

Babbitt and Contemporary Conservative Thought in America

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SUCH WATERSHED EVENTS in our history as the American Revolution, the election of Andrew Jackson, the Progressive reform movement, and Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal have rightly prompted historians to examine the intellectual and cultural backgrounds that generated these changes. The election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency may someday rank as another of these phenomena that redirect the course of American history. Should that be the case, historians should have no difficulty identifying a marked gain in currency for conservative opinion within the American intellectual community in the decade or so before the 1980 election.¹ Already the term "neoconservatism" has given at least a journalistic label to this revival, though most thinkers included in that reference have abjured it. It will be a more challenging assignment to illuminate the several strands of ideas that mark the conservative renaissance and to identify their roots, influences, and interrelationships. The effort has so far yielded one outstanding study, George H. Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America: Since 1945*,² and one less worthy survey, Peter Steinfels's *The Neo-conservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America's Politics*.³

The question of influences is important in helping us understand the character of contemporary conservative thought in the

United States. In this century conservatism received its first and perhaps most powerful formulation in the writings of Irving Babbitt. From his earliest works in the 1890s to his two most powerful statements, *Rousseau and Romanticism* in 1919 and *Democracy and Leadership* in 1924, Babbitt's scholarship prepared the way for the *annus mirabilis* of the New Humanism in 1930. In that year Babbitt and his colleague Paul Elmer More, joined by a coterie of younger but zealous writers, enjoyed a rare public limelight. Separate "manifestoes" from the humanist camp and from their rivals⁴ highlighted the controversy. But the deepening economic depression made the debate about morals, the wisdom of antiquity, and the need for "inner checks" somehow less urgent; and the New Humanism faded from attention. Like most great intellectual issues, this one was never settled: it was more or less forgotten.

But not entirely so. What remained was the "remnant," a core of intellectuals of decidedly traditionalist temperament, who adhered to a system of absolute or permanent moral ideals and who, whether from a theistic or humanistic perspective, waged a kind of rear-guard defense against the continuing triumph of relativism and materialism in American life. These individuals kept Babbitt's influence alive. But they won little public attention, and

even in academic spheres their influence, at least for the time being, was probably marginal. The impact of World War II, however, certainly changed the intellectual climate in America to the point that a traditionalist viewpoint seemed relevant and needed. In colleges and universities, where the New Humanist movement always had its greatest strength, curricular revisions reflected the urgency with which educators stressed cultural continuity and the permanent values of Western civilization. The legacy of Charles William Eliot's elective system, against which Babbitt had railed for years, now met its first sustained attack, symbolized by the reforms at his own Harvard College. The sense that Western civilization had suffered a "cultural hemorrhage," of which the war was but a manifestation, motivated the "new conservatism" of Peter Viereck. Viereck's conservatism, of course, was new only within the limited context of the American experience. Viereck stood squarely in the old European conservative tradition of Burke and Disraeli and acknowledged Irving Babbitt as a major intellectual influence. So also did Russell Kirk, whose 1953 volume, *The Conservative Mind*, made the subject again topical. Kirk identified Babbitt as perhaps the strongest conservative author in the whole range of modern American letters; his book appropriately marked the second decade of Babbitt's death.⁵

Besides influencing those like Viereck and Kirk who cited a direct influence of Babbitt on their thinking, the conservative intellectual movement yielded directions that were parallel to Babbitt's. Here again another postwar constellation of intellectuals led what Nash has labeled "the rediscovery of tradition and values." These intellectuals experienced painfully the moral vacuum that was twentieth-century culture, and their common perspective was an anti-naturalist ideology with clear overtones of Platonism. Richard Weaver, John Hallowell, Walter Lippmann, Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, Thomas Molnar, and others all opposed liberalism on the grounds of its

naturalistic character and its moral agnosticism. Clearly Babbitt would have been a spiritual friend of this group. His own humanism posited naturalism as an offshoot of romanticism, and he attacked both for their erosion of permanent ethical norms. On the other hand, however, most of these postwar thinkers incorporated a religious and metaphysical content into their conservatism, one that contrasted with Babbitt's "empirical" humanism. Babbitt constantly insisted that he was prepared to meet the moderns on their own ground by defending human dualism on the immediate data of consciousness, without appeal to revelation. There are among the recent anti-modernists explicit Roman Catholic and Anglo-Catholic affiliations.⁶

Probably at no other time since his death was Babbitt's stock lower than in the 1960s. Now, amid the clamor and hysteria that surrounded anti-war protests and the calls for a new order in America, the "remnant" felt its isolation. For the generation of the 1960s was nothing if not a romantic generation. "Do your own thing" became a battle cry for a culture that celebrated whim. On the campuses, the demand for "relevance" not only personalized courses in Shakespeare, in which a student's dance interpretation of *Hamlet* might substitute for a research paper, but enhanced the solipsistic mentality that became pervasive. How might any conservative individual imbued with the spirit of a Burke or a Babbitt address a culture whose advertising media mindlessly worshipped youth and invited young and old alike to join the "Pepsi Generation"? Conservatism became "a still small voice" indeed.

