STUDENT IDEALISTS AND THE SPECTER OF NATURAL SCIENCE, 1870-1910

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by

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines the normative content of collegiate student intellectual life in art, literature, and philosophy during the period 1870-1910. This perspective allows for some precision concerning the nature of student thought at a time when, historians believe, a shifting curriculum provided an infertile terrain for moral instruction. Based on an extensive use of primary documents—especially essays written in student literary publications—I show how a segment of undergraduates I call idealists resisted natural science, its methods, and especially its application to the humanities: first, because they believed it would obscure certain principles that they wanted to see clearly; second, because they feared it would introduce a post-Christian and thus an amoral world.

My sources come from diverse institutions: Harvard, Wellesley, Princeton, Vassar, the University of California, and Smith. Chapter one describes the socio-economic, religious, and educational backgrounds of students at these schools, so far as available. With this composite in place, I describe the larger intellectual context that shaped the thought of undergraduates.
Chapter two considers late Victorian conceptions of art as expressed by cultural commentators, professors of art, and their students. I show how in the 1860s and 1870s collegians tended to treat art as a vehicle for religious instruction and ethical reflection. By the 1880s, the emergence of an Aesthetic Movement that subordinated moral content to the “art-technique,” plus the influence of certain art historians, led students to apotheosize art, rather than treat it as a means to understanding something greater.

In chapter three, I show how students’ interest in exploring normative conceptions in literature was challenged by an empirical hermeneutic that emerged in the 1880s as the legitimate form of textual analysis. While some idealists’ “literary instinct” led them to reject the “scientific method” in literature, others, in their attempt to avoid it, were driven into a mystical literary experience. Led by some professors, student idealists turned the world of English letters into a romanticized space that functioned as a bulwark against the “Papacy of Science.”

In chapter four, I argue that the dread of natural science led some students to embrace Transcendentalism and reject Pragmatism.

In chapter five, I demonstrate how students’ sacralization of the humanities was intimately related to a narrowing understanding of science. As the humanities expanded in dealing with phenomena of “enduring significance,” science underwent a severe contraction. For most of the nineteenth century, science was a capacious term describing virtually any systematic and rigorous intellectual labor, such as that conducted in philosophy or theology. By the 1880s and 1890s the term commonly only described work in the “natural sciences.” This dissertation describes how idealists responded to this development.
For Marcy,
at last
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Scholars have depicted undergraduate students around the turn of the twentieth century as resistant to learning, even hostile to their studies. This image of rebellion against books has not been entirely unwarranted: much evidence suggests that for many students during this time social and recreational activities brooked no competitors. Understandably, many people now imagine students then as fervently pursuing just about every activity—except their studies. But this generalization does not hold up well when confronted with archival evidence, especially essays students themselves wrote in literary magazines. For in these records, as well as papers they wrote in class and notes they took while listening to their professors, a drastically different picture emerges. Here students debate whether novels should contain larger “philosophical” objectives. Here students defend aesthetic concepts like beauty against its alleged detractors. Here students criticize the dominant philosophy of their day for failing to provide them with an adequate basis upon which to make moral judgments. A look at sources closest to students then reveals that far from resisting learning, some students were positively enchanted with their studies.

Since the intellectual life of students has never been analyzed very deeply, there is no need to try and revise a previous interpretive rendering. In effect, there has been no student “mind.” My task in the pages that follow is to try and begin the process of
reconstructing the puzzle of student thought. What I found, based on archival work at Vassar, Wellesley, Smith, Harvard, Princeton, and the University of California, is that there was an articulate body of students (whom I call “idealists”) at each of these institutions who believed, with most of the college presidents and humanities professors of their time, in the ennobling influence of art, literature, and philosophy. Holding this belief together was the conviction that the end of education is to glorify God. Drawing upon these two principles, student idealists produced a body of reflections that is normative in the sense that it assumed the validity of certain moral standards and religious in that it was informed, albeit indirectly, by an American Protestant tradition. (Perhaps future scholars can examine how students at Catholic schools compare to these students.)

Having found serious subjects who contradict the anti-intellectual gloss that historians have placed upon students, I must now explain the criteria by which I chose my institutions. By the turn of the twentieth century there were hundreds of American colleges and universities. Hence my subjects are not necessarily “representative” of students across the country, at least not in the way that social scientists understand that term. Dictating my choice of schools was, first, the practical matter of archival resources. It is simply the case that older, eastern, schools have deeper archives than many institutions founded later. Being founded “first” lent these schools an operational sense of their self-importance that persuaded them to keep many documents that their later counterparts did not. Second, my schools also nourished an identifiable “liberal culture” that has provided the context in which to study changes in student thought, as in the pursuit of Culture (or its derivatives) as an end in itself.
With the benefit of rich archival resources, I asked the question, What large intellectual forces shaped student thought? More than any other issue, students in the humanities were concerned with science, most specifically *natural science* (meaning the study of the laws of nature and the physical world). Many students looked disapprovingly on the adoption of scientific methods in fields like art history, where the effect was to render traditional concepts like beauty elusive if not downright subjective. Like many of their older Victorian counterparts, student idealists nursed an additional, more serious, concern: that natural science would introduce a post-Christian world in which moral judgments would lose their meaning.

