

Civic Education for the Republic—If You Can Keep It

Justin D. Garrison
*Independent Scholar**

Celebrations of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence will occur at a time when Americans' civic knowledge is in a sad state. In a 2024 survey conducted by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, nearly a third of college students incorrectly identified the Declaration as the source of the phrase "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." In the same survey, only 28 percent of students knew that the Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery.¹ College students are not the only civically illiterate citizens. In the Annenberg Public Policy Center's 2025 Constitution Day survey, only 34 percent of adults knew that the First Amendment protects freedom of the press.² These representative examples are troubling not only because they show that knowledge of America's written constitution is diminishing but also because such a decline likely springs from an even more serious deterioration of the nation's *unwritten* constitution.

About the relationship between America's written and unwritten constitutions, Claes G. Ryn writes, "The Constitution and related documents all imply an entire view of human nature and society. The particular text assumes and forms an inextricable part of a more comprehensive and unwritten constitution, which includes the moral ethos of the Framers."³ The unwritten constitution comprises the customs, laws, language, virtues, history,

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religious beliefs, and civic associations that make a nation distinct from all others. In a healthy society, the unwritten constitution finds expression in and harmonizes with the written document. When the two constitutions are disconnected, the written constitution cannot survive for long. Today it is not hard to see that America's written and unwritten constitutions are separated by a growing chasm. To revive the written constitution, leaders and citizens imbued with the "moral ethos of the Framers" must be cultivated. The development of such constitutional souls is possible—the republic can be kept—but only if civic education takes on a central role in repairing America's unwritten constitution.

In this article's first section, key ideas from *The Federalist* about human nature, societal formation, politics, and violence are explained in ways that uncover the written constitution's reliance on the unwritten constitution. Analysis of these points draws on the writings of Irving Babbitt and René Girard. Babbitt and Girard are two major twentieth-century thinkers, and they have distinct yet compatible interests in literature, religion, history, ethics, and politics. My using them together strengthens this article's arguments and allows readers to see the written and unwritten constitutions with fresh eyes. The article's second section relies on Babbitt and Girard to interpret Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Earth's Holocaust," a tale that offers a vivid account of the motivations behind and consequences of abolishing an unwritten constitution in the pursuit of liberation, fraternity, and progress. The article's final section claims the United States of today bears a painful resemblance to the world of Hawthorne's story. Drawing attention to ideas from Babbitt, it concludes with a modest hope for a civic education that plays a pivotal role in mending America's unwritten constitution, even in these discouraging times, by working through the ideas and concerns presented in this article.

America's Written and Unwritten Constitutions

The Federalist relies heavily on ideas embedded in America's unwritten constitution—that is, the common culture at the time. For example, when it comes to human nature, the authors often

draw attention to the fact that people are highly prone to conflict. In “Federalist No. 6,” Alexander Hamilton dismisses the idea that the thirteen states could live in peace and harmony “in the same neighborhood” without a unifying national government. He describes such notions as “Utopian speculations” because they “set at defiance the accumulated experience of ages” by forgetting that “men are ambitious, vindictive, and rapacious” and thus will never experience “a want of motives for such contests.”⁴ In “Federalist No. 10,” James Madison argues, “So strong is this propensity of mankind, to fall into mutual animosities, that where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions, and excite their most violent conflicts.”⁵ In their minds, page after page of American and human history provides supporting evidence for these claims.

René Girard’s mimetic theory supports Hamilton’s and Madison’s insights into human nature, social existence, and violence. Girard argues that all desire is mimetic (imitative) and triangular. Between the desiring subject and the desired object is a mediator who possesses or otherwise bestows value on the object. A person can become envious of or even violent toward a model of desire, seeing the mediator as a rival. Models of desire are drawn into the vortex of mimetic conflict as they try to stop others from copying them. Girard claims, “The principal source of violence between human beings is mimetic rivalry, the rivalry resulting from imitation of a model who becomes a rival or of a rival who becomes a model.”⁶ Like measles, mimetic conflicts are highly contagious and can rapidly expand beyond the initial rivals to consume neighborhoods, cities, and entire countries.