Throughout the decade of upheaval, however, a new conservative spirit was fermenting. It had many roots and many locations. It could not be identified by any geographical, ethnic, or religious denominators. It flourished in journalism and at Harvard. But this diversity has been a troubling factor to some. Paul Gottfried, for example, has criticized "neoconservatism" as too much an *ad hoc*

phenomenon, merely an issues-oriented response to 1960s causes such as feminism, environmentalism, and racial quotas. Gottfried believes these characteristics will assure this movement only a "provisional" status in American conservatism. "The neoconservatives are political commentators," he writes, "not the authors of timeless truths."⁷ Such a castigation raises the question whether some cohesive philosophy underscores contemporary conservative thought, something akin to those first principles that animate all of Irving Babbitt's writings.

For this reason it may be useful to examine the recent conservative literature from the perspective of Babbitt's own scholarship. There may be in fact no better way to ascertain whether or not some kind of continuity underlies modern American conservatism, some commonality of belief concerning human nature, history, politics, and social change. Here it is not just a matter of demonstrating that Babbitt directly influenced the contemporary writers. As Claes Ryn has suggested, Babbitt's "influence" may be implicit.⁸ The comparison would then be useful in helping us indicate a core of opinion that has given conservative thinkers a consensus, however independently each may have arrived at it. Such an effort, of course, must be selective. This paper will discuss Babbitt and contemporary intellectual conservatism with reference to three individuals: a New York Jew of a Trotskyite background, a Roman Catholic of Eastern European background, and a Protestant of midwestern background.

Wise readers have always recognized in Irving Babbitt a concrete guide for the conduct of life. The less perceptive, however, have charged that Babbitt and his followers pursued only vague abstractions and did not sufficiently outline a program for social amelioration. Now Babbitt and More partly validated this criticism themselves. For both, even an immersion in a contemporary novel induced malaise. Babbitt's political and social commentary

was unspecific at least to the point that he did not propose corrective legislation for the ills of the day. His criticism was trenchant in its Burkean perspective, but even his theory of justice, he admitted, applied only to the inner lives of individuals.⁹

The contemporary conservatives we shall examine have been eager, on the contrary, to give their ideas concreteness. They are journalist intellectuals who study the daily news to make it the substance of their larger ideologies. At the very least they give us a fairly good intimation of how a Burkean mentality might assume flesh and blood in the United States of the 1980s.

Babbitt stood clearly in the tradition of Burke, and his differentiation of the "moral imagination" of Burke and the "idyllic imagination" of Rousseau stood at the heart of his political philosophy. And that philosophy, like all of Babbitt's intellectual efforts, was essentially an exploration of human nature and an application of his dualistic philosophy of man. Specifically, Babbitt was interested in how the modern intellect, since the Renaissance, had lost the sense of sin. The dissolution of the higher will under the forces of romanticism and naturalism had conspired, in Babbitt's extended analysis, to deprive human beings of any restraints on their natural instincts. Modern culture had thus become both sentimentally emotional—self-indulgent with respect to individual feelings and humanitarian with respect to feelings toward others—and materialistic, hedonistic in individual living and imperialistic in the relations between nations. These trends, Babbitt believed, could be understood only as the result of our relocating the source of sin, in Rousseauistic fashion, away from the individual and on to society. Human beings were essentially inculpable regarding their situations in life. Naturally good in their given nature, they probed society for the roots of their discontent. The political consequences of this new mentality horrified Babbitt.¹⁰

Most troubling to him was the zealous reformer, the utopian reshaper of the

world. For anyone who legitimates his own inherited innocence is free to redesign the world, the source of all evil, as his imagination dictates. The reformer is motivated by a quest to recover a lost innocence, an idyllic state that will reclaim humanity's original birthright. To Babbitt, such a reformer could be only a menace. For all along the way to the new world, reality interferes. Imagination and fact war against each other. But for the reformer it is reality that must submit; therefore, coercion and eventually tyranny become the vehicles of revolutionary changes. Those most eager to serve us become those most eager to control us. Those who begin with an inordinate love for humanity end in oppression of it.¹¹ And the reformer who has escaped the "war in the cave" is not unlike the modern nation, equally ruled by its own sense of innocence. Babbitt warned against the dangers of the most recent of our many "sham" religions, the religion of nation, another product of the romantic age. Both the utopian reformer and the chauvinistic nationalist registered the dangers to civilization of the expansive temperament at work. The undisciplined will stood at the service of the undisciplined imagination.¹²