It is important to stress that student reflections on natural science were defensive, not offensive. That is, students generally sought to protect the ideals of “the Good, the True, and the Beautiful” by critiquing natural science rather than developing a coherent ideology to express the validity of their cherished beliefs. This tendency kept students vulnerable to the encroachment of natural scientific categories even as it prevented them from developing a positive rationale for their own convictions.

In no area discussed did student thinking remain unchanged. Students who reflected on aesthetics during the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s began with the conviction that art was an effective conduit for divine revelation and an instrumental aid in moral reasoning. By the 1890s, however, at the height of the Aesthetic Movement, and under the influence of humanists like Charles Eliot Norton, student conceptions of beauty, thought still cast in a normative light, became more ambiguous. Rejecting empirical analyses of art, students now tended to apotheosize art, some even referred to it as the new “Morality.”
Resembling the pattern established in art, students writing on literary themes in the period 1870-1880 called for stories that would “lighten the burdens and refresh the souls of men.” By the last decade of the nineteenth century, this positive inflection had been replaced by a negative preoccupation with what one student condescendingly described as “the laboratory method in the study of English.” The result is apparent in student literary periodicals of the 1890s: students writing on literature spent more time fending off scientific analyses than they ever had before.

In philosophy, students rejected philosophical Pragmatism in part because it was associated with science, which to many students meant it was being underwritten by philosophical materialism, a philosophy that denied the entire realm of the supernatural and thus undermined any transcendent basis for ethical reflection. Just as students in art and literature fled the threat of scientific materialism by seeking shelter in the uncertain (and capacious) canopy of idealism, so collegians in philosophy sought refuge in one or another form of Romanticism.

The overall trajectory of student thinking in the humanities during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century is not a simple story of declension or secularization: it is a story of one line of thinking (what can be referred to as “Christian thought”) being merged with other kindred expressions in an attempt to keep them from being eclipsed by the means and rationale of natural science. Nothing about this process suggests that such a transformation was done consciously, even less that it was executed with some calculation of possible outcomes. But judging from student writing in the early years of the twentieth century, it is apparent that such an adjustment took place. Whether or not the distance traveled from students’ place of intellectual origin to idealism is greater than
where natural science might have taken them is not clear. What is clear is that students worried about this last outpost more than any other destination.
I am grateful to many people for their support without which this project would not have seen the light of day. I wish to acknowledge the Graduate School at the University of Notre Dame and the History Department for providing the funds needed to complete this project in a reasonable amount of time. My work benefited from a Zahm Research Travel Grant, two Hearst Fellowships, and a Graduate Teaching Fellowship. The Hesburgh Library and especially its Inter-Library Loan division provided crucial aid. I also had the good fortune of being assisted away from home, and thus am grateful to the archival staffs at Wellesley, Vassar, Smith, Harvard, Princeton, and the University of California.

I wish to thank my dissertation committee at the University of Notre Dame: Tom Slaughter for his frank critiques; John McGreevy for his kind encouragement; George Marsden for his insightful comments; Bob Sullivan for his sharp eye (and for a rewarding tutorial). I am especially grateful to my advisor, James Turner, who has been the model historian for me for many years, and who provided the breadth to carry out this project in a way that reflects my own intellectual journey.

I would also like to thank St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church in South Bend, where I gained spiritual sustenance during my years at Notre Dame. I wish to thank Father Randall Melton for allowing me to connect the life of the mind with the life
of faith through such things as the adult forum. I am also thankful for the prayers and
tavel assistance provided by my good friend and fellow Hoosier, Scott Hutton.

I dedicate this work to Marcy, who has been with me now for fourteen years. She
has supported me through two M.A.’s and now, finally, the Ph.D. She is the definition of
patience and fidelity. My thanks go also to my sons, especially Bernal, whose love of
learning is contagious, and whose example has provided me with the motivation that I
needed on many a gloomy day. For all this and much more, thank you.
CHAPTER ONE

“WE ARE INTELLECTUAL”

I

In February 1909, Leola Baird Leonard, a senior at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, wrote the following poem:

When you and I are dead, and all the things
Which we have loved and cared for are no more,
When all our deeds are strangely covered o’er
Like rusty scepters of forgotten kings,

I do not like to think that men will scorn
What we have given our life-blood to complete,
Because their souls lie prostrate at the feet
Of some long-looked-for Mystery, newly-born.