According to Girard, ancient communities in the midst of mimetic crises would spontaneously polarize around and then murder a victim perceived to be the sole cause of the conflict. Such acts of violence transfer the mimetic tension from the community to the victim, thereby restoring harmony to the rest of society. These communities discovered scapegoating as a means for resolving mimetic crises before they descend into Hobbesian wars of all

against all. Girard writes, “Since the dawn of humanity, millions of innocent victims have been killed in this way in order to enable their fellow humans to live together, or at least not to destroy one another.”⁷ Culture emerges out of the founding murder through the creation of rituals (what community members must do), prohibitions (what community members must not do), and myths (how the community remembers its origins). He claims, “There is no culture without a tomb and no tomb without a culture.”⁸ Girard believes Christianity’s revelation and defense of the innocent victim has broken the power of archaic sacred culture to hold communities together through scapegoating violence. He argues that “the Cross has destroyed once and for all the cathartic power of the scapegoat mechanism.”⁹

Despite the cultural influence of Christianity in many parts of the world, human beings have been reluctant to abandon the broken scapegoating system for managing mimetic tensions. Many people have become good at seeing the scapegoats of others, but not their own. The lingering appeal of the single-victim mechanism—in other words, not placing the blame where it belongs—coupled with its decreasing efficacy, makes for distinct political challenges. In a word Girard takes from St. Paul, government, whatever form it takes after the Resurrection, acts, at best, as a *katéchon*, a restrainer. Girard writes, “The question of *katéchon* concerns all those who have the authority to act. How must they act if they know? What is the weight to be given to sacrifices in a world in which the truth has been revealed? This is the modern predicament.”¹⁰ In the absence of effective scapegoating mechanisms, government becomes limited to restraining the spread of violence through the prudent use of the least amount of violence necessary to maintain peace and order.

Girard’s mimetic theory makes at least two things clear about the understanding of human nature and politics in *The Federalist*. First, Hamilton’s and Madison’s claims about human nature as conflict prone express awareness of a human trait that extends back to the origins of humanity. Second, ancient systems of politics that grounded peace and order in cultures of scapegoating violence are

no longer viable. In a way, Madison seems to be aware of this second point. In “Federalist No. 10” he explains that efforts to eliminate the causes of faction by giving people “the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests” cannot succeed and are dangerous to attempt.¹¹ This is another way of saying attempts to imprint a single set of prohibitions, rituals, and myths on a people, such as was done in archaic societies, are doomed to fail. “Federalist No. 10” argues that the management of factious conflicts now consists of restraining the effects rather than the causes of faction. The Constitution creates an extended republic in which regional differences, geographical distance, and schemes of representation work together to separate the “impulse and the opportunity” for majority tyranny, thereby diluting the power of mimetic violence.

Federalism and separation of powers are also constitutional structures that have the capacity to restrain the popular passions of the moment and thereby to stop or slow the spread of mimetic contagion. The relationship between the various states and the national government, and the extent of their respective powers, is not exhaustively defined in the Constitution. The tension of *imperium in imperio* is managed in the political process itself with the people empowered to use one level of government to defend themselves against the other as the circumstances require.¹² Precautions are also taken within the national government itself. Madison grounds his account of separation of powers in the idea that desires for power and glory cannot be eliminated and must therefore be channeled in more productive directions. In “Federalist No. 51” he writes, “Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man, must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place.” This notion, he continues, is a “reflection on human nature” because “if men were angels, no government would be necessary.”¹³

Girard’s theory conveys the deeper theoretical resonances of some of but not all the ideas about human nature and politics found in *The Federalist*. Hamilton and Madison see more in human nature than violence. They believe human beings are a mixture of higher and lower inclinations. In “Federalist No. 55,”

Madison writes, "As there is a degree of depravity in mankind, which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust: so there are other qualities in human nature, which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence." Such an understanding of human nature can be referred to as ethical dualism. Madison goes on to explain, "Republican government presupposes the existence of these [estimable] qualities in a higher degree than any other form."¹⁴ What ethical dualism meant to the Framers, including Hamilton and Madison, can be understood more clearly with reference to Irving Babbitt's ethical thought.

