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Babbitt Junior: The New Philistinism

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EVER since Matthew Arnold borrowed from Heinrich Heine the word "philistine" to describe an insensitive, cliché-addicted conformism, the word has had certain indefinable but readily recognizable connotations for the English-speaking world, immortalized in its American application by Sinclair Lewis's book *Babbitt*.

Today philistinism has acquired a new content, a new set of conditioned reflexes. It is still mongering clichés, but the clichés have changed. And the only people still

using the old-fashioned epithets "philistine" or "Babbitt" are the Babbitts themselves. The main activity of the new-style philistine has become the facile game of philistine-baiting.

I should like to suggest that the autumn of any civilization, the twilight of the gods, begins on that hour when the suburb becomes sophisticated. Definition of a suburb: any congregation of those would-be city slickers who are deadly afraid of seeming suburban. For a bill of particulars I submit a few short excerpts from a

novel I am writing on Babbitt's imaginary son: not "George Babbitt" but bearing the fancier name, that I invented for him, of "Gaylord Babbitt." Perhaps every twenty years, the eternal Babbitt dons a new name and a new mask. Whereas Sinclair Lewis's George Babbitt talks about boosting and flag-waving and hating slackers and reds, and hating such long-hair stuff as culture, my Gaylord Babbitt says: "I go for art and culture in a big way. If there's one thing I can't stand, it's a Babbitt. Say, there's nothing more wonderful than defying middle-class conventions. There's no more fearless defier than I; why, I defy convention right and left."

At this point the wife of Babbitt Junior chimes in: "I can't stand those barbaric middle-class businessmen. In my little salon everybody's gotta be suave and *civilisé*."

Where Babbitt Senior would have used a lithograph of Whistler's "Mother" to cover up that hole in the wallpaper, Babbitt Junior would, of course, use a Picasso. The essence of all Babbittry, senior or junior, is stereotypes. The stereotypes of Babbitt Senior are the following words and connotations: solid, reliable, sound, businesslike, wholesome. The stereotyped words and connotations of Babbitt Junior are: daring, vital, dynamic, unpuritanical, forward-looking, the masses, the common man.

RECENTLY I had a luncheon engagement in New York with a friend in business, a friend since high school, where he had been voted "Class Babbitt." Most conventional fellow I know. Being in a hurry, I suggested we have hamburgers at the drugstore counter.

"No," said my friend in business. "You must let me take you to an adequate little French restaurant in the East Fifties. Sure, it takes two hours to get served there, but that's what I call Art of Living. Guess I'm just an ole Bohemian at heart."

The phrase "East Fifties" has always haunted me as a leitmotif of the new Babbitt. During a recent midwestern lecture tour on poetry, I was invited to a Rotary Club lunch. I was delighted, hoping to pick up useful hints on the stock market

and on whether hog prices are going up. Instead, to my disappointment, everybody talked in a knowing way—"knowing" is the word—about favorite French restaurants in the East Fifties, and where to get the best *paté de foie gras*.

As I left, a very sensitive young garter salesman from Des Moines was saying dreamily: "Gee, it must be wonderful to be out there on the Left Bank and sit there in some café with Sartre, talking all about existentialism and everything. And maybe at the table right next to me, sipping absinthe, there'd be Alice B. Toklas and Josephine Baker and Louis Aragon and Garry Davis, all out on a double-date together."

From that moment on, I became haunted by the ubiquity of Babbitt Junior. In every city, at every party, I ran into him under some new disguise. If you're not fooled by his un-Babbittlike masks, you'll be able to spot him, too. His face, his name, may seem to change. But you can't miss him. You can always spot him by the phrases he uses, by his enlightened, forward-looking attitude toward everything, in life or art or politics; and even more, by his awareness of how enlightened and forward-looking he is and by the satisfaction that such awareness gives him. This is the same satisfaction that poor, stodgy, conservative old Babbitt Senior used to feel when he strolled through Zenith long ago in that other epoch. I mean before 1929, before the world changed on him and laughed at his ideas.

IN contrast, nobody laughs at Babbitt Junior's ideas. That's because they're always so liberal and *avant-garde*. "How," I sometimes ask my hero in open-mouthed admiration, "do you manage to insure so infallibly that your ideas on any subject are always the most liberal possible, so that you're always protected, never giving anybody an opening to kid you as a philistine or old fogey or awful narrow-minded businessman?" Pouring himself an elegant demi-tasse of Sparkling Burgundy, his favorite distinguished beverage, Gaylord Babbitt replies to me frankly:

"That's easy as pie. For example, take

politics. Whenever I have to choose between two political ideas, I always choose whichever idea is the more Advanced. If they're equally Advanced, so that I can't choose, then I read what my *Nation* and my *New Republic* say about it. And as for the field of art and sex—you know, art, sex, that kind of thing—why, sometimes my thoughts are so Advanced that I tremble at my own daring."