In 1924 Babbitt outlined these views, which received mostly scorn or indifference. But it is instructive to discover that among the contemporary conservative thinkers we are considering here, some form of Babbitt's humanistic dualism applied to politics constitutes a common perspective. Mostly it emerges as a critique of utopianism and its totalitarian consequences. And it is not difficult to understand why this particular concern of Babbitt has gained currency. Babbitt's *Democracy and Leadership* coincided with the socialist movements that rose in Germany and Italy in the middle 1920s and soon brought their tragic consequences when their fascist characteristics emerged in the ensuing years. Babbitt died in 1933, just before the great communistic experiment in the Soviet Union was demonstrating that this worker's paradise

was no Brook Farm. Slowly and painfully over the ensuing decades intellectuals, save those lost in a stubborn refusal to observe facts, have witnessed the outcome in tyranny of the "progressive" forces of the twentieth century. Many conscientious liberals in the 1940s did begin to warn that totalitarian forces were not the accidents of history and that intellectuals and others must recover the sense of evil in the human personality to guard against these dangers.¹³ But since that time what probably has most changed many minds have been the political directions of the Third World and the failures of socialism. Among intellectual conservatives in America today there are many who saw the socialist dream die hard amid the repressive political course of the world's former colonial nations.

The link between Babbitt and the contemporary conservatives must also take note of some indigenous developments in the United States. Intellectual conservatism enjoyed a lively revival in the 1950s, but the character of "neoconservatism" seems to owe as much to the direction of liberalism and the New Left in the 1960s, into which many conservatives had brought radical and liberal pasts. Two factors seem influential. First, the utopian character of the New Left, with its "new order" rhetoric, its Freudian emphasis on the transformed personality, its call for a "new consciousness," and its sense that all these were in ready reach of a militant revolutionary push—this character of the New Left certainly caused many to take exception and view skeptically, in Babbitt's fashion, all such easy promises that a different human nature lies just below the surface of our evil capitalistic and bureaucratic society. Second, a new conservatism emerged because a new liberalism emerged. Partly as a defense against the New Left, liberalism shifted from an emphasis on equality of opportunity and the large role that government would play in achieving it, to equality of results and the role that government would play in bringing that about. Liberalism became obsessed with

numbers. Busing, racial quotas, the working incomes of the sexes, and other measurements gave a new and disturbing meaning to democracy, an ideal of statistical uniformity. To many who had been liberals, there was in these prospects something rash and utopian, and something frightening too.

II

THE UTOPIAN MENTALITY has been the subject of some analysis by Irving Kristol. Kristol, who willingly applies the term "neoconservative" to describe his political position, is co-editor of *The Public Interest*, an issues-oriented conservative publication, and frequent contributor to other journals. His most recent collection of essays, *Reflections of a Neoconservative: Looking Back, Looking Ahead*,¹⁴ contains some biographical remembrances of his collegiate years at City University of New York and the student rivalries between the Stalinists and his own Trotskyites. In previous works, *On the Democratic Idea in America* and *Two Cheers for Capitalism*, Kristol covers a considerable number of issues, from economics to pornography. But one may legitimately ask if these writings generate a unifying view of history and life that helps provide an intellectual framework for Kristol's neoconservatism. Without in the least maintaining that Kristol's reflections on politics and economics reflect, as do Babbitt's writings, a sustained and consistent ideology, we can nonetheless discern in Kristol a perspective on human nature that makes neoconservatism something more than a merely *ad hoc* response to contemporary events. And that perspective resembles Babbitt's in a very clear way.

Kristol believes that the American experience is exceptional and owes its special character to the influence of certain cultural traditions. These traditions have their beginnings in the Western religious experience. In a suggestive essay Kristol argues that Judaism and Christianity have always reflected certain dialectical

tensions, which he describes as rabbinic (orthodox) and prophetic. Borrowing from Eric Voegelin, Kristol describes the prophetic tradition as gnostic in character. It finds the world sinful, imperfect, and unyielding. It confronts the world not within these limitations but by opposing to it some new kind of metaphysical order by which it hopes to reshape the world. Its temper is millenarian. "These gnostic movements," Kristol writes, "tend to be antinomian—that is, they tend to be hostile to all existing laws and to all existing institutions."¹⁵ The political form of gnosticism is utopianism. The prophetic mind envisions an ideal order that it strains against all in its path to make a reality. It differs to that extent from the "orthodox" character of religion. Orthodoxy seeks improvement in human life through practice in daily living. Its spirit, in the face of the world's evils, is stoical. Its faith teaches that somehow these evils can be made the vehicle of good, but it warns that in this life things may not ultimately be "fair."¹⁶ What really divides the prophetic from the orthodox, Kristol believes, are fundamentally different views of human nature, or what Babbitt would call differences of "first principles." The prophetic vision turned much of Judaism and Christianity increasingly away from the doctrine of original sin. The doctrine of original innocence, which replaced it, "meant that the potential for human transformation here on this earth was infinite, which is, of course, the basic gnostic hope." The hope was illusory. Writes Kristol: "Human nature and human reality are never transformed. . . ."¹⁷

Western culture has ever since felt these tensions. Kristol observes that Christianity was born at a time when Jewish gnosticism was very active and that Christianity inherited a large measure of its spirit. The different mentalities continued to be influential even in the more secularized world of the eighteenth century, and Kristol believes that the opposing courses within the Enlightenment were especially important for American history. Kristol compares the Anglo-

