

## Notes

that nationalism destroys, is.

The "conservatism" of Rousseau is thus exposed for what it is: a dangerous political absolutism, a form of nationalism which would attempt to impose an abstract, rationalistic set of "universally binding principles" on all nations. Its ahistorical outlook and its totalitarian tendencies are in direct opposition to all that conservatives hold dear. Under its domain, the intermediary organizations that conservatives see as playing the primary role in the creation of virtuous men and good citizens would be swept away, in favor of an undifferentiated mass with no ties to its patrimony. To those who would urge them to drop their "irrational prejudice" against Rousseau, and embrace him with open arms as an "unexpected friend" (RR, 48), conservatives should not be ashamed to say with Edmund Burke:

You see, Sir, that in this enlightened age I am bold enough to confess that we are generally men of untaught feeling, that, instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree, and, to take more shame to ourselves, we cherish them because they are prejudices; and the longer they have lasted and the more generally they have prevailed, the more we cherish them. We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason, because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and of ages. (RF, 76)

1. Joel Schwartz, "Rousseau Revisited" in *National Review* (February 25, 1991), 47-48; hereinafter referred to in the text as "RR."
2. See Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1987), 118; hereinafter referred to in the text as "CAM."
3. Arthur M. Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau's Thought* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 120; hereinafter referred to in the text as "NGM."
4. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract* in *The Basic Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1987; translated by Donald A. Cress), 142; hereinafter referred to in the text as "SC."
5. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile; or, On Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1979; translated by Allan Bloom), 40.
6. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy* in *On the Social Contract with Geneva Manuscript and Political Economy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978; translated by Judith R. Masters and edited by Roger D. Masters), 212.
7. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1987; edited by J.G.A. Pocock, 76; hereinafter referred to in the text as "RF.")
8. Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1979; first published in 1924), 220-221; hereinafter referred to in the text as "DL."
9. Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College* (Washington, D.C.: National Humanities Institute, 1986), 75.
10. John Lukacs, *The Passing of the Modern Age* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 65.

## Babbitt Provides Answers for Our Troubled Age

Joseph Baldacchino

**R**OUSSEAU AND ROMANTICISM (Transaction Publishers, lxxxiii + 426 pp., \$24.95, quality paperback), probably the most widely discussed work of the influential scholar and critic Irving Babbitt (1865-1933), is now available in a new edition featuring a comprehensive introduction by NHI Chairman Claes G. Ryn.

Some have accused Babbitt of having laid all that is wrong with Western society at the doorstep of a single man, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. But this is a misreading. Babbitt makes clear, as Ryn notes, that Rousseau is but one leading exponent of a large and powerful historical movement that far transcends the work of any one writer.

Babbitt does not claim to give a balanced description of Rousseau's life and work. Rather, he is interested in Rousseau as a leading exponent of an ethical-aesthetical worldview that Babbitt calls sentimental humanitarianism. This worldview has been replacing the classical and Christian moral and artistic ethos in the Western world with results that Babbitt deems subversive of traditional

morality and destructive of civilized life.

Babbitt stresses the duality of the human self. There is a conflict within man between an unceasing flow of particular desires, on the one hand, and an ethical will that transcends the impulse of the moment and orders life to an enduring purpose. Man's higher will is experienced as an "inner check" on incipient actions that would be destructive of real happiness.

For Babbitt the great danger of Rousseau is that he denies the inner conflict in man between good and evil and identifies goodness with giving vent to one's unrestrained feelings. Goodness, instead of requiring effort, becomes an easy yielding to the flow of passions.

The Rousseauistic imagination paints the flight from personal responsibility in enticing colors. All responsibility for the bad that occurs is projected outward onto society. Nature is good; if horrible things are going on, that is the fault of society with its rules and conventions.

"Instead of the old dualism between good and evil in the breast of the individual," writes Babbitt, the Rous-

seauistic imagination conjures up a “new dualism . . . between and artificial and corrupt society and ‘nature.’”

Babbitt notes that “[m]ost men according to Rousseau are perverted by society, but there are a few in whom the voice of ‘nature’ is still strong and who, to be good and at the same time beautiful, have only to let themselves go. These, to use a term that came to have in the eighteenth century an almost technical meaning, are the ‘beautiful souls.’”

The Christian doctrine of grace at its best, says Babbitt, makes “man feel desperately sinful at the same time that he is less open to reproach than other men in his actual behavior. The beautiful soul on the other hand can always take refuge in his feelings from his real delinquencies.”

“Rousseau dilates on his ‘warmth of heart,’ his ‘keenness of sensibility,’ his ‘innate benevolence for his fellow creatures,’ his ‘ardent love for the great, the true, the beautiful, the just,’ on the ‘melting feeling, the lively and sweet emotion that he experiences at the sight of everything that is virtuous, generous and lovely,’ and concludes: ‘And so my third child was put into the foundling hospital.’”

Thanks in no small part to Rousseau’s influence, the distinguishing characteristic of the “beautiful soul,” his “subordination of all of the other values of life to sympathy,” has become a dominant theme in the literature and social thought of the last two centuries.

Perhaps the ultimate literary expression of “the new evangel of sympathy as a substitute for all the other virtues,” Babbitt notes, occurs in a story by Victor Hugo, “Sultan Murad.”

“Murad, Hugo narrates, was ‘sublime.’ He had his eight brothers strangled, caused his uncle to be sawn in two between two planks, opened one after the other of twelve children to find a stolen apple, shed an ocean of blood and ‘sabred the world.’ One day while passing in front of a butcher-shop he saw a pig bleeding to death,

tormented by flies and with the sun beating upon its wound. Touched by pity, the Sultan pushes the pig into the shade with his foot and with an ‘enormous and superhuman gesture’ drives away the flies. When Murad dies the pig appears before the Almighty and, pleading for him against the accusing host of his victims, wins his pardon. Moral: ‘A succored pig outweighs a world oppressed.’ (*Un pourceau secouru vaut un monde égorgé*.)”

The person who gets rid of the traditional virtues that restrain the appetite “in favor of an indiscriminate sympathy,” Babbitt writes, “does not simply lose his scale of values. He arrives at an inverted scale of values. For the higher the object for which one feels sympathy the more the idea of obligation is likely to intrude—the very thing the Rousseauist is seeking to escape. One is more irresponsible and therefore more spontaneous in the Rousseauistic sense in lavishing one’s pity on a dying pig.”

When Babbitt wrote in 1919, the example of Hugo’s “Sultan Murad” still seemed an extreme case. In our own day—when many of the same people who crusade in favor of abortion refuse to eat meat lest an innocent cow be killed—it seems less so. Indeed, ours could be called “The Age of Inverted Values.” Babbitt explains how civilization sank to this level and points to the ethical imagination and inner moral working as offering the hard but true way out.

#### NHI Book Service

As a service to our readers NHI is making available the new edition of Babbitt's *Rousseau and Romanticism* at \$19.95—a 20 per cent discount from the publisher's list price. Quantities are limited. Related books available include Babbitt's *Literature and the American College*, \$9.00; and Claes Ryn's *Will, Imagination and Reason: Irving Babbitt and the Problem of Reality*, \$15.00. Please add \$2 for postage and handling. Send orders to: National Humanities Institute, 214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E., Suite 470, Washington, D.C. 20002.

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