Another important clue to Babbitt's new party-line is the changed role of *The New Yorker*. It no longer provides elite titillations for a small circle of smoothies. It now means big business, big advertising, big circulation. It has become the favorite magazine of Gaylord Babbitt, just as George Babbitt's favorite magazine was the Chamber of Commerce bulletin. Mrs. Gaylord Babbitt will now tell you, "I met the quaintest taxicab driver the other day; he was priceless: he said the most whimsical things." Thus *The New Yorker* line has been adopted by the very people whom *The New Yorker* was originally created to satirize. It has not changed its humor or appeal, but society has changed; the philistine has changed his mask.

II

LET us examine, respectively, the political application and the literary application of the new Babbitt.

First, politics. To best indicate my point, I quote from a recent article by Robert Bendiner, associate editor of *The Nation* and a leading liberal: "Out of some 140,000,000 people in the United States, at least 139,500,000 are liberals, to hear them tell it, 'liberal' having become a rough synonym for virtuous, decent, humane, and kind to animals. Rare is the citizen who can bring himself to say, 'Sure I'm a Conservative. What of it?' And any American would sooner drop dead than proclaim himself a reactionary."

Even Senator Taft calls himself a liberal. Babbitt Senior was a Republican. Babbitt Junior knows that it's smart to be left: "If there's one thing I go for in a big way, it's Progress. If you ask me, people who talk law and order are just a bunch of duds and has-beens. Political

democracy is okay in its way. But there's something else you conservatives forget. A different kind of democracy. And do you know what *that* is? It's economic democracy! Economic democracy, that's what's gonna hit the sociological jackpot of the future. As my favorite sophisticated poetess, Dorothy Parker, so aptly put it, 'It's no longer I but We!'"

Similarly, Gaylord Babbitt has proclaimed a "sophisticated" new line for literature. Reviewing an unsatisfactory book of poetry (possibly a book of mine), one of the fashionable arty Little Magazines concluded something like this: "We unfortunately miss in this book that rich surrealistic obscurity which our modern taste has been led to expect." The giveaway phrase here is "led to expect." The justification of the modernist revolt against Victorian clichés was to give the public what it did *not* expect; hence, quite properly shocking the public of Babbitt Senior by surrealism, Joycean cross-references, and obscurity in poetry, an obscurity which Babbitt *père* smugly denounces as "long-haired," and which Babbitt *fils* with equal smugness applauds as a-la-mode. In the long run, Babbitt Junior is even more dangerous to art than Babbitt Senior. Old George Babbitt merely hates art. Gaylord hugs it to death.

The clichés of conservatism have been ousted in both politics and poetry, and this is a good thing; let's get rid of conservative clichés. But instead they may have been replaced by the clichés of radicalism and revolution. The latter clichés are just as stereotyped but less frank. Those of us who belong to what Robert Bendiner calls the "conservative" minority, thereby at least *admit* we believe in tradition. But leftism and the cult of revolt claims for itself the virtue of freshness and independence; instead, it has its own jargon and old-fogey dogmatisms without ever admitting it.

III

THE resulting situation is not funny. It is a serious, perhaps tragic, problem. Society is in a bad way when people say two and two are five because it sounds

more daring than to say two and two are four. Society is in a bad way when too many people reject every ancient truth and tradition in ethics and politics and art because thereby they can show off better at cocktail parties. Civilization is an infinitely fragile bundle of accumulated habits and restraints. The necessary conservative function of any generation is not just to enjoy itself but to pass on this bundle in good condition to the next generation. Only the conservation of this moral heritage of the west can halt Stalinist fascism and can prevent the revival of the Hitlerite fascism against which our generation fought World War II.

The core and fire-center of this moral conservation, this conservative way to freedom, is a humanist respect for the dignity of the individual. This is incompatible with fascist or Stalinist collectivism; incompatible with a purely mechanistic view of man; incompatible with a purely economic view of history.

In the universities, humanism inspires the return to literature and the classics, away from the short-sighted cult of utilitarian studies. A crassly modern education, overweighted with economics, may educate us to be good clerks. Only a curriculum in the broad humanities can educate us to be good human beings. By harmonizing head and heart, Apollo and Dionysus, the Athenian classics train the complete man rather than the fragmentary man. With his one-sided emotionalism or one-sided intellectualism, the fragmentary modernist sees life neither steadily nor whole. "Almost all we have of any real and lasting value," Alfred North Whitehead would say to his friends at Eliot House, "has come to us from Greece. We should be better, had we kept a bit more Philosophy at its greatest is poetry and necessitates esthetic apprehension."