Babbitt believes all people suffer from a divided will. Each person has desires that can make for a life of happiness lived according to virtue as well as desires that are destructive of human flourishing. These desires compete to be translated into action, waging what Babbitt calls "the civil war in the cave." The teachings of Eastern and Western philosophy, religion, and history show that the fight between these wills is not equal. St. Paul describes the human moral predicament well when he writes, "For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice."¹⁵ Babbitt reframes the wisdom of this passage when he argues, "I do not hesitate to affirm that what is specifically human in man and ultimately divine is a certain quality of will, a will that is felt in its relation to his ordinary self as a will to refrain."¹⁶ Like the Framers, Babbitt is an ethical dualist.

Babbitt's dualistic understanding of the will is directly connected to his epistemology, especially his understanding of imagination. For him imagination is the faculty that synthesizes various particulars into a concrete, vivid, pre-rational unity. It gives each person an intuitive sense of what people are like and how the world works. A person's higher and lower desires make themselves known through intuitions and images that encourage concrete actions. Individuals who respond to the higher will fashion a corresponding sense of reality, what Babbitt calls the moral imagination. People of moral imagination know the truth of ethical dualism and the importance of exercising the "will to refrain." People who get in the habit of acting according to the lower will develop what Babbitt

calls a romantic or idyllic imagination. Such individuals typically deny the “civil war in the cave,” assert the natural goodness or rationality of human beings, and look outward for explanations of the misery of their lives. Either type of imagination develops in an individual through formative encounters with great works of literature, philosophy, and religion reinforced or refuted in everyday life experiences.

For Babbitt the two qualities of will and imagination also find political expression. Constitutional democracy, such as the one established in the American Constitution, operates as a type of “will to refrain” writ large. Grounded in a moral imagination that flows from a healthy unwritten constitution, such a democracy facilitates rule by the people, but only after the popular will has been scrutinized (e.g., in a system of checks and balances) to determine if what the people want in a given moment accords with the enduring desires they expressed in a fundamental law such as a constitution. This type of democracy also understands politics is limited in its ability to promote justice, reduce violence, and create conditions for people to live in what Aristotle calls concord. Democracy grounded in romantic imagination and its corresponding quality of will takes a direct or plebiscitary form. When people are viewed as naturally good or reasonable, there is no need for barriers to the swift and complete translation of the popular will into action. In such a democracy political power knows no limits because the permanent transformation of existence into paradise is dreamed possible. In both kinds of democracy, the unwritten constitution shapes and is shaped by human nature, political practice, and the imagination.

This section has used ideas from Girard and Babbitt to argue that claims found in *The Federalist* about human nature, human sociality, politics, and violence are derived from the unwritten constitution. But a nation’s unwritten constitution is not frozen in time. To retain its essential character in different historical circumstances, and thereby to survive over a long period of time, it must be open to change and renewal. As Edmund Burke argues, “A state without the means of some change is without the means of its

conservation.”¹⁷ But what if a people set out to destroy their unwritten constitution? What would happen if the constitutional spirit were replaced by another spirit, one that rejects historical wisdom and the truths about human nature and social life prized by Babbitt, Girard, and the Framers? This possibility is not considered in *The Federalist*, but it is depicted in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story “Earth’s Holocaust.”

The Erasure of the Unwritten Constitution

Hawthorne’s story begins by explaining that the whole world “had become so overburthened [*sic*] with an accumulation of worn-out trumpery, that the inhabitants determined to rid themselves of it by a general bonfire.” The narrator joins a crowd and hopes “the illumination of the bonfire might reveal some profundity of moral truth, heretofore hidden in the mist or darkness.”¹⁸ Some of the items the crowd throws into the fire, such as marriage certificates, fashionable clothes, property deeds, records of debts, diplomas, alcohol, coffee, tobacco, and tea, receive only brief attention. To make the world “as free as the man first created,” all constitutions, forms of government, legislation, and codes of law are deemed nothing more than “arbitrary laws” and destroyed. The narrator dwells at greater length on the crowd’s attacks on the unwritten constitution through their efforts to abolish social classes, instruments of war and capital punishment, education, and religion.

