education or not. The elective

system emphatically announced that studying the classics of Western civilization was not something important or relevant enough to be required but merely among the alternatives from which one could choose. The humanities were consequently placed on the same academic plane as any and all other subjects. Babbitt's subsequent observation was

There is then no general norm, no law for man, as the humanist believed, with reference to which the individual should select; he should make his selection entirely with reference to his own temperament and its (supposedly) unique requirements. The wisdom of all the ages is to be naught compared with the inclination of a sophomore. Any check that is put on this inclination is an unjustifiable constraint, not to say an intolerable tyranny.<sup>16</sup>

This was Babbitt's definitive statement against Eliot's Rousseauism. Babbitt went on to describe how "the impressions of the moment," the constant flux of life, complemented the elective system in creating an "educational impressionism."<sup>17</sup> The temperament of a student may dictate what he/she would study each day; the fear for Babbitt was that both the student and his/her interests would change continuously, leaving no room for any course of study to be abiding. Even though Babbitt attacked the elective system which had been in place for decades, he cited a speech Eliot gave at the National Educational Association in 1900 concerning Rousseau. The selection contained Eliot's recognition of Rousseau's personal flaws, which were mixed with his quest for universal human freedom: "The main work of that man's life tended and still tends toward human liberty, and that one fact has almost sanctified an execrable wretch."<sup>18</sup> The selection ends with Eliot's imploring the audience to become an advocate of "freedom and liberty" with "no sins to cover."<sup>19</sup> But Babbitt countered that Eliot's implication was part of his philosophical error: "Rousseau was an 'execrable wretch,' who was at the same time a glorious apostle of liberty. Yet nothing is easier to prove than that if Rousseau was an execrable wretch, it was directly because of his idea of liberty."<sup>20</sup> Babbitt attempted to argue that Eliot could not have his cake and eat it too: to give free reign to a student's choosing the course of his/her studies naturally reinforced the expansive tendencies of the student within his/her life. If a student's education was without order or restraint, why would a student's life be any different?

Eliot's Rousseauism, according to Babbitt, manifested itself at Harvard by being reinforced by the Baconian strand of humanitarianism. He claimed that "President Eliot has adopted and applied to education only one half" of Rousseau's idea of liberty as a "majestic indolence."<sup>21</sup> In reference to Eliot, Babbitt continued that "Like Rousseau, he would release the student from all outward constraint; like Rousseau, he denies

that there is a general norm, a 'law for man,' the discipline of which the individual should receive."<sup>22</sup> Babbitt's phrases "general norm" and "law for man" both articulated his belief that classical wisdom gave readers a "norm" and a "law" on how to live their lives; again, the Greek and Roman classics modeled behavior on restraint and avoiding excess. But by ignoring this discipline and granting this freedom to his Harvard students, Eliot assumed that they would

use this liberty in a Baconian spirit; he [the student] is not to profit by his emancipation, as Rousseau himself would do, to enjoy a 'delicious indolence,' but he is to work with great energy with reference to his personal interests and aptitudes. Unfortunately many of our undergraduates are more thoroughgoing Rousseauists in this respect than President Eliot.<sup>23</sup>

### **Rousseau and Bacon: Eliot's Vision of Harvard**

Babbitt conceded that Eliot was "one of the most strenuous of men," not only through his role of President of Harvard but also through his leadership within the entire American educational system but judged that he clearly underestimated the level of intellectual strenuousness in human nature, and especially within undergraduates. After the elective system had been in place for decades, Babbitt surmised that

President Eliot must be somewhat disappointed to see how nearly all these youths insist on flocking into a few large courses; and especially disappointed that many of them should take advantage of the elective system not to work strenuously along the line of their special interests, but rather to lounge through their college course along the line of least resistance.<sup>24</sup>

This complaint of Babbitt's was at the heart of his attack of Eliot's sentimental humanitarian tendencies. But Babbitt went on to conclude that Eliot's Rousseauism also complemented and reinforced his Baconianism; after all, Babbitt argued, "The fullness of knowledge," for the true Baconian,

he abandons as something impossible for the individual, and by a sort of fiction transfers it to humanity in the mass. He does not have the humanist's passion for wholeness, for the harmonious rounding out of all the faculties. He is willing to sacrifice this ideal symmetry if only he is allowed to cultivate some special faculty or subject to the utmost.<sup>25</sup>

Because the individual cannot master all subjects or knowledge, he/she is forced into a specialty, the Baconian ideal. The Rousseauistic aspect of this dualism entered at this point, as the individual could justifiably



choose any specialty or course of study, no matter how esoteric or remote, as an individual's educational tastes were to be prized above all else. All subjects and inquiries were on the same level plane of importance. At Harvard under Eliot, then, this reinforcement was working on both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Within the elective system, undergraduates had the choice of a variety of subjects and courses of study; of course, these could only be offered by a faculty specially prepared and qualified to teach them. With Harvard's transformation into a research university, such specialists were easily had. Babbitt's first major work was devoted to critiquing and warning about this humanitarian alliance in such an education.