This esthetic (and thereby philosophical—and thereby moral) function of humanist education is defined in the 1948 report of the Commission on Liberal Education of the Association of American Colleges:

Our society is preoccupied with activities that obscure and in effect deny the importance of knowing and understanding letters

This unhappy situation arises partly from technology's promise of great physical comfort, partly from the material rewards most esteemed in a materialistic society, and partly from the dangers of our time that seem to demand immediate and material solution. Young people, therefore, take inordinate interest in what they think is practical study, failing to realize that self-knowledge, which is indispensable to the most practical judgments, is the highest practicality

In a period of technological prodigies and of economic complexity, the crucial problem of education is to sustain and develop the individual. If social and economic welfare are realized, we are told, the individual can take care of himself. It is at least equally true that if an adequate number of individuals are unusually elevated society can take care of itself.

The distinctive value of literature is that it enables one to share intensely and imaginatively the rich, varied experience of men of all ages who have been confronted with human problems and conditions of life common to men. It thereby leads to self-discipline and self-realization.

DOES the humanist stress on the perfection of great creative individuals sound too aristocratic for an ant-heap age? Perhaps that is just how it ought to sound. We don't need a "century of the common man"; we have it already, and it has only produced the commonest man, the impersonal and irresponsible and uprooted mass-man. What we need, and what a humanistic, non-utilitarian education will foster, is a century of the individual man. Such a century would no longer change persons into masses but masses into persons, each with individuality and sense of personal responsibility, each with a sense of his ethical duties to balance his material rights. The century of the common man means a century of sterile and tyrannic philistinism, whether it be a philistinism of right or of left, of Colonel Blimp or of Comrade Blimp. A century that returns to the humanist ideal of the individual man must hold equally aloof from George Babbitt and Gaylord Babbitt.

IV

RADICALISM and revolt are just as valuable as conservatism so long as they really do correct social defects. But

not when their insurgency accentuates, instead of corrects, social defects. In the past, when society had too much *laissez faire*, the thunder from the left was a valuable corrective to social defects. Today, when the world is afflicted by too much fascist and Stalinist statism, the left accentuates, rather than corrects, social defects. Because society has changed. Today, Bohemia and Left Bank and Left Wing, and the dully "daring" defiance of bourgeois conventions, has become the rheumatic jitterbugging of aging *enfants terribles*.

In the Victorian age, civilization was stuffy and stodgy, conservatism at its worst. It was dull to have only law and tradition; it was healthy and useful for obscure and surrealist poems and paintings to stir up placid reality with a nightmare art. It was healthy and useful to have the young rebel poke dull old civilization in its stuffed shirt; the *enfant terrible* served as a real purpose.

Today the whole world is *terrible*. The whole world has become a surrealist painting. What was shocking in early surrealist painting was: legs and arms strewn about, buildings torn open. This contrasted with an unstrewn and untorn Victorian and Coolidgean reality. Today, however, reality is strewn all over the place. To us G.I. soldiers in Italy, strewn limbs and buildings became the norm. If the Babbitt is he who kowtows to fashionable conventions, then it is the wilfully obscure poet and the surrealist artist and the *enfant terrible* Greenwich Village genius who is the philistine; *he* is accentuating society's defects. The traditional moralist, the conservative in politics and in poetry, is correcting the defects. When reality is itself a nightmare, then an art which is lucid and calm and ennobling—an eighteenth-century neoclassical art—is more helpful, more original, and more exciting.

For a generation brought up not under Queen Victoria but under Queen Betty Boop, with not Bishop Wilberforce but Dr. Kinsey as Father Confessor, for such

a generation Flaming Youth is not exciting but a bore. The only way to shock your reader in a modern non-Victorian novel—if that's what you want to do—would be to use the word "limbs" instead of "legs." That would shock them more than all the boring four-letter words of Norman Mailer and D. H. Lawrence.

JUST as the clichés of old-style philistinism justly provoked the earlier revolt, so the clichés of revolt—what I call "Gaylord Babbitt"—will inevitably provoke a revolt against revolt.

But an affectation of archiepiscopal reactionary stodginess would be just as tiresome as the present rebel stodginess. In both art and politics, one pendulum extreme is as bad as the other. Why have any affectations, either reactionary or revolutionary? Why not be yourself? Integrity may be the dullest platitude in the preaching of old Polonius, but integrity is the two-plus-two that does make four. A reverence for integrity, not because it's fashionable but because it's true, such a reverence would work a moral revolution deeper and more helpful than all the shallow artistic and political and economic revolts of our panting apostles of progress. It would be a moral revolution against that inner smirk which prefers cleverness to wisdom.

In conclusion, let us turn to some relevant lines out of a poem by the late Theodore Spencer. His poem "Invocation" best sums up this hunger for loftiness, this simple, wise integrity which is the most truly shocking, truly exciting, and most beautifully revolutionary truth in the cosmos:

Wipe from my mind, lord, the inner smirk
That swells from lack of love's humility;

I am in this fire. Prove me by this fire.
Protect me from the Zeitgeist and its claws.
Give me resolution beyond desire
Show me authority out-ranking laws;
Fix me in danger firmly, so that I stand
Able to be bowled over by your hand.