Scottish Enlightenment with the French-Continental Enlightenment. The latter, culminating in the French Revolution, saw a new order emerging from the progress of history. Its temper was gnostic and anti-traditionalist. From its prophetic roots in religion, the French-Continental Enlightenment imposed on the world a secular eschatology.¹⁸ But the Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment envisioned no immanent new order. Its spirit, Kristol says, was melioristic rather than eschatological. Whereas one Enlightenment yielded a Robespierre and a Saint-Simon, the other yielded a James Madison and an Adam Smith. The Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment accepted an imperfect human nature and tried to channel self-interest safely into a competitive marketplace economy. It would utilize existing social institutions as safeguards in this process and trust to traditional moral values to civilize it.¹⁹

Its disdain for existing institutions also made the French-Continental Enlightenment hostile to capitalism. French Physiocrats emphasized "real" wealth drawn from the soil.²⁰ But the later socialists, both utopian socialists and "scientific" socialists like Marx, were the genuine heirs of the radical Enlightenment and of the prophetic religious tradition. Marx was the more realistic only in the sense that he knew that the new human consciousness that was needed to transcend the limitations of the human condition heretofore thought to be natural would not be spontaneous. That task must then fall to a socialist elite that would lead the masses into their own self-transformation. The Marxian origins of communism are no different in outcome from those of any other grand scheme of reform. Socialists, communists, and fascists all have roots in the temperament of the French-Continental Enlightenment. Kristol states: "The germs of twentieth-century totalitarianism, whether self-declared Left or Right, were activated by that grandiose, indeed utopian, commitment."²¹ But Kristol does believe that the socialist ideal flourished as a genuine albeit misguided offshoot of the Western

religious tradition. It has been the quasi-religion of the prophetic Jews and Christians who have found their orthodox traditions to be stale and unrewarding. The zeal with which these partisans embraced a gnostic socialism was not merely a threat to world peace; it was a corruption of religion. Kristol concludes: "All of modern socialism is a movement that says it will create a good society, which will then create good people. I can think of no political doctrine more contemptuous of both the Jewish and Christian traditions, which says that there cannot be a good society unless there are good people."²²

Kristol believes it is a matter of great significance and good fortune that the American Revolution was born of the more sober influences of the Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment. While the French philosophers thrived in the fashionable salons of Paris, remote from the rest of society and "alienated" as an intellectual class, the Anglo-Scottish thinkers were respected community participants and active members of improvement societies in and outside the universities. "At home" in the world, they were content to find practical means of improving it.²³ The leadership of the American Revolution, Kristol finds, reflected these characteristics. Not distracted by imaginative projections of a new world to be made, the prolific pamphlet writers and publicists of the Revolutionary cause did not so easily lose sight of human nature and its deficiencies. The Founding Fathers in fact were even more "realistic" in this consideration. So the Americans looked inward on human nature, not outward to a new society. According to Kristol, "They understood that republican self-government could not exist if humanity did not possess . . . the traditional 'republican virtues' of self-control, self-reliance, and a disinterested concern for the public good." James Madison's sensitivity to the "degree of depravity in mankind" fortified democracy against the unrealistic hopes that may ultimately bring the harshest judgments against it. That realistic temperament also explains why the

American Revolution was, as Kristol calls it, a "successful" revolution.²⁴

Thus clearly the neoconservative views of Irving Kristol resemble Babbitt's distinctions between the individual who places primary attention on the external world and its reconstruction and the individual who considers the self the only proper vehicle of reform. And for Babbitt and Kristol alike the differences were not inconsequential. What Babbitt described in general terms Kristol elucidates with history. Babbitt may have founded his ideas on a fuller outline of human nature, but Kristol is no less useful for being the more concrete.

III

IRVING BABBITT'S social conservatism embraced capitalism. But it never waxed eloquent in that embrace. Babbitt greatly feared the dangers in all leveling programs of reform and decried the pretensions of socialism. Private property he accepted as a needed safeguard against the rule of numbers, and he acknowledged as valid the rewards won by successful competition. But Babbitt knew too much history to rest content in the assurance that the leadership class would not betray its trust. Social decay always sets in at the top first. Since Babbitt accepted the trickle-down theory of degeneration, he issued his famous warning: "Our real hope of safety lies in our being able to induce our future Harrimans and Rockefellers to liberalize their own souls, in other words to get themselves rightly educated."²⁵

Recently, another effort to give contemporary conservatism a large intellectual framework has been undertaken by Michael Novak, and as its specific subject is "democratic capitalism," it bears comparison with Babbitt on that subject.