Perhaps some pilgrim singing on his way
Will pause awhile to gaze across the plain
And see the distant cities which we built,
The crumbling memories of an ancient reign.

And if he smile, let cynics raise their cry.
I am content to live and work—and die!1

Time has indeed effaced much of Leonard’s and her cohorts’ experience. So invisible have students’ lives remained that few scholars—and even fewer people outside higher education—know much more than that, in the twentieth century, collegians were consumed by the trinity of football, fraternities, and fêtes. This is an image that may

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describe a majority of American students, but it does not capture the individuals in this story. ²

This dissertation focuses on a particular segment of undergraduates I call idealists. I use the term idealist not in the strict philosophical sense, but as an eclectic outlook consisting of fragments of Romantic, Transcendental, and Christian thought.

In their preoccupation with intellectual concerns, idealist students probably constituted a minority of the total number of collegians during the late nineteenth century. For example, of the 154,374 undergraduates seeking degrees in the 1889-90 academic year,³ only a small proportion could be described as “intellectuals,” even fewer as “idealist intellectuals.” These students’ views on the religious significance of beauty or the ethical ballast in literary works or the necessity of a normative component to philosophy never defined the classes they belonged to, let alone the schools they attended. But unlike their more numerous counterparts, idealists left a rich record of their thoughts, beliefs, and convictions in the form of essays in literary publications, papers, class notes, and reminiscences. From these sources I have attempted to recreate the intellectual “cities” that these students inhabited during the final three decades of the nineteenth century and the first few years of the twentieth century.

The students at the center of this dissertation had a special interest in the humanities, usually expressed in fields like art, literature, and philosophy. Idealists

² I do not mean to suggest that the students in this dissertation never attended a party or engaged in extracurricular activities; only that they demonstrated their intellectual earnestness by writing for literary publications for which, in the majority of cases, students did not receive any academic credit.

approached art with reverence, seeing it as divinely suited for comprehending the “great truths of revelation” and a sure source of moral instruction. They looked to literature for wholesome stories that “refresh the souls of men.” In philosophy, idealists affirmed the importance of motives in judging right action and generally called for an absolutist understanding of “the Good.” While student idealism rarely achieved the precision of a formal doctrine (though some scholars have detected traces of Hegel’s philosophy in their writing), or even possessed the substance of a consciously held belief, it did nevertheless shape the musings that students produced on perduring questions in the humanities.

What makes student idealism difficult to discern is the multiple sources that fed its composition and the amorphous forms that it took. An analysis of student writing reveals a combination of Romantic, Transcendental, and Protestant principles. Failing to precisely formulate these ideologies, students often merged and melded them in their writing. Part of this elision may have issued from a genuine confusion about what really constituted (and thus distinguished) each of these interpretive traditions. Probably, too, student imprecision stemmed from the intuitive or non-rational epistemology inherent in each. Equally significant but harder to demonstrate are the affective needs that led students to these sources in the first place. William James recognized this motivation

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when he stated that in comparison to scientific materialism, philosophical idealism is especially suited to meet humankind’s deepest longings.⁸

The Romantic element in student thought is apparent in idealists’ protest against the preoccupation of many students and professors with scientific reason.⁹ Idealists like Vassar College’s Ethel Wilkinson, for example, wrote strenuously against the application of scientific principles to literary texts. Rather than bowing before scientific rationality, student idealists elevated intuition and feeling as more reliable guides to life and thought. Like Harvard University’s W.M. Fullerton, these students claimed that to feel is more authentic than to reason, and that an intuitive appreciation of beauty is preferable to the analytical scrutiny provided by natural science.¹⁰

The Transcendental component in idealism is more commonly found in fragments of writing rather than full-blown essays: usually in the form of paragraphs and sentences that act as presuppositional links to other ideas. So, while relatively few students dedicated entire articles to Ralph Waldo Emerson, many more used his ideas in an informal though recognizable way. For instance, when Princeton’s Benjamin Lewis

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⁹ H.S. Thayer, *Meaning and Action: A Critical History of Pragmatism* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1981), 51, argues that this tendency in Romanticism goes back to at least the eighteenth century. It is important to realize that the strain of “Romanticism” that I am referring to is but one expression of many different kinds of Romanticism. For a helpful elaboration of this point, see Arthur O. Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1960), 228-253.

¹⁰ For an insightful history of the emotive sensibility, see Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1980).
Hirshfield wrote that “every leaf and star and man are unified by an invisible bond,” we can recognize Transcendentalism as the animating force behind his words.