### Two Decades Later: "President Eliot and American Education"

Babbitt went on to refer to Eliot briefly in both his *Democracy and Leadership* (1924) and *On Being Creative and Other Essays* (1932),<sup>26</sup> but he saved his most complete attack on Eliot's ideas for his essay "President Eliot and American Education," published in *The Forum* in January 1929, three years after Eliot's death. Later the essay was republished in a collection of essays in 1940 entitled *Spanish Character and Other Essays*. Babbitt began his 1929 essay by echoing a sentiment found in his *Literature and the American College*: His attack was solely philosophical, as he held Eliot's character in the highest regard.<sup>27</sup> When discussing and deriding the elective system in *Literature and the American College*, Babbitt pointed out that Harvard's undergraduates did not generally mirror Eliot's academic and intellectual "strenuousness." In "President Eliot and American Education," Babbitt began by proclaiming that

It would be reassuring if one could establish a connection between President Eliot's educational theory and his character and personality. His character and personality would seem, however, to derive from the Puritan tradition at its best, whereas his theory at the essential point marks an extreme recoil from Puritanism.<sup>28</sup>

Babbitt persisted that the individual was naturally inclined towards excess: an individual may possess a Baconian hunger for knowledge that leads into further and further into a one-sided specialty and/or a Rousseauistic expansion of emotions and freedom that leads to relativism, as all opinions, preferences, etc. are thought to be equally valid. Babbitt even transferred this natural tendency towards expansion from the individual to entire nations as, writing at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he argued that unchecked excess within individuals eventually led to international imperialism.<sup>29</sup>

But as Babbitt pointed out, Eliot's own Puritanism, his ability to avoid unchecked excess, was "the result of generations of religious or humanistic discipline. The illusion of a President Eliot is that of a man who himself born to great riches, deems it 'natural' that everyone should have cash in the bank."<sup>30</sup> Both Eliot's own religious and humanistic training and schooling provided for the capability to check his expansive tendencies; for Babbitt, though, Eliot's development of the elective system and the following of the German model of the research university at Harvard, along with his advocating of dismissing a liberal education for all American students in favor of a specific vocational training, demonstrated Eliot's philosophical oversight. Eliot apparently did not perceive how his own humanistic and religious discipline and training led him to his own prominent character and ability. Babbitt pointed to the irony: Eliot ignored his own instruction and training while serving as the leader of American education at the turn of the century.

In looking back at Eliot's legacy in American education in the decades preceding and following the turn of the century, Babbitt argued that he "did little more than reflect the time in its main tendency. For forty years he pushed American education in the direction in which it was already leaning. His whole career, indeed, illustrates the advantages of going with one's age quite apart from the question whither it is going."<sup>31</sup> For Babbitt, American culture, strongly reinforced by its education of this era, was becoming more and more sentimental and utilitarian-based, moving away from its religious and humanistic discipline found in earlier times. Though Eliot was trained within the "old education," he seemed to disregard this in order to lead American education towards the "new education." Eliot's ideas forced critics "practically to consider the value of the naturalistic philosophy that he and other leaders of the nineteenth century espoused so heartily."<sup>32</sup> Babbitt's simple argument with "naturalism," subsequently, was that

This philosophy culminates in a doctrine of progress that would seem to be in serious conflict with the wisdom of the ages; for it is plain that there can be no such wisdom without the assumption in some form of a core of normal human experience that is set above the shifting tides of circumstance. The progress proclaimed by the naturalists, on the contrary, is to be achieved not by transcending the phenomenal flux but by a surrender to it.<sup>33</sup>