Marks of nobility such as coats-of-arms, family pedigrees, and “stars, garters, and embroidered collars” are incinerated. So too are royal regalia of all kinds. Modern honors of distinction for service to the state or various professions are thrown in as well.¹⁹ A man from the noble social class pleads with the crowd to stop, shouting, “This fire is consuming all that marked your advance from barbarism, or that could have prevented your relapse thither.”²⁰ His words cannot move the mob. The narrator says, “That was their moment of triumph, achieved after long ages, over creatures of the same clay and same spiritual infirmities.”²¹ The crowd is enraged by the nobleman’s defense of social distinctions. Someone shouts,

“Let him thank his stars that we have not flung him into the same fire!”²²

Babbitt would find the leveling tendencies of the crowd incompatible with constitutional democracy because when it comes to governance, “unbounded faith in the plain people” is no substitute for “the whole question of standards and leadership.”²³ Democratic idealists can dream of leaderless societies, but such notions reflect either a gross ignorance of the nature of politics or a cynical manipulation of the people. As Babbitt explains “Genuine leaders, good or bad, there will always be, and that democracy becomes a menace to civilization when it seeks to evade this truth.”²⁴ In “Federalist No. 57,” Madison argues that a constitutional democracy depends on leaders “who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society.”²⁵ Constitutional democracy cannot work for long without a preponderance of leaders—and citizens—shaped by an unwritten constitution that encourages restraints on baser inclinations and working with others to achieve the common good. Babbitt has these points in mind when he writes, “A man who looks up to the great traditional models and imitates them, becomes worthy of imitation in his turn. He must be thus rightly imitative if he is to be a true leader.”²⁶

Girard would argue that the crowd’s incineration of social and political hierarchies makes the positive type of imitation Babbitt recommends to leaders almost impossible for *anyone* to pursue. An additional factor in determining the likelihood of mimetic conflict is the proximity of the mediator to the desiring subject. In instances of what Girard calls “external mediation,” models of desire can safely be imitated in the sense Babbitt means because they are either “long dead or of standing so far above their imitators that they cannot become their rivals.”²⁷ In Girardian terms, by proposing an extended republic led by citizens possessing constitutional character, *The Federalist* articulates a republican system of external mediation of desire. By abolishing social distinctions, the crowd in Hawthorne’s story is creating conditions, not for a constitutional republic, but for a volatile democracy permeated by what Girard calls the “internal mediation” of desire. When the structures that

regulate desires are weakened, or in this case eliminated, everyone becomes a potential model and thus a potential rival. Thus, contrary to the expectations of the crowd, Girard would claim that the elimination of classes and the crisis of undifferentiation it will produce will lead to the outbreak of widespread violence rather than the establishment of permanent peace. It is no coincidence that immediately after discarding distinctions, the crowd threatens to kill a man who defends the older order.

The crowd moves on to eliminate all instruments of warfare. Muskets, cannons, and swords are destroyed. The narrator says, "It was wonderful to behold, how those terrible instruments of slaughter melted away like playthings of wax." The significance of the moment is compared with "the millennium," and it is heralded as "the proclamation of universal and eternal peace."²⁸ A group of reformers then brings a collection of the world's instruments of capital punishment to the bonfire. Axes, gallows, and guillotines are consigned to the ash heap of history. The leader of the group exclaims that so long as people act on the best and noblest ideas they have, then whatever they do in each moment, "surely that thing cannot be wrong, nor wrongly timed!"²⁹ Not everyone in the crowd is convinced. An old warrior grouses that the destruction of weapons only means more business for weapons makers and that, in any event, "when Cain wished to slay his brother, he was at no loss for a weapon."³⁰ Another man mentions to the narrator his tepid support for eliminating capital punishment, but alluding to the fallen nature of human beings, he says, "Death, however, is an idea that cannot be easily dispensed with."³¹