Of the three discernable influences to shape student thinking, Protestant Christianity received the most complete expression. This is because student idealists reflexively wrote in a religious idiom—even when they thought they were articulating an alternative to Christian doctrine. Students’ propensity to draw upon this language hardly puzzles. Religion had been a fixture in American institutions of higher learning from their colonial origins, and thus a certain residue endured that students attending college during the late nineteenth century would doubtless have absorbed. For most students, too, Christian faith enjoyed more support outside the university from parents and near relatives than its ideological rivals. Thus whether religious belief came principally by way of the pronouncements of college presidents, the lectures of their professors, or the steady influence of their family, students seemed to have drunk deeply enough to write in a distinctly Christian key.

II

To better understand idealists’ interest in art, literature, and philosophy, it is important to keep the socio-economic background of students in mind. This is suggested by the correspondence of students’ elite socio-economic provenance and their absorption in rather abstract academic matters. At Harvard, for example, the occupational status of

11 Benjamin Lewis Hirshfield, “The Idealist in Literature,” The Nassau Literary Magazine 50 (October 1894): 145, ML.

12 This should not surprise as some of the best studies we have of students show a high level of religious interest. See, for example, Stephen M. Clement, “Aspects of Student Religion at Vassar College, 1861-1914,” (Ed.D. diss., Harvard University, 1977).
students’ fathers for the years 1870-1875 was staunchly upper-middle-class: 55.7 percent reported themselves to be “businessmen”; 28.6 percent were “professionals”; 7.3 percent identified themselves as “manual workers”; and 4.2 percent said they were “farmers.” In 1903, 56.7 percent of Harvard fathers reported themselves to be “businessmen”; 29.5 percent said they were “professionals”; 7.8 percent were “manual workers”; and 3.0 percent identified themselves as “farmers.” At Vassar, the record for fathers’ occupational background is incomplete, but “among 139 (of the 185 college students) reporting their fathers’ occupations in 1870, all but six were daughters of professional and independent businessmen.” In 1910, 88 percent of fathers were either “professional or business men, and only 12 per cent were minor officials in business establishments, clerical workers, or manual workers.” A substantially similar portrait can be drawn for Smith and Wellesley, despite the latter’s initial plan of serving girls of limited means. At the University of California, “statistics sporadically collected by administrators show that approximately half of the students came from families of professionals and businessmen; the other half had fathers who farmed or worked in the mines.”

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15 Ibid.


the institutions consulted, the overall socio-economic portrait of students is one of privilege.\(^{18}\)

The religious affiliation of students is also of great consequence in better understanding their intellectual interests. At Vassar, a disproportionate number of collegians during the late nineteenth century hailed from Congregational churches.\(^{19}\) A similar composite can be sketched for Smith.\(^{20}\) Wellesley’s early religious bent was emphatically evangelical, thanks to the active role of Henry Durant, the college’s founder.\(^{21}\) A Princeton study of the religious affiliation of students for 1872, 1875, and 1876 reveals that 69 percent of collegians identified with the institution’s Presbyterian heritage.\(^{22}\) By 1909, only 38 percent belonged to this denomination. While the number of non-Protestants rose from practically nothing in 1870 to “an average of 16 Catholics and 5.5 Jewish students” by 1910, the greatest challenge to Presbyterian hegemony came from Episcopalians, who assumed a statistical majority as early as 1904. Despite some evidence of religious diversity, the general picture of these colleges remained overwhelmingly and broadly Protestant.

\(^{18}\) While historians continue to perpetuate the notion that Gilded Age students were overwhelmingly from the middle and upper classes, a thorough and extensive study of students’ socio-economic backgrounds is still needed. See, for example, Colin Burke, *American Collegiate Populations: A Test of the Traditional View* (New York: New York University, 1982).

\(^{19}\) The most complete study of Vassar student religion remains that of Clement, “Aspects of Student Religion.”


Also relevant is the subject matter students studied while at college. According to a 1913 study conducted by researcher Frederick C. Ferry, Wellesley students logged a prepossessing 8,456 instruction hours in “English” for the academic year 1911-12.\(^{23}\) Students at Harvard registered 7,287 hours in “English,” those at Princeton took 4,839 hours. Of the six institutions in this study, Smith appears last with 3,018 hours. In “Art,” Harvard students logged 1,266 instruction hours. Smith students took 1,046 instruction hours, while Wellesley students registered 878 hours. Among the colleges studied here, Princeton lagged far behind with 558 instruction hours. In “Philosophy,” a field of special importance at Harvard,\(^{24}\) collegians logged an impressive 3,681 instruction hours. Students at Princeton registered 2,943 hours, while those attending Wellesley accumulated 2,028 hours. Of the schools in this study, only Smith failed to reach the two-thousand-hours-mark, registering 1,896 instruction hours.