Babbitt seemingly perceived (and fought against) an American educational system that was becoming ever more progressive in the sense of becoming ever more concerned with the circumstances of the present. On the one hand, child-study advocates were promoting an education that both encouraged and allowed for the shifting interests and pursuits of

the student; on the other hand, social efficiency experts were scientifically preparing students for roles within the present society and for careers in the future. Babbitt's problem was with the disregard of the naturalists for the past, for "the wisdom of the ages" instead of the "wisdom of the age."<sup>34</sup> Babbitt went on to assert that "The belief in progress in its most naïve form is still held by multitudes, especially in America," but that the confidence in this type of progress, a progress promising an eventual utopia, "has been receiving the most formidable of refutations—that of the facts. The contrast between the whole conception of a 'far-off divine event' and incidents like the Great War is too flagrant."<sup>35</sup> What Babbitt's genuine humanism called for was the practice of restraint, developing the ability to curb those appetites and desires that, unchecked, become insatiable. The "new" and "progressive" education Babbitt argued, in turn, rejected any sort of check on our expansive tendencies; in fact, these tendencies were to be cultivated. Babbitt pointed to the Great War as the result of such an approach.

As Babbitt perpetually spelled out in his prior works, he argued in this essay that Eliot's

humanitarian idealism based in the faith in progress will be found in analysis to be either utilitarian or sentimental. Practically, in education as elsewhere, a utilitarian and sentimental movement has been displacing traditions that are either religious or humanistic. President Eliot deserves to rank as our chief humanitarian idealist in the educational field, not because of any novelty in his views, but because of the consistency and unwavering conviction with which he applied them.<sup>36</sup>

As the face of the revolutionary changes in American education beginning in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Eliot simply personified for Babbitt the influx of sentimental and utilitarian humanitarianism he warned as taking over the educational landscape. Eliot led the charge of both sentimental and utilitarian humanitarianism into American schools in the forms of the child-study movement and the efficiency experts. Of course, for Babbitt, these two factions basically represented different sides of the same humanitarian coin and actually worked in concordance with each other. Babbitt pointed out that Eliot was historically in a long line of educational humanitarians, founded by Locke and Rousseau. But Babbitt went on to assert that "Superficially, at least, humanitarianism is even more triumphant today than it was during the lifetime of President Eliot. Humanitarians are at present shaping our educational policy from the elementary grades to the university."<sup>37</sup> Babbitt's most intense criticism of Eliot's ideas, it is true, did come from his role as the president of Harvard; even in this essay concerning Eliot's general role in leading American education, Babbitt still managed to

denounce his implemented elective system at Harvard, using it as the prime example of the “clash between a familiar type of naturalistic philosophy and the wisdom of the ages; for nothing is more certain than that this wisdom has been neither utilitarian nor sentimental, but either religious or humanistic.”<sup>38</sup> This “wisdom of the ages,” the wisdom passed down both through religion and the humanities, Babbitt believed centered on self-control. Babbitt’s insisted that, by turning away from this wisdom, Eliot’s Harvard served as the humanitarian guide for all facets of American education.

### **The “Work” of Eliot and Babbitt**

Interestingly, this philosophical clash between Babbitt and Eliot can be illustrated through their respective notions of “work.” Babbitt did lavish praise on Eliot’s intellectual “strenuousness” in contrasting it to the attitude of many students involved in Harvard’s elective system. But Babbitt’s praise ended there, as his crusade against Eliot’s idea of work began. Referring to his model humanist, Babbitt cited three statements from Aristotle:<sup>39</sup> “The end is the chief thing of all; The end of ends is happiness; Happiness is a kind of working.”<sup>40</sup> Babbitt began with the concession that “no concern” can be more important to us than our happiness. And, Babbitt continued, “Aristotle’s treatment of happiness is especially relevant to our present topic because of the close connection he establishes between it and his scheme of education.” A genuinely humanistic, or liberal, education for Aristotle centered on leisure. For Babbitt, this “requires that all partial aims and special disciplines should be subordinated to the specifically human form of effort or ‘energy’—the source of true felicity—that is put forth in mediation and finally in the contemplative life or life of vision.” If we are able to control or check properly our expansive tendencies, then our intellectual energy is free to lead us to contemplation, the act that brings about true happiness for Aristotle. But for Babbitt, students of the “new” education were encouraged to take this inner energy and focus needed for contemplation and project outwardly: Energy was expended outwardly instead of inwardly. Curricula of the “new” education promoted unchecked self-expression and the training for specific careers, both pursued without any attention devoted to the development of restraint or constraint within students. Babbitt directed his criticism directly towards Eliot:

With this background in mind one should be able to grasp the nature of the conflict between the wisdom of the ages and the humanitarian ‘idealism’ of President Eliot. Like the religious and humanistic teachers of the past, President Eliot was very much and rightly preoccupied

with the problem of happiness. Like these teachers, again, he held that to be happy one needs to be active and energetic. But in his notion of the kind of activity that tends to happiness he plainly diverged from these teachers widely.<sup>41</sup>