In "Federalist No. 4," John Jay writes, "It is too true, however disgraceful it may be to human nature, that nations in general will make war whenever they have a prospect of getting any thing by it."³² Babbitt knows such thoughts embarrass many modern people, and he draws attention to the irony that modern schemes for the elimination of war have coincided with the increasing horrors of modern warfare. Scientism and romanticism have played vital roles in this apparent paradox. Modern science makes numerous improvements in human health and material well-being, but it also

enables human beings to unleash levels of violence technologically impossible in previous ages. There are no iodine pills without Hiroshima. Romanticism espouses human natural goodness and seeks the global diffusion of brotherhood and peace, but when such dreams are opposed or simply go unrealized, efforts to discover and eliminate conspirators against humanity's happiness ensue. Babbitt sees the dreams and realities of scientism and romanticism on full display in World War I. About the conflict, he writes, "An age that thought it was progressing toward a 'far-off divine event,' and turned out instead to be progressing toward Armageddon, suffered, one cannot help surmising, from some fundamental confusion in its notions of progress."³³

Girard applies mimetic theory to an examination of Clausewitz and modern war. His mimetic analysis of conflict begins with a reference to Clausewitz's claim that "war is nothing but a duel on a larger scale."³⁴ For individuals, a duel is an extreme, often fatal resolution to a mimetic conflict (e.g., the duel between Hamilton and Aaron Burr). Eighteenth-century European wars were not fought in an equivalent manner. They were largely "gentlemanly" affairs, such as those that Jay has in mind, in which combatants were easily identifiable, violence was (mostly) confined to the battlefield, and war aims were limited. For Girard, Clausewitz grasps that this method of war is being replaced by the practice of total war inaugurated by Napoleon. Girard sees this change accelerating during two world wars and then with the advent of international terrorism.³⁵ War aims become unlimited, anyone can be a combatant, and the battlefield is everywhere. Such a shift in the idea of war is the real outcome of the crowd's efforts at the bonfire to break away from the accumulated wisdom in the unwritten constitution.

The crowd then turns to burning books. Works of history, literature, and philosophy, along with reference materials and works of commentary, are all destroyed. The narrator marvels that many contemporary works burn quickly, while *Mother Goose* and the works of Milton and Shakespeare burn long and bright. As the books are consumed in the flames, the narrator records the delight

of a “modern philosopher” who says, “Now we shall get rid of the weight of dead men’s thought, which has hitherto pressed so heavily on the living intellect. . . . Well done, my lads! Into the fire with them! Now you are enlightening the world, indeed!”³⁶ Babbitt knows all too well the representative nature of this modern philosopher’s attitude toward the wisdom of the past. Such people are more than willing to dismiss as “mere moonshine” the many “areas of what the past had taken to be genuine experience, either religious or humanistic, experience that has been transmitted to us in consecrated masterpieces.”³⁷

The last items to go into the flames are religious. Vestments, crosses, baptismal fonts, pulpits, and other such objects are discarded in favor of a simpler faith guided by the teachings of nature.³⁸ Finally, there is nothing left to burn except the Bible as “the final sacrifice of human error.” Church bibles, from “whence the pastor’s solemn voice had given holy utterances,” are burned. Then family bibles, “which the long-buried patriarch had read to his children [and] had bequeathed downward, as the heirloom of generations” are thrown into the flames. The links between heaven and earth, and the ties that bind the generations, have been dissolved. The destruction of culture is, or at least appears to be, complete. Hawthorne conjures inversions of Pentecost and the Crucifixion when the narrator describes how “a mighty wind came roaring across the plain, with a desolate howl” after he declares, “It was done!”³⁹

Babbitt would not be surprised by the crowd’s attempt to destroy religion. He sees something similar happening in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American society. He writes that as traditional religion declines in the United States, a “cult of humanity is coming more and more to be our real religion.”⁴⁰ This “cult of humanity,” a combination of scientism and romanticism that Babbitt also calls “humanitarianism,” is a “sham spirituality” that rejects the hard-won insights of religious and humanistic traditions throughout history, not the least of which is the notion of ethical dualism discussed earlier. Modern ideologies that pursue progress through liberation suffer from an underlying “spiritual

anarchy.”⁴¹ In a constitutional democracy, a pseudo-religion like humanitarianism can be particularly dangerous. A government is ultimately judged by the quality of its leaders, and the quality of democratic leadership depends on the quality of leaders’ visions. The shift toward sham vision leads Babbitt to claim, “What is disquieting about the time is not so much its open and avowed materialism as what it takes to be its spirituality.”⁴²