### TABLE 1

**STUDENT HOURS OF INSTRUCTION IN THE HUMANITIES, 1911-12**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Wellesley</th>
<th>Smith</th>
<th>Harvard</th>
<th>Princeton</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Art</strong></td>
<td>878</td>
<td>1,046</td>
<td>1,266</td>
<td>558</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>English</strong></td>
<td>8,456</td>
<td>3,018</td>
<td>7,287</td>
<td>4,839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Philosophy</strong></td>
<td>2,028</td>
<td>1,896</td>
<td>3,681</td>
<td>2,943</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data from Frederick C. Ferry, “Some Tables of Student Hours of Instruction,” *Science* 38 (1913): 586.


To gain a proper sense of the significance of instruction hours in the humanities, it is helpful to compare these figures with hours earned in mathematics and in the physical sciences. For the 1911-12 academic year, Ferry found that students at Princeton logged 5,038 instruction hours in “Mathematics,” 3,379 hours in “Engineering,” 3,243 hours in “Physics,” and 2,209 hours in “Chemistry.” Collegians at Harvard registered 3,648 hours in “Chemistry,” 3,090 hours in “Mathematics,” 2,694 hours in “Engineering,” and 1,473 hours in “Physics.”

**TABLE 2**

**STUDENT HOURS OF INSTRUCTION IN THE PHYSICAL SCIENCES AND MATHEMATICS, 1911-12**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Wellesley</th>
<th>Smith</th>
<th>Harvard</th>
<th>Princeton</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>4,126</td>
<td>1,514</td>
<td>3,090</td>
<td>5,038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2,694</td>
<td>3,379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>1,473</td>
<td>3,243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>753</td>
<td>685</td>
<td>3,648</td>
<td>2,209</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data from Frederick C. Ferry, “Some Tables of Student Hours of Instruction,” *Science* 38 (1913): 586.

The results of Ferry’s study of eighteen prominent institutions show a marked focus and weight given to the humanities. For example, the percentage of total instruction hours in the humanities at Harvard was 51.77; the sciences, 24.73; foreign languages, 23.50. At Princeton, the humanities registered a total of 37.29; the sciences, 37.26; foreign languages, 25.45. Wellesley devoted a total of 53.78 of its instruction hours to the humanities, 27.83 to the sciences; 18.39 to foreign languages. At Smith, the percentage of
hours in the curriculum was divided thus: 54.23 for the humanities, 18.53 for the sciences; 27.24 for foreign languages.\textsuperscript{25}

Empirical studies dedicated to tracking women’s education are also illuminating. Keeping in mind that women’s program was underwritten by a distinct view of their “feminine nature,” we can discern a concentration in “culture and language” courses. This is indeed the conclusion of Clark University researcher Hermione L. Dealey, whose 1915 study found that 51 percent of Wellesley undergraduates completed at least 20 percent of their work in “English”; 36 percent of Vassar students did the same.\textsuperscript{26} Dealey’s research is corroborated by historian Joan Zimmerman, who found that at Grinnell College, between the years 1896 and 1914, 34 percent of women chose majors in the “Modern Languages,” 19 percent chose “English,” 18 percent selected “Greek,” 11 percent chose “History,” and only 6 percent took majors in the sciences.\textsuperscript{27} Despite a genuine openness to the physical sciences, collegiate women’s education remained heavily weighted towards the humanities.

As suggested by Ferry’s data on Harvard and Princeton, men’s education also tilted towards the humanities. In her study of New York University men during the nineteenth century, historian Louise Stevenson concluded that the student imagination there was “literary rather than scientific.”\textsuperscript{28} Thus while the humanities were thought to be

\textsuperscript{25} Ferry, “Some Tables,” 587.

\textsuperscript{26} Hermione L. Dealey, “A Comparative Study of the Curricula of Wellesley, Smith, and Vassar Colleges,” (1915), 354 ff, Vassar College Archives (VCA).


\textsuperscript{28} Louise Stevenson, “Preparing for Public Life: The Collegiate
especially suitable to women’s “natural interests,” the moral and aesthetic cultivation they were supposed to impart were widely regarded as essential to any liberally educated person.