It seems, then, Babbitt insisted that a student's engagement with the classics provided him/her numerous models of right behavior and examples to be imitated. The "wisdom of the ages" provided this means of more closely attaining an inner-control over the naturally expansive tendencies of students. Babbitt conceived that students who meditated upon and contemplated the classics primarily in their education would be much better equipped to develop character, as they would be much better trained in controlling their expansive tendencies. The classics, according to Babbitt, once afforded students models and examples to imitate, before the strands of both sentimental and utilitarian humanitarianism began exerting their profound influence upon the world through the respective leadership of Rousseau and Bacon. After this epoch, expansion through both sentimental and utilitarian means began negating the discipline needed in order to follow and develop the sense of Aristotle's Golden Mean.

Thus, Eliot was under the delusion that happiness was to be found outside of the inner life of the individual.<sup>42</sup> "In the address given on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday," Babbitt explained, "he advised his hearers to avoid introspection, to 'look out and not in' (one gathers from the context that he identified introspection with the morbid brooding of the introvert)."<sup>43</sup> In what Babbitt called a "highly representative" way of thinking, "The effort that President Eliot recommends [...] is outer effort—effort of the utilitarian type," and that "The main effort of the Occident was in his day, and still remains in ours, utilitarian."<sup>44</sup> Babbitt railed against Eliot's elective system because of its promotion of the student's passing and transitory inclinations and whims, thereby ignoring any sort of attempt of controlling a student's natural expansiveness. What this meant for the public schools was that, through the influence of the child-study experts, a student's natural tendencies and interests were to be unquestionably celebrated and pursued. Any such attempt of putting a check upon this emotional expansiveness was considered a hindrance to a student's natural growth. The utilitarian branch of humanitarianism made a much clearer attempt at a solely outer working for Babbitt. Through the social efficiency experts, this outer working led directly to working itself: students were to be trained to enter a specific role in society, thus producing an efficiently running society based on the preparation done in the schools.

### The Problem of Eliot's "Service"

Babbitt's chief complaint of the outer effort promoted by both strands of humanitarianism, and the resulting disregard of the mediation of the inner dualism, was that nothing guaranteed that the student would use the proficiency of this outer working for humane ends. Eliot, of course, was the chief advocate of such a frame of mind. "The crucial assumption of President Eliot," Babbitt opined,

appears to be that the material efficiency promoted by utilitarian effort will be used altruistically. For the traditional attempt to train for culture and character he sought to substitute, in his own phrase, 'training for service and power.' Power is in itself desirable provided it be employed to some adequate end. The whole issue is whether service in the humanitarian sense can supply this end. Most Americans are convinced that it not only can but does.<sup>45</sup>

Babbitt's primary concern was focused on the fallacy that students not trained in "culture and character," would nonetheless be both capable and willing to serve humanity altruistically. In the sentimental humanitarian's quest for serving mankind and in the utilitarian humanitarian's quest for efficiency and material power, Babbitt looked around his world and argued that "we are altruistic in our feelings about ourselves and imperialistic in our practice."<sup>46</sup> The unchecked expansiveness allowed and encouraged within both curricular factions provided no guidance or guarantee, according to Babbitt, in serving humane and altruistic ends.

As mentioned previously, Babbitt was perplexed with Eliot's own religious and humanistic education and his subsequent abandonment of those principles as president of Harvard and as a leader of American education at the turn of the century. Babbitt aimed his argument at the new definition of "service," in that it

has changed its meaning in the transition from Christianity to humanitarianism. In general, the representatives of the utilitarian-sentimental movement have tended [...] to dissimulate from others and perhaps from themselves the wideness of the gap between the new dispensation and the old.<sup>47</sup>

Though Babbitt celebrated Eliot's own traditional education, his desire to dismiss such an education for present students took away exposure to the "wisdom of the ages" in order "to encourage an extraordinarily complacent materialism."<sup>48</sup> Babbitt supported the traditional Puritan conception of the individual's need of restraint, but the vehement emphasis of control over expansion made a return to a Puritanical mindset, best represented by the ideas of Jonathan Edwards, "no doubt highly

objectionable.”<sup>49</sup> In the ongoing quest for the balance of inner-control and outward expansion, the Puritans egregiously overemphasized the aspect of control. Unquestionably Babbitt felt the “old education” followed suit.<sup>50</sup> But Babbitt also believed that advocates of the “new education” made the same mistake in the other direction:

Unfortunately, President Eliot and the humanitarians have, in their rejection of the [overly controlling Puritan] dogma, laid themselves open to the suspicion of pouring out the baby with the bath. Not merely Puritanism but every doctrine that asserts the dual nature of man must be felt, in its relation to man’s natural self, as more or less repressive.<sup>51</sup>

Eliot’s remedy, of course, for this repression was to implement the elective system at Harvard, thereby advocating a variety of curricular tracks within American schools. Babbitt publicly took issue with Eliot’s elective system over two decades before in his *Literature and the American College*, but in critiquing Eliot’s ideas for American education as a whole, he examined what this meant for the student in American public schools. Babbitt mused that “The effort that he [the student] puts forth along the lines of his temperamental bias will make for his own happiness and finally be pressed into the service of humanity.”<sup>52</sup> Through descriptions of what sound precisely like the two major curricular factions in his day, Babbitt added his voice to their critique. The question Babbitt posed to Eliot ultimately persisted: “What proof is there, after all, that so purely temperamental a person as President Eliot’s theory tends to produce will be altruistic? The humanitarian is finally forced to fall back on some theory of man’s natural goodness of the kind that is commonly associated with Rousseau.”<sup>53</sup> Babbitt quickly discredited this notion of “man’s natural goodness” by simply asking his readers to observe both young children presently and those in generations of the past, in order to see if such a notion could actually be observed.<sup>54</sup>

### Babbitt, Eliot, and Today

Writing in the late 1920s, Babbitt lamented that

Production is apparently to expand indefinitely—a programme that has been summed up in the formula: ‘Pigs for more pigs for more pigs.’ One is reminded of this programme by the articles Henry Ford recently contributed to the *Forum*. One may be sure that he would not have set forth his philosophy of industry so confidently—one is tempted to add so naively—were it not for the presence in the background of really dignified figures like President Eliot who are at one with him on certain underlying postulates.<sup>55</sup>

Babbitt ended his essay by reiterating his attack of Eliot first brought forth in 1908 in his *Literature and the American College*; that is, Babbitt once more argued against Eliot's elective system and his support of specialization at Harvard.<sup>56</sup> But in a more general sense, he concluded that "The discrediting of the principle of control in favor of a sheer expansiveness is in general dubious. In the educational field it is not only dubious, but, so far as it leads to a primary emphasis on innate gifts and their supposed right to expand freely, it is also Utopian."<sup>57</sup> Of course, Babbitt placed Eliot at the head of this philosophical charge and admitted to the enormity of his influence, as "Most of the heads of our institutions of learning, great and small, have been content for a generation and more to follow in the wake of President Eliot."<sup>58</sup> Babbitt readily recognized the challenge he and his genuine humanism faced in staking a claim in the American curriculum. He conceded that "Comparatively few Americans are likely to share the doubts I have been expressing about the humanitarian revolution in the theory and practice of education. The idea of service proclaimed by President Eliot [...] has not as yet been seriously shaken."<sup>59</sup> Babbitt certainly pointed to Eliot as the leader of the gradual rejection of the humanist curriculum and its objective of emphasizing an inner check on our expansive tendencies:

At the bottom of the whole educational debate, as I have been trying to show, is the opposition between a religious-humanistic and a utilitarian-sentimental philosophy. This opposition, involving as it does first principles, is not subject to compromise or mediation. Those who attempt such mediation are not humanists but Laodiceans. Many persons who deem themselves moderate are in fact only muddled.<sup>60</sup>

"Muddled" and the idea that "Production is apparently to expand indefinitely"—two ideas presented by Babbitt in the 1920s concerning American education and society respectively, and two ideas seemingly not too distant from the present. Of course, Babbitt's pronouncements concerning education, especially those pointed against Eliot's ideals, made no profound dent or brake on the trends in education at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The two reforms Eliot championed at Harvard, the elective system and the rigorous research element of the university, have continued on with intense strength. Too, Eliot's belief in a differentiated curriculum, especially promoting current and future vocational tracks, along with his trust in the validity of only working outwardly, particularly in students' altruistically serving the greater causes of society, remain well secured in our schools. It is therefore not a matter of comparing Babbitt's and Eliot's respective influence on American education at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century or the 21<sup>st</sup>. What is worth contemplating, though,



is whether Babbitt's position as an educational "outsider" (a 39-year career in the Languages Department at Harvard) relegates his ideas to the periphery today as well. It would seem that Babbitt's misgivings with many of Eliot's educational ideals could prove viable in our current educational landscape. Are we content with an elective system and an uncompromising adherence to research in our universities, making a sense of commonality amongst students nearly impossible? Are we satisfied, in the lower schools, with different tracks for academic and vocational purposes? In preparing students for future professions and for serving others in society at large, are we content in having little to say of the inner lives of students, focusing nearly solely on their outward lives? Babbitt offered no panacea in his quarrels with Eliot, but it seems as if his questions continue a century later to linger with us, awaiting our attention.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Babbitt-More Correspondence, Dec. 1895-April 1914, pp. 1-167 [typescript]. Harvard University Archives. P. 106.