“Earth’s Holocaust” begins with the words “once upon a time.” In the archaic sacred, religious myths are the foundational narratives that unify a people and give coherence to the community’s sacred structure and beliefs. Girard would likely see Hawthorne’s story as a satire of modern myths expressing hope for a world of peace and freedom achieved through liberation from all constraints, especially those derived from Christianity. If the past is anything to go by, something much more sinister is likely to occur in the wake of Christianity’s demise. Recall that for Girard Christianity is unique in that it reveals most completely the innocence of the victims of sacrificial violence. It replaces the murderous sacrifice of others, the foundation of order in the archaic sacred, with the spiritual sacrifice of oneself as a path to sanctity as well as peace. About the waning of archaic myths, Girard explains, “The disintegration of myths and rituals, and indeed of religious thought in general, leads not to genuine demythologizing, but to the outbreak of a new sacrificial crisis.”⁴³ Abolishing religious structures, as the crowd in Hawthorne’s story enthusiastically tries to do, cannot lead to a peaceful future. It can inspire, and it has inspired, efforts to return to the world of the archaic sacred, a world in which the choices again become annihilation or scapegoating.

The narrator is ultimately troubled by what he has witnessed, but not all hope is lost. Recall that the grizzled old soldier was not persuaded that abolishing the weapons of war would change very much in the long run. Other minor characters grumble about the foolishness of the crowd’s efforts to achieve peace and harmony through destruction. A stranger takes pity on the unconvinced narrator and explains, “There is one thing that these wiseacres have forgotten to throw into the fire, and without which all the rest of

the conflagration is just nothing at all." When the narrator asks what the crowd overlooked, the man tells him, "What, but the human heart itself!" The destruction of the world's objects and historical memory—the unwritten constitution—does not accelerate the arrival of heaven on earth. It merely creates an environment in which "all the shapes of wrong and misery—the same old shapes, or worse ones"—will reassert themselves and expand in the absence of civilizing restraints built up over centuries.⁴⁴

In "Federalist No. 49," Madison warns against frequent alterations to the Constitution because such activity would "deprive the government of that veneration which time bestows on everything, and without which perhaps the wisest and freest governments would not possess the requisite stability." He goes on to explain that such reverence increases in the mind of each person when "the examples which fortify opinion, are *ancient*, as well as *numerous*."

He concludes that such attachments would not be needed in a country populated entirely by philosophers, but in the real world "the most rational government will not find it a superfluous advantage to have the prejudices of the community on its side."⁴⁵ In "Earth's Holocaust," the crowd scoffs at Madison and many other like-minded Framers. They explode the "prejudices of the community" that support a constitutional way of life. Contemptuous of America's constitutional order, or any order, they do not seek to reform but choose to destroy. They incinerate all the means human beings use to transmit wholesome knowledge of virtuous living from one generation to the next. They do this to gain freedom, enlightenment, and peace, but they are laying a foundation for unprecedented suffering and uncontrollable violence.

The Written Constitution, the Unwritten Constitution, and Civic Education

In "Federalist No. 2," Jay writes, "This country and this people seem to have been made for each other."⁴⁶ On the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, is his statement still true? The American present might resemble the world of Hawthorne's short story to a greater degree than many would care to admit. Can

America's unwritten constitution be rehabilitated to a point where leaders of constitutional character, and citizens imbued with a spirit of reverence for the Constitution, again predominate—as they must for the written constitution to work? If it is possible, reviving America's unwritten constitution will be very difficult because it will require substantial reforms in almost all areas of American life.

Babbitt is more confident than Girard, and possibly Hawthorne, about the potential for rescuing a civilization before it collapses. For him such efforts must start in each person's soul. He explains, "Civilization is something that must be deliberately willed. . . . Furthermore, it is something that must be willed first of all by the individual in his own heart."⁴⁷ In practice, willing civilization—that is, acting according to the higher will—is almost impossible without guidance. Human beings always imitate models, and they need good models to imitate. Babbitt writes, "Human nature, and this is its most encouraging trait, is sensitive to a right example. It is hard, indeed, to set bounds to the persuasiveness of a right example, provided only it be right enough."⁴⁸ He argues further that education is one of the main modes of conveying these right examples, especially historical examples, to the broader community and down through the generations. From a Babbittian perspective, civic education must play a vital role in a broader project of rekindling historical wisdom and renewing American constitutionalism—provided the quality of civic education is right enough.