Although this dissertation does not treat gender as a defining category of analysis, the sources consulted suggest that, despite the claims of some scholars, women students, their humanities professors, and college presidents generally held views of gender more in line with the doctrine of “domesticity” rather than any recognizable species of feminism. When considering their studies, for example, few women intended to use their education for professional careers; like Vassar’s E.L. Garrett, most were “attracted to college by a certain sensitiveness to beauty in nature, literature and art.” Women’s intrinsic interest in the humanities does not suggest that they were pleased with the limited professional prospects awaiting them after graduation. Realizing that their

Students at New York University, 1832-1881,” in Thomas Bender, ed., The University and the City: From Medieval Origins to the Present (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 150-177. For an exception to the rule, see Maresi Nerad, The Academic Kitchen: A Social History of Gender Stratification at the University of California, Berkeley (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 22 ff.


31 E.L. Garrett, “The Value of Aesthetics in College,” The Vassar Miscellany 27 (June 1898): 443, VCA. Background for the feminization of culture can be found in Alan Trachtenberg, The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), 145 ff.

chances for work outside the home were mainly limited to teaching, many of the collegiate women who appear in this dissertation developed an inherent interest in their studies while assuming that they would someday marry and have children.

At first blush, the humanistic emphasis in a liberal education may seem at odds with the need for practical training that a country in the throes of industrialization required. These were, after all, years in which the production of raw steel rose from “13 tons in 1860 to near 5,000 in 1890.” What role, we might ask, does poetry have in such a context? Only by recalling that the vitality of America’s national life was believed, by prominent educators, to rest on such things as an expanded mental vision, an invigorated imagination, and a subtle understanding can we fully appreciate the significance of a liberal education. Moreover, such an education was deemed crucial to balancing the material progress and modernization that were coming to define the age, and that, according to some commentators, would rend the very fabric of America if left unchallenged. Most important of all, a liberal education was supposed to fulfill the moral obligation of producing responsible citizens.


Scholarship on marriage and children’s birthrates for collegiate women during the late nineteenth century has supported this claim. See, for example, Patricia Palmieri, *In Adamless Eden: The Community of Women Faculty at Wellesley* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 217-231, esp. Tables 9 and 10.

Trachtenberg, *Incorporation*, 52.


Clearly articulating this view is L. Clarke Seelye, “Lecture 9, Part II,” n.d., L. Clarke Seelye Papers, 2, SCA.
symbols of industrialization—the Union Pacific Railroad, the Atlantic cable, the Suez Canal—the humanities cultivated the indispensable inner, more invisible, region.

III

Knowing the intellectual, socio-economic, and religious background of students, as well as the kinds of studies they devoted themselves to, is helpful in giving us a more complete view of collegians’ identity. But the statistical profile that emerges from these facts can also give the impression that all student intellectuals during the Gilded Age were idealists. This is of course not true. Although I have focused my study on this segment of the student body because they embody the principles I want to explore, the reality is that there were students like the future journalist John Reed or the novelist and critic Randolph Bourne whose turn of mind and college experiences led them to develop quite different concerns. While arriving at the exact number of student radicals is at least as difficult as precisely measuring the number of idealists, there is no denying that the former had established an identifiable (though probably diminutive) enclave at some institutions by the turn of the twentieth century.

The final years of the nineteenth century also witnessed the emergence of a conception of education that increased students’ involvement in relieving social problems. Reflecting the emphasis on “service,” many colleges offered special lectures

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and classes on topics such as socialism, urban slums, settlements, and labor strife. For students of the right disposition, involvement in settlement work and the relief of social ills like prostitution and poverty became absorbing intellectual concerns.

Why focus on idealists if there were other kinds of student intellectuals? Because idealists shared the presuppositions and beliefs of leading humanists and college presidents responsible for preserving and developing the normative basis of the liberal arts curriculum. Among these foundational ideals was the conviction that a liberal education should enable a person to embrace the good, believe the true, and recognize the beautiful. Although idealist students did not always articulate these principles clearly, their writing demonstrates a genuine interest in grappling with their (waning) significance. In this way idealists took part in that sea-change that scholars have long identified as crucial to the experience of late Victorians: from home-town beliefs to bureaucratized knowledge, religious confidence to ideological uncertainty, and (in some cases) small-town simplicity to urban complexity.

Significantly, my focus on the vitality of student intellectual life contests and modifies the judgment of historians who are suspicious of collegians’ academic earnestness. Early in the twentieth century Henry S. Canby described the undergraduate mind as a “slab of coarse-grained wood upon which the cabinetmaker lavished his stain. Its empty pores soak in the polishing mixture, no matter how richly it may be applied,


41 James Turner, Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1985).

and in many instances we fail to get the expected gloss.”43 Half a century later Laurence R. Veysey set this image in stone when he summarized students as “marked by a strong resistance to abstract thinking and to the work of the classroom in general.”44 This simplistic portrait has found no dearth of supporters in our own time, as historians continue to portray student culture as overwhelmingly devoted to entertainment and social activities.45 While it is true that many students struggled to concentrate on their studies, it is inaccurate to portray this tendency as a congenital condition. My objective in this dissertation will be to explore the hidden dimension of student intellectual life so as to reconstruct those “crumbling memories of an ancient reign.”