<sup>2</sup> *The Future of the Liberal College* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1938), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Stephan C. Brennan and Stephan R. Yarbrough, *Irving Babbitt* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 22.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: RoutledgeFarmer, 2004), 190.

<sup>5</sup> Harvard Archives. Box 9, Babbitt-More and More-Babbitt Correspondence, 1895-1934. Harvard University Archives. P.3. Earlier in the same letter, Babbitt proclaimed that "under present conditions victory belongs in the long run to those who have ideas and power of expression, and the philologues have neither."

<sup>6</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College: Essays in Defense of the Humanities* (1908), ed. Russell Kirk, (Washington, DC: National Humanities Institute, 1986), 95-6.

<sup>7</sup> Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*, 105.

<sup>8</sup> Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*, 105.

<sup>9</sup> Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*, 105.

<sup>10</sup> Gabriel Compayre, *Jean Jacques Rousseau and Education from Nature*, trans. R.P. Jago (New York: T. Y. Crowell & Co., 1907), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Compayre, *Jean Jacques Rousseau and Education from Nature*, 108.

<sup>12</sup> Compayre, *Jean Jacques Rousseau and Education from Nature*, 108-9.

<sup>13</sup> Compayre, *Jean Jacques Rousseau and Education from Nature*, 109.

<sup>14</sup> Compayre, *Jean Jacques Rousseau and Education from Nature*, 109.

<sup>15</sup> Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 96. Babbitt's citation of Eliot's words was from *Educational Reform*, pp.132, 133.

<sup>16</sup> Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 96.

<sup>17</sup> Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 96.

<sup>18</sup> Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 96-7. Eliot's quotation continues: "Do you know what Rousseau did with five of his wife's babies, one after the other, in spite of her prayers and tears? He put every one of them in succession into the public *crèche*, knowing that in the then condition of foundling hospitals that destination meant all but certain death. Yet we sit here and listen to the praise of that mean and cruel creature. How shall we account for these two judgments of one man, both just? We can only say that he tied the main work of his intellectual life to the great doctrine of human liberty. Verily, to have served liberty will cover a multitude of sins. May you serve freedom and humanity in all your labors, and then have no sins to cover." Babbitt cited Eliot's quotation from *Proceedings National Educational Association*, 1900, 199.

<sup>19</sup> Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 97.

<sup>20</sup> Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 97. Babbitt made the same comparison to Bacon and his philosophy in this section as well: "...just as Bacon failed morally, not in spite of his idea of progress, but as a result of it."

<sup>21</sup> Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 100.

<sup>22</sup> Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 98. Babbitt argued later that "In praising the liberty of Rousseau, President Eliot is in reality praising the liberty of the anarchist, not because he is himself an anarchist, but because he belongs to a generation which saw so keenly the benefits of liberty that it was unable to see the benefits of restraint" (106).

<sup>23</sup> Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 98.

<sup>24</sup> Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 99. Babbitt went on to assert that "A popular philosopher has said that every man is as lazy as he dares to be. If he had said that nine men in ten are as lazy as they dare to be, he would have come near hitting a great truth."

<sup>25</sup> Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 94.

<sup>26</sup> In *Democracy and Leadership* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside P, 1924), 290, Babbitt argued that "no one has been more successful in breaking down American educational tradition in favor of humanitarian conceptions than President Eliot, who is himself an unusually fine product of Puritan discipline. He has owed his great influence largely to the fact that many men are sensitive to a dignified and impressive personality, whereas very few men are capable of weighing the ultimate tendencies of ideas. One might have more confidence in the elective system if it could be counted on to produce President Eliots." Later, 303, Babbitt surmised that "The old education was, in intention at least, a training for wisdom and character. The new education has been summed up by President Eliot in the phrase: training for service and power. We are all coming together more and more in this idea of service. But, though service is supplying us in a way with a convention, it is not, in either the humanistic or the religious sense, supplying us with standards." In *On Being Creative and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1932), 227-8, Babbitt pleaded, concerning Eliot, that "A legitimate admiration for his personal qualities should not interfere with the keenest critical scrutiny of his views about education, for the two things stand in no necessary connection. Practically this means to scrutinize the humanitarian idealism that he probably did more than any other man of his generation to promote. In this respect most of the heads of our institutions of learning have been