Developing higher levels of civic knowledge in students and the general population is important, but the right kind of civic education must aspire to something more than learning facts about the structure of American national government in preparation for voting.⁴⁹ It needs to be part of a broader renewal of liberal arts education. Russell Kirk often explained the importance of humane learning to the proper functioning of American constitutionalism. He writes, "The principal purpose of what has been called a liberal education was to develop a considerable body of young people who would become molders of public opinion and leaders of community."⁵⁰ Forming such leaders would require colleges and

universities to turn away from current strategies of preparing students for “global citizenship,” which is a vapid and pernicious abstraction, and turn toward the cultivation of constitutional character. Some have put forward such ambitious visions of civic education, stressing the importance of civic character formation in addition to the acquisition of practical skills and content knowledge.⁵¹ Babbitt would find much to admire in such understandings of civic education. Education in the wisdom of the ages, which includes civic education, is essential for human happiness and civilizational order. It provides insights into what makes for a good and a bad life and what makes for just and unjust politics. It supplies the imaginations of generations with models to imitate (and not imitate).

Americans are far removed from their constitutional roots, and their constitutional structures are in advanced stages of decay. As this article has argued, the written constitution depends on the unwritten constitution for survival; revitalizing the latter is the necessary condition for repairing the former. Many parts of the unwritten constitution need immediate attention, and this is especially true for education. A system of “mimetic education” is needed. When it comes to civic education, such an approach will aim at replenishing the unwritten constitution by feeding the imagination and building the constitutional character of citizens and future leaders. A civic education that immerses students in the right examples to imitate from various fields of study, especially those that can be found in the liberal arts disciplines of literature, history, philosophy, theology, and political theory, has the potential to mend the unwritten constitution and cultivate the historical wisdom, reverence, and character on which America’s written constitutional order depends. This kind of civic education is key to keeping the republic.

NOTES

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29. Hawthorne, “Earth’s Holocaust,” 152.
30. Hawthorne, “Earth’s Holocaust,” 151.
31. Hawthorne, “Earth’s Holocaust,” 152.
32. John Jay, “Federalist No. 4,” 13.
33. Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 25.
34. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 4.
35. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 10.
36. Hawthorne, “Earth’s Holocaust,” 153.
37. Irving Babbitt, “The Problem of Style in a Democracy,” in *Character & Culture: Essays on East and West* (Transaction, 1995), 179.
38. Hawthorne, “Earth’s Holocaust,” 156.
39. Hawthorne, “Earth’s Holocaust,” 157.
40. Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College: Essays in Defense of the Humanities* (National Humanities Institute, 1986), 89.
41. Irving Babbitt, “What I Believe: Rousseau and Religion,” in *Character & Culture: Essays on East and West* (Transaction, 1995), 238.
42. Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 38.
43. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 125.
44. Hawthorne, “Earth’s Holocaust,” 158–59.
45. James Madison, “Federalist No. 49,” 262.
46. John Jay, “Federalist No. 2,” 6.
47. Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 254.
48. Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 334–35.
49. This is what the American Bar Association has in mind when it comes to civic education. See Robert A. Kelly, “The State of Civics Education in the General Populace,” May 6, 2024, American Bar Association, https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/election_law/american-democracy/our-work/state-civics-education-general-populace/.
50. Russell Kirk, “The Constitution and the Antagonist World,” in *The Essential Russell Kirk: Selected Essays*, ed. George A. Panichas (ISI Books, 2007), 469.
51. For an example of such an outline for civic education in American colleges and universities, see Benjamin Storey and Jenna Silber Storey, “Civic Thought: A Proposal for University-Level Civic Education,” December 11, 2023, American Enterprise Institute, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/civic-thought-a-proposal-for-university-level-civic-education/>.