Novak's family roots were in the hills and farms of eastern Slovakia. His religious influences were Roman Catholic, and his social influences were small industrial communities in Connecticut and Pennsylvania. Like the Eastern European Jewish background that inspired the

religion of socialism in the younger Kristol and his ethnic contemporaries, these factors in Novak's life shaped his early leftist views. "I identified with the sense of community of the European villages and the familiar neighborhoods of my youth," he writes, "and with 'labor' rather than 'capital.'" For these identities had religious and ethnic associations. "Capitalists seemed always to be Protestants, either Calvinist or Episcopalian."²⁶ Novak's education seemed to rationalize and intensify these prejudices. He read heavily in European Catholic literature—de Maistre, Lamennais, Chesterton, Belloc, Marcel, and especially Charles Péguy. Now the socialist ideal became especially compelling to Novak. It seemed to express the best of the Judeo-Christian moral system. However more effective capitalism was in providing material goods, socialism had moral superiority over it.²⁷ But for Novak too the dream faded. He came to ask, "If an ideal doesn't work, isn't that evidence that it is out of touch with human reality? Isn't that a sign that it is a *false* ideal?"²⁸

So Novak eventually resolved to examine capitalism for its theological meanings and significance. *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*²⁹ became an effort at justification and at the same time a critique of the rival socialist alternative. Such an effort led to some considerations of human nature.

Novak's comments on this question raise a familiar theme. The socialist ideal, he says, carries a large promise, a promise that a "new socialist man" will emerge from the ruins of destructive capitalism, a virtuous individual unexemplified in human history heretofore. But democratic capitalism "promises no such thing." "Its political economy . . . is designed for sinners. That is, for humans as they are."³⁰ And again a fundamental difference in perspective maintains. Novak describes two types of revolutionary traditions, the utopian and the realist. "Utopian revolutionaries," he writes, "imagine that the source of human evil lies in social structures and systems and that in removing

these they will remove evil and virtue will flourish." Realists, on the other hand, insist that evil lies in the self and in the inherent deficiencies of all collective organizations. Morality cannot be generated by a new social order, neither spontaneously by a new human nature thus realized nor by an elite entrusted to its imposition on the larger group. "For the realists," Novak says, "morality flows from individual will and act."³¹

The democratic capitalist spirit, according to Novak, is suspicious of any rule of the saints; it knows that it will eventuate in a rule of tyrants. And this concern necessarily focuses the attention of the realist inward. Those European thinkers and American statesmen who effected the American Revolution illustrate the best tradition of realist revolution. "The seminal thinkers who set democratic capitalism upon its historical course," Novak writes, "were exceedingly practical men, thoroughly sobered by the human capacity for sin and illusion."³² And by this kind of emphasis Novak places himself in the tradition of Burke and Babbitt. For if human nature is disposed to evil, how is freedom justifiable? Burke's formulation is classic: "Society cannot exist," he writes, "unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters."³³ So the thinkers who shaped the spirit of democratic capitalism, Novak says, were obsessed with inner controls. Even the maxim "time is money" was a reflection of this obsession, a new command for inner self-discipline. Furthermore, democratic capitalism cannot survive without a traditionalist moral culture that will furnish these controls. Democratic capitalism is liberal in its respect for freedom and in its demands for a competitive economic system. But it is conservative in its reliance on existing social institutions and ethical social norms. These must furnish the means for an inner discipline that will

make outer freedom effective.³⁴

Novak goes even further in his book than Kristol does in trying to relate contemporary conservatism, that is, his defense of democratic capitalism, to the religious traditions of the West. He does so in a manner that again reveals continuity in the line of conservative thinking from Babbitt to the contemporaries. To be sure, in considering capitalism as a theological issue, Novak disavows any claim that capitalism is supported by Christianity or that the verity of one is dependent in any way on that of the other. Only liberationist theologians today take the truly transcendent character of the gospels and try to make them a blueprint for social policies. But Novak does believe that democratic capitalism has absorbed certain ideals that derive from a Christian outlook and understanding of life.³⁵ He discusses six points of Christian theology that he judges appropriate to the spirit of democratic capitalism, of which one, the Incarnation, is especially germane to this discussion.

Christians who know and accept the true meaning of the Incarnation, Novak says, must disavow the whole tradition of utopian socialism. For the Incarnation informs us first that God entered the world as flesh and walked among human beings as man. "He accepted for Himself the human condition, including the worst it might offer. . . ." God did not send legions of angels with Christ to save the world. Christ brought a message of hope, not of utopia. However persistently some Christians have tried to derive a larger promise from the Incarnation and to make it the means of deliverance from all constraints of human evil, they have really misread its meaning.³⁶ "The point of the Incarnation," Novak declares, "is to respect the world as it is, to acknowledge its limits, to recognize its weaknesses, irrationalities, and evil forces, and to disbelieve any promise that the world is now or ever will be transformed into the City of God."³⁷ For the single greatest temptation for Christians is to persuade themselves that the salvation brought by Christ has also

altered the human condition. Moreover, the realistic Christian will fortify himself by the Incarnation against all promises of "an eschatological break" with the past and a new beginning for the human race. "The pure fury of reformers can kill," Novak warns. "Those who claim enlightened virtue often carry unexamined viciousness in their hearts."³⁸ What Babbitt described in extending his view of an empirical human nature to an understanding of social and political behavior, Novak similarly comes to describe from within the categories of a Christian view of life.