and still are understudies of President Eliot. In an address on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday President Eliot warned his hearers against introspection, lest it divert them from a wholehearted devotion to service. Between this attitude and a religious or humanistic attitude there is a clash of first principles. Both humanism and religion require introspection as a prerequisite of the inner life and its appropriate activity. With the disappearance of this activity what is left is the outer activity of the utilitarian, and this leads straight to the one-sided cult of material efficiency and finally to the standardization that is, according to nearly all foreign critics and many of our own, a chief American danger." Note well again Babbitt's insistence upon separating the criticism of Eliot's ideas from his character.

<sup>27</sup> Irving Babbitt, "President Eliot and American Education," (1929), in *Character and Culture: Essays on East and West / Irving Babbitt*, ed. Claes G. Ryn (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 199. Babbitt believed any attack on Eliot and his educational ideas should be "discussed in a way worthy of him, be lifted above the petty and the personal into the region of ideas."

<sup>28</sup> Babbitt, "President Eliot and American Education," 198.

<sup>29</sup> In his *Democracy and Leadership*, Babbitt devoted a chapter to this idea entitled "Democracy and Imperialism."

<sup>30</sup> Babbitt, "President Eliot and American Education," 198-9.

<sup>31</sup> Babbitt, "President Eliot and American Education," 199.

<sup>32</sup> Babbitt, "President Eliot and American Education," 199.

<sup>33</sup> Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 199-200.

<sup>34</sup> Babbitt, "President Eliot and American Education," 199. In discussing Eliot, Babbitt surmised "If, however, one is finally to be accounted a great and wise leader, it is not enough thus to be the faithful servant of the wisdom of an age; one must also be true to the wisdom of the ages" (199).

<sup>35</sup> Babbitt, "President Eliot and American Education," 200. Babbitt argued that "It may be doubted, however, whether in the future anyone of a distinction comparable with that of President Eliot will be able to hold it [the adamant belief in progress] with the same bland confidence" (200).

<sup>36</sup> Babbitt, "President Eliot and American Education," 200.

<sup>37</sup> Babbitt, "President Eliot and American Education," 201. Babbitt immediately and critically continued: "One should, however, note in passing a curious circumstance: the most thoroughgoing humanitarians—for example, our professors of pedagogy and sociology—are held in almost universal suspicion in academic circles, and are not infrequently looked upon by their colleagues as downright charlatans."

<sup>38</sup> Babbitt, "President Eliot and American Education," 201.

<sup>39</sup> Babbitt argued later in his essay, 205, that Aristotle was "a thinker who will be found to be more completely experimental than many moderns who profess to found their whole philosophy on experiment." Later, 206, Babbitt added that "Aristotle has himself admonished us to give heed to the sayings of the wise men of old only in so far as they are found to coincide with the facts. If, therefore, we attach any weight to Aristotle, it should not be primarily because of his traditional authority, but because Aristotle turns out to be only another name for inspired good sense." In exploring the same notion of Aristotle's concep-

tion of work in "Humanism: An Essay of Definition," (1930), in *Humanism and America: Essays on the Outlook of Modern Civilisation*, ed. Norman Foerster (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1930), 41, Babbitt labeled Aristotle "a true humanist" in this regard.

<sup>40</sup> Babbitt, "President Eliot and American Education," 205-6.

<sup>41</sup> Babbitt, "President Eliot and American Education," 206-7.

<sup>42</sup> Babbitt further related that "According to a French authority, 'happiness is not an easy matter: it is difficult to find it in ourselves and impossible to find it elsewhere.' President Eliot must be numbered among those who hoped to find it 'elsewhere,'" 207.

<sup>43</sup> Babbitt, "President Eliot and American Education," 207. Babbitt shared the same anecdote in *On Being Creative and Other Essays*, 228: "In an address on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday President Eliot warned his hearers against introspection, lest it divert them from a whole-hearted devotion to service. Between this attitude and a religious or humanistic attitude there is a clash of first principles. Both humanism and religion require introspection as a prerequisite of the inner life and its appropriate activity. With the disappearance of this activity what is left is the outer activity of the utilitarian, and this leads straight to the one-sided cult of material efficiency and finally to the standardization that is, according to nearly all foreign critics and many of our own, a chief American danger."

<sup>44</sup> Babbitt, "President Eliot and American Education," 207.