Although it is difficult to precisely measure the number of thoughtful students, my own work suggests that even accounting for the growing academic apathy after 1900 leaves you with hundreds of students who do not fit the profile of intellectual wastrels. Critics may justifiably wish for a more quantifiable measure of student intellectual engagement than my informed estimate. These skeptics may turn to educational researcher Charles F. Thwing, whose 1905 study of over 1,700 students showed that on average collegians spent about twenty-six hours a week in “scholastic labor,” a figure that included time spent in the classroom as well as in private study.46 Although the amount of hours spent in study certainly suggests something, they are not synonymous with


academic seriousness, even less with intellectual engagement. These more elusive concepts are not easily quantifiable and thus cannot be used to arrive at any solid conclusion about the level of devotion students had for their studies.

IV

Where most students during the Gilded Age probably had no real idea what a liberal education was supposed to achieve, many idealists did: they emphatically called for an education that “aims evenly and symmetrically to develop the diligent mind, to educate it into the habits of mastery and analysis and synthesis, and, also, to secure at the end a fair acquaintance with all departments of popular knowledge. Now this seems to us to be precisely what a college ought to do.” To achieve this end, idealists recommended an education characterized by “versatility.” Code for the survey of many things, these students argued that such training “gives to the mental horizon a scope which could not be acquired by restricting the mind to one theme.” Of course not all students agreed. For example, in a head-to-head debate published in the *Vassar Miscellany* in 1875, a student going by the initials “M.C.” asserted that “the profound man implies the specialist . . . [and this] mode of research is the most natural, influential and effective.” Dissenters aside, most idealists like Smith’s Ethel Louise Norton, class of 1910, argued that “the education of the college must be ‘all-round’; it must give the individual a chance to become acquainted with his own soul . . .; it must give him a training underlying every

47 “Princeton’s Curriculum,” *The Princetonian* 1 (January 11, 1877): 1, ML.

48 C.L., “Versatility or Profundity,” *The Vassar Miscellany* 10 (January 1881): 155, VCA.

49 M.C., “Profundity or Versatility?” *The Vassar Miscellany* 4 (July 1875): 490, VCA. Further support can be found in “Electives as Granted in the University,” *The Berkeleyan* 14 (September 11, 1882): 4, University of California, Berkeley, Bancroft Library (BL); and “The Proper Tendency in Higher Education,” *The Occident* 7 (September 26, 1884): 65-67, BL.
form of specialization; a knowledge of those subjects with which any college graduate
should be familiar.”

Idealists’ call for a “versatile” education was part of a larger, national, debate over
the nature of higher education during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century. On
the one side were thinkers like Noah Porter of Yale University who advocated the
preservation of the “classical” curriculum, made up mainly of mathematics, philosophy,
natural science, Latin and Greek. At the other extreme were followers of Charles W.
Eliot of Harvard, whose “elective system” allowed students to create their own program
of study with little to no faculty intervention. The embattled middle was occupied by
thinkers like James McCosh who respected the classical curriculum but thought that it
should exist alongside the emerging sciences of psychology, biology, economics, and
political science.

Based on the evidence consulted, it is clear that student opinion on the curriculum
varied: a few students wanted colleges to retain the old forms of tuition; most craved the

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50 Ethel Louise Norton, “The Purely Elective System,” The Smith College Monthly 17 (October
1909): 9, SCA.

51 Old but still relevant are Freeman Butts, The College Charts its Course: Historical Conceptions
the American Undergraduate Curriculum,” in Carl Kaysen, ed., Content and Context (New York: McGraw-
Hill, 1973), 1-63; and Frederick Rudolph, Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course

52 See Peter Dobkin Hall, “Noah Porter Writ Large? Reflections on the Modernization of
American Higher Education and its Critics, 1866-1916,” in Roger Geiger, ed., The American College in the

53 See Hugh Hawkins, Between Harvard and America: The Educational Leadership of Charles W.

54 See J. David Hoeveler, Jr., James McCosh and the Scottish Intellectual Tradition: From
curricular expansion, disciplinary focus, and personal freedom promised by the elective system; and some wished that the new measures would be integrated in a way that would not threaten the ideal of “even and symmetrical development.” Idealists, it seems to me, supported this last option.