IV

BABBITT'S APPLICATION of his human dualism to affairs of state raised for him another important matter. Like the individual, a society, in so far as it listened only to its "lower self," was free to follow its impulses, to yield to the pressures of the hour, to accept any bold scheme for its metamorphosis. It could do so to the extent that it had freed itself from restraints, from a countervailing will that served as a check on its appetites and emotions. These restraints were critical for Babbitt. For like the individual, society too had a lower and a higher self. And, like Burke, Babbitt located the sources of society's higher will in its imaginative grasp of the controlling power of the tradition. For Babbitt this power, felt to be a living reality of the present, alone guarantees that any community of individuals will not succumb to the facile appeal of sensationalists and demagogues. The imaginative power of the symbols of the past, Babbitt believed, draws the individual back into an ethical center that exercises a restraining control against the "lawless expansion of his natural self." To the extent that such individuals typify any given community, so will that community be stable and orderly, and so too will the process of change avoid violence and upheaval.³⁹ And yet at the same time that Babbitt urged these considerations, he knew how uncertain they were for his own country.

Despite Babbitt's admiration for the achievements of the Founding Fathers, he still knew the United States to be a traditionless society that celebrated its origins in rebellion from all Old World ways, a capitalist society that seemed to worship progress and technological change as the essence of its life, and not a society likely to yoke itself to an imaginative conservatism in the Burkean tradition. And is that fact not the intrinsic problem of conservatism in the United States?

George F. Will knows that it is, and that concern governs his brand of conservative thinking. Grandson of a Lutheran minister and product of central Illinois, Will traces his intellectual pedigree to the philosophical "Tory" conservatives—Burke, Newman, Disraeli, Henry Adams, Babbitt, More, Viereck, and others. And for this reason Will feels slightly uncomfortable with those writers embraced by the "neoconservative" label. They are solid citizens, Will says, but they do not have "stained-glass minds."⁴⁰ "Neoconservatives do not really mourn the passing of the thirteenth century, feudal codes, heraldic banners, serried ranks of bishops, the lower orders tugging at their forlocks—that sort of good stuff." One has the emphatic sense in reading Will that he, like Babbitt, was born conservative. He is exorcising no radical ghosts from a leftist past. And, writing in the *New Republic*, he has urged that American conservatism needs "a Burke, a Disraeli," a more thoughtful, principled leadership.⁴¹ In many ways Will's syndicated newspaper columns give us a fair sense of a Babbitt mentality applied to the contemporary facts of American life.

Will's glance at present-day America uncovers as many Rousseauistic influences as Babbitt's in his time. Our popular culture and conventional wisdom celebrate an unreflective individualism; we wallow in subjectivity; we judge one opinion as inherently good as another, no matter how ill-formed; we honor the street wisdom of the inarticulate. Our nation has become a democracy of the sentiments, and nowhere is this more dangerously the

case than in higher education. Will is at one with Babbitt on this score. He laments the tragic decline of the humanities in our universities, for these, properly pursued, create and sustain a sense of a higher wisdom beyond the whim of undergraduate genius. But this notion of humanistic education moves against the prevailing tide, against our cult of intuition and our education in self-expression. *Sentio ergo sum* summarizes our prevailing educational credo. Our modern conceit preaches that education serves to help us choose between alternative lifestyles, and such intellectual agnosticism has turned our colleges into "academic cafeterias offering junk food for the mind." The forgotten lesson in this emphasis, Will states, is that democracy is essentially irrelevant to a university's purpose.⁴²

Will is saying, in short, that our educational system has betrayed its essential function. It has failed to sustain a common trust of learning, moral wisdom, and collective historical experience. It has ceased to be the vehicle of America's higher self in Babbitt's meaning of that word. And if education has failed in this responsibility, what more can we expect of our public life in general? For decades, Will believes, the liberal mind has been at work in America to strip our public life of meaningful symbols of our shared experiences and values. It has flayed these ideals in the name of individual rights and private conscience. And today school children who wish to perform a Nativity play have fewer rights in the courts than the pornographer. Nazis are free to preach their venom of hatred in Skokie, Illinois, because the liberal says that truth should be decided in the marketplace.⁴³ This matter is not a frivolous one for Will. We suffer from an excess of individual freedom, and it takes its toll on our community. Our "public space" is being neutered, and "symbolic nakedness" erodes the common essence and spirit that give life and vitality to any society. The community's right to celebrate the various beliefs that leaven its culture, Will avers, yields dangerously today to a court system that recognizes only

individuals.⁴⁴

A great society will have an ennobling sense of its traditions; our society functions increasingly under a sentimentality of the commonplace. The culture of democracy contributes dangerously to these effects. It is a long-standing trend in America, dating probably from the time of Andrew Jackson. But Will questions what public good, what higher purpose is served when television enters the White House and shows President Ford buttering his breakfast toast in the kitchen. Why enshroud our high public offices with the details of the commonplace? And what of the "denim presidency" of Jimmy Carter and his bluejeaned Kitchen Cabinet? How can a society exercise a set of high standards and promote its higher self when its most important officers drape themselves in the garb of Georgia hillbillies?⁴⁵ For the kind of conservative that Will is, the state is important, functionally and symbolically. It must serve, somehow, as the centerpiece of a high and worthy public life. However much we may unfortunately lack the symbols of crown and scepter that give meaning in traditionalist societies, we still have no excuse to trivialize government and public life in the name of egalitarianism. But government does trivialize itself when, for example, the Department of Transportation makes a study of car pooling and finds to its horror that mostly men are doing the driving. It ponders how it might rectify this crisis. Says one official: "The issue is equality."⁴⁶