<sup>45</sup> Babbitt, "President Eliot and American Education," 208. Babbitt followed by pointing out that "Service has been made the basis of the gospel of Rotary and may therefore be termed our Rotarian convention."

<sup>46</sup> Babbitt, "President Eliot and American Education," 209.

<sup>47</sup> Babbitt, "President Eliot and American Education," 209.

<sup>48</sup> Babbitt, "President Eliot and American Education," 209.

<sup>49</sup> Babbitt, "President Eliot and American Education," 210.

<sup>50</sup> Elsewhere in his works Babbitt lamented generally the ideas and applications of the neo-classicists as being too rigid, dry, and mechanical. Babbitt thought in the same manner towards the "old education" specifically: "Our educators, in their anxiety not to thwart native aptitudes, encourage the individual in an in-breeding of his own temperament, which, beginning in the kindergarten, is carried upward through the college by the elective system, and receives its final consecration in his specialty. We are all invited to abound in our own sense, and to fall in the direction in which we lean. Have we escaped from the pedantry of authority and prescription, which was the bane of the old education, only to lapse into the pedantry of individualism? One is sometimes tempted to acquiesce in Luther's comparison of mankind to a drunken peasant on horseback, who, if propped up on one side, slips over on the other," *Literature and the American College*, 121. Babbitt further argued that "To set up pure restraint, as was the tendency of the mediaeval educator, is easy. To set up pure liberty, as our modern radical tends to do, is likewise easy. But to temper liberty with restraint in education requires 'a sagacious, powerful and combining mind,'" *Literature and the American College*, 109. Babbitt quoted this last phrase from

Edmund Burke. In *Rousseau and Romanticism*, (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1919), 118-9, Babbitt proclaimed that “There is also a formalistic taint in the educational system worked out by the Jesuits—a system in all respects so ingenious and in some respects so admirable. The Greek and especially the Latin classics are taught in such a way as to become literary playthings rather than the basis of a philosophy of life; a humanism is thus encouraged that is external and rhetorical rather than vital, and this humanism is combined with a religion that tends to stress submission to outer authority at the expense of inwardness and individuality. The reproach has been brought against this system that it is equally unfitted to form a pagan hero or a Christian saint. The reply to it was Rousseau’s educational naturalism—his exaltation of the spontaneity and genius of the child.”

<sup>51</sup> Babbitt, “President Eliot and American Education,” 210.

<sup>52</sup> Babbitt, “President Eliot and American Education,” 210.

<sup>53</sup> Babbitt, “President Eliot and American Education,” 211.

<sup>54</sup> Babbitt, “President Eliot and American Education,” 211. Babbitt incidentally made his closest connection between Eliot, John Dewey, and their respective stances as sentimental humanitarians on this point, 211-2: “For example, Professor John Dewey, who has probably had more influence than any other living American on education, not merely in this country but in the new China, writes that ‘the child is born with a *natural* desire to give out, to do, to *serve*’ (my [Babbitt’s] italics). Let anyone who has growing children observe them closely and decide for himself whether they exude spontaneously this eagerness for service. Let him then supplement this observation by a survey of the working of the theory on the larger scale for several generations past. He may conclude that the amount of instinctive goodness related by the decline of religious and humanistic control has been somewhat exaggerated.”

<sup>55</sup> Babbitt, “President Eliot and American Education,” 214-5.

<sup>56</sup> Babbitt, “President Eliot and American Education,” 215-24. Babbitt used the same arguments found in his 1908 publication, which seemingly implies that he felt Harvard and higher education in general were still headed in the wrong philosophical directions. Babbitt, though, did supply two additional items of note: first, 216, he surmised that “If the average student today is more interested in football than in things of the mind, one reason may be that football, unlike the college as it has become under the new education, has a definite goal and is frankly competitive with reference to it.” Secondly, he argued, 222, that “The new education requires an enormously elaborate and expensive apparatus. This elaborateness is encouraged by the prime emphasis of the utilitarian on the progress of humanity through the co-operation of a multitude of specialists, as well as by the prime emphasis of the sentimentalist on innate gifts and their right to gratification. The small college that accepts the department-store conception of education, is at once put at a hopeless disadvantage. The humanistic college, on the other hand, [...] may hope to flourish with a much more modest equipment.”

<sup>57</sup> Babbitt, “President Eliot and American Education,” 215.

<sup>58</sup> Babbitt, “President Eliot and American Education,” 223.

<sup>59</sup> Babbitt, “President Eliot and American Education,” 218.

<sup>60</sup> Babbitt, "President Eliot and American Education," 223.

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