Will most directly confronts the problem of conservatism in America in the way Babbitt did. Babbitt had deep reservations about industrial capitalism and its dehumanizing effects, and he certainly knew that a free economic system did not coexist easily with a traditionalist view of life. Nevertheless, Babbitt did not write at length on this problem. Will is acutely aware of it and addresses it. "Capitalism," he writes, "undermines traditional social structures and values: it is a relentless engine of change, a revolutionary inflamer of appetites, enlarger of expectations, diminisher of patience." Capitalism,

to use Babbitt's language, spurs the lower self of individuals and society and feeds its expansive nature. And the "neoconservatives," Will believes, are too cozy with capitalism, too indifferent to the lust of appetite that it promises.⁴⁷ For capitalism, furthermore, has promoted a social structure that tends to minimize the state and deprive the state of its right and necessary role as moral and symbolic bond among citizens. This situation is the legacy of Adam Smith: the weak state is left to be the prey of powerful interests; the notion of public spiritedness declines, and the rhetoric of entitlements succeeds. Contemporary conservatism is dangerously indifferent to these effects, Will believes. "Such conservatism neglects the craving for ennobling passions and enlarging public enterprises," a craving well understood by great conservatives like Disraeli and Churchill.⁴⁸ Will once tried to convey this spirit in an eloquent and moving essay entitled "The National Cathedral: Symphony in Stone," a tribute to Washington, D.C.'s great Gothic edifice. He made this point:

In the great cities of the civilization from which this Republic is descended, the noblest works were built to serve religion—the Parthenon in Athens, Saint Peter's in Rome, Notre Dame in Paris, Westminster Abbey in London. They are stone memories of a premodern age when cities were supposed to be something other than mere arenas for acquisition, when civil society was supposed to serve ends other than the pursuit of self-interest, when civil law was supposed to be patterned after a higher law.⁴⁹

Very likely this concern expresses the

link in intellectual conservatism between Babbitt and the contemporaries. Will is not correct in saying that writers like Kristol or Novak, in their defense of capitalism, are indifferent to the higher self of American society. In fact, each is greatly troubled by what we have come to call the "contradictions of capitalism." For capitalism, as Kristol says, generates its own discontents even as it succeeds. The demand for gratification of desires becomes ascendant, fueled by advertising media in a free press. Kristol believes that it is well to remember that the intellectual traditions from which American capitalist ideals spring were much concerned with inner morality and control. The public and the state, moreover, have a stake in preserving these moral norms.⁵⁰ Likewise, Novak points out, the successes of democratic capitalism undermine its cultural order. Affluence corrupts; advertising appeals to base material interests. Parents brought up in poverty have trouble raising their children in affluence, in passing on those habits of self-discipline and deferred pleasures necessary for their own successes. It is all the more imperative, Novak says, that our capitalist system be tamed and corrected by "a moral-cultural system independent of commerce." In fact, no conservative would deny that America will probably always confront these inner tensions in its culture. Conservative opinion will surely continue to fluctuate between the ideals of a state that is externally free in its economic life and a society that is disciplined and restrained by moral controls in its inner life. And these concerns will also mean that conservative opinion in the United States will thrive within the spirit of Irving Babbitt's earlier formulation.⁵¹

¹Conservative journalism, as one measure, has attained both wider readership and new respectability. Such journals of opinion as *The Public Interest*, appearing in 1966, and *The American Spectator*, 1967, have usefully supplemented older periodicals like *The National Review*, *Modern Age*, and *University Bookman*. They have brought attention to a new generation of conservative writers. Also, it seems inconceivable that such an organization as the Conservative Historians' Forum, founded in the late 1970s, could have flourished unharassed in the previous decade. ²New York, 1976. ³New York, 1979. ⁴*Humanism and America: Essays on the Outlook of Modern Civilization*, ed. Norman Foerster (New York, 1930); *The Critique of Humanism: A Symposium*, ed. C. Hartley Grattan (New York, 1930). ⁵Claes Ryn, "Peter Viereck: Unadjusted Man of Ideas," *Political Science Reviewer*, 7 (1977), 326-66; *A Program for Conservatives* (Chicago, Ill., 1954), p. 20. ⁶Nash, pp. 36-41, 44-46, 49-54, 57-83. ⁷"On Neoconservatism," *Modern Age: A Quarterly Review*, 27 (1983), 40-41. ⁸Claes Ryn, "American Intellectual Conservatism: Needs, Opportunities, Prospects," *Modern Age: A Quarterly Review*, 26 (1983), 307. ⁹Thus the oft-quoted remark by Malcolm Cowley: "And what . . . has Humanism to do with the scene outside my window: with the jobless men who saunter in the dusk, or the dying village, or the paper-mill abandoned across the river—this mill whose owners have gone South where labor is cheap?" in Grattan, ed., *Critique of Humanism*, p. 84. ¹⁰For a summary of Babbitt's political views see J. David Hoeveler, Jr., *The New Humanism: A Critique of Modern America, 1900-1940* (Charlottesville, Va., 1977), Chapter 6. ¹¹Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, p. 37; *Democracy and Leadership*, pp. 69, 197-98, 287-88. ¹²Babbitt, *Rousseau and Roman-*

ticism, pp. 344-47. ¹³For example, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center* (Boston, Mass., 1949) and Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York, 1944). ¹⁴New York, 1983. This anthology includes many early Kristol essays, and most of the items in the book have been previously published. ¹⁵Kristol, *Reflections*, pp. 320, 317. ¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 317. ¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 318. ¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. xi, 143. ¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 143-44. ²⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 146-47. ²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 33-34, x-xi. ²²*Ibid.*, pp. 324-25. ²³*Ibid.*, pp. 150-51. ²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 81-82. ²⁵*Democracy and Leadership* (Boston, Mass., 1924), p. 212. ²⁶Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York, 1982, p. 23). ²⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 23, 197-98. ²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 198. ²⁹Novak's subject does not embrace all countries that are formally capitalistic in their economic structures; it excludes such "authoritarian" capitalist nations as Brazil. ³⁰Novak, *Democratic Capitalism*, p. 85. ³¹*Ibid.*, p. 86. ³²*Ibid.*, p. 88. ³³Quoted in *The Portable Conservative Reader*, ed. Russell Kirk (New York, 1982), p. 48. ³⁴Novak, *Democratic Capitalism*, pp. 91, 120-21. ³⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 353-56. ³⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 340-41. ³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 341. ³⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 342-43. ³⁹Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, pp. 142-43. ⁴⁰George F. Will, *The Pursuit of Virtue and Other Tory Notions* (New York, 1982), p. 40. ⁴¹Will, "In Defense of the Welfare State," *The New Republic*, May 9, 1983, p. 21. ⁴²Will, *Pursuit of Virtue*, pp. 24-26. One example of our sentimentalist culture that Will mentions was the public bathos, the vigils and weeping, surrounding the death of John Lennon, rock star. ⁴³*Ibid.*, pp. 24-25, 93. ⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 93. ⁴⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 181, 242-43. ⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 243. ⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 36. ⁴⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 285, 297. ⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 329. ⁵⁰Kristol, *Reflections*, p. 175. See also the essay "Pornography, Obscenity, and the Case for Censorship," in this volume, pp. 43-54. ⁵¹Novak, *Democratic Capitalism*, pp. 31-32.

The Two Cities and the Modern World: A Dawsonian Assessment

Russell Hittinger

SÖREN KIERKEGAARD OBSERVED that a distinguishing mark of modern culture is its preoccupation with theories of historical progress. Whether he is a philosopher or a shopkeeper, modern man secretly believes that there exists some hidden hand that moves the system of history along. The individual is called upon by an array of public authorities to serve this world-historical process, or at the very least, not to stand in the way of it. Modern man, Kierkegaard argued, has become so proficient in understanding the progress of world history that he has forgotten what it takes to make moral and religious progress in his own life. The situation is a kind of wholesale sanity and a retail madness.

As one sits in the pews of many Christian churches today, he has his attention called to world-historical issues: to the "new" historical moment of the nuclear arms race; to the movements for social justice in the Third World; to the struggle to liberate men and women from structures of "patriarchal oppression"; and, in general, his attention is called to all sorts of momentous issues which are linked together by hyphens along what Kierkegaard called the "prodigious railroad" of world history. Rather than being addressed as individuals who need to cultivate the virtue of justice—as well as the other interior excellences of the

soul—we are all too often invited from the pulpit to jump aboard the caboose of the train of world history, less it pass us by altogether.

To point out that this malaise has particularly affected the Christian churches is not to say anything new. Nietzsche contended that the contemporary *theologus liberalis vulgaris* "appears quite innocently to have taken up history and even now is hardly aware that in doing so, probably quite against his will, [he] has entered the service of Voltaire's *écrasez*."¹ It is often the case that one's enemy speaks prophetically. David Hume, for example, understood very clearly that historical apologetics can prove to be a more effective weapon than ordinary philosophical discourse. Hume devoted much of his philosophical career to polemics against Christian natural theology—against the possibility of miracles, against the proofs for the existence of God, and against metaphysics in general. Yet, as he read the galleys of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* on his deathbed in 1776, Hume conceded that Gibbon would do more to undermine Christianity than would any of his own work. He saw that there is no better way to turn men's minds against Christianity than to suggest that it has played either an insignificant or a harmful role in history and culture. Most men care little for metaphysical debate, but they are willing