V

Underwriting the appeal of the doctrine of perfect symmetry, “the Whole Man” or the “Whole Woman,” was a spiritual conception of education that saw every discrete fact as a thread in the cosmic tapestry of life. James Taylor, the fourth president of Vassar, put it thus: “Why is the real thing, the single fact, the separate life, unreal, untrue, insufficient? Why must the practical be moved by the ideal or lose its practical character altogether? Because the ideal universalizes the real, . . . the individual fact or thing is made significant and is brought into the relations that give it worth only by that which relates it to other facts and things, and makes it part of the great whole.”

Idealists like Taylor maintained that the reason why a liberal education should remain devoted to cultivating symmetry and wholeness in students is that each field of study is an integral part of a larger invisible and spiritual reality. This larger reality can only be glimpsed by individuals sensitized to the inherent interconnections of studies. To treat a discipline like art, for instance, as a separate entity is not only to cut it off from other fields of inquiry; it is to eclipse its ability to illumine the spiritual sphere. “No education is practical,” asserted Taylor, “which does not give an outlook beyond the actual and tangible and visible, and which fails to inspire the soul with a vision in seeking

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which it shall be ever impelled toward ‘a higher than its highest and a better than its best.’
It is a failure if it help us only to bake bread, and does not open eyes and heart to unseen
things which are eternal.”

Underlying the argument for the superiority of a liberal education (over a
utilitarian one) was the presupposition that ideals were more real than material things.
The Presbyterian minister William P. Merrill delivered one of the clearest articulations of
this religious belief at Wellesley, on June 13, 1915. Summarizing the heart of his talk,
Merrill declared that “there are few if any messages we need so urgently to heed as this
of the power of ideals, the things that are not, the ‘‘truths that never can be proved,’ the
invisible forces; that these are mightier and more real than the whole world of things as
they are.”

Taylor’s and Merrill’s message found a warm reception among idealist students,
who were eager to protect their esteemed “transcendentals” from the real and imagined
threat of natural science. In art, students feared that scientists’ rational cast of mind would
render ideals like beauty meaningless. In literature, votaries of idealism saw philologists
as preoccupied with “derivations of words and archeological details” rather than
imbibing the spirit of the author’s work. In philosophy, thoughtful students worried that
practitioners of natural science would dismiss certain moral concepts like “truth” and
“justice.” Although idealists tended to simplify and thus misunderstand scientific

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56 Ibid., 8.

57 William P. Merrill, “The Power of Ideals,” Convocations and Commencement (June 13, 1915),
n.p., Wellesley College Archives (WCA).

58 Ethel Wilkinson, class of 1893, “Literature as Science,” The Vassar Miscellany 22 (March
1893): 468, VCA.
approaches to their fields of interest, they were not completely off the mark when it came
to detecting the “Spirit of the Age.” So, for example, while idealists at Wellesley might
have exaggerated the threat posed by philosopher Ethel Puffer’s work on the aesthetics of
beauty, they were right to see her colleague Anne Morgan’s “Types of Ethical
Theory” as part of a larger curricular effort to bring age-old ideals under scientific
scrutiny.

VI

For sensitive minds, the Gilded Age provided plenty of evidence to suggest that
science was on the prowl. Auguste Comte, the French philosopher and sociologist, denied
the possibility of gaining knowledge of an unobservable reality. Having shut the door to
the noumenal sphere, to use Kant’s phrase, Comte directed his energy toward exalting the
deity of natural science. Hailing from traditions within the broad canopy of Protestantism
that long viewed natural science as an ally, many collegians must have felt deeply
troubled by this perverse exaltation.

If some philosophers believed that natural science could ascend the mountaintop
of God, they most assuredly maintained that it encompassed all truth. English positivist
philosopher Herbert Spencer insisted that the study of science comprehended everything
knowable, while paleontologist O.C. Marsh declared that “‘science is only another name
for truth.’” Expressions of materialism were in direct contradiction to idealism, which

59 Puffer’s work is typical of professors in this period in their attempt to reconcile scientific
knowledge with older philosophical precepts. See Ethel D. Puffer, The Psychology of Beauty

60 The Wellesley College Calendar, 1895-96 (Wellesley: Wellesley College Press), 50, WCA.

61 Quoted in Turner, Without God, 189.
assumed that truth was often not susceptible to empirical means of investigation. Idealists liked to believe that truth was ethereal and, like a butterfly, could not be easily captured. Hence students of this persuasion tried to keep what they felt to be true away from rational means of analysis, which they considered antagonistic and hostile to their most cherished beliefs. Possessing little more than this defensive tactic, students remained susceptible to the idea that natural science was the only adequate method of grasping truth.

The self-confidence—or, rather, hubris—of nineteenth-century philosophers of science was built upon contributions from several different quarters. French mathematician and astronomer Pierre Simon Laplace argued early in the century that the formation of the solar system through nebular development required thousands of years. Though Laplace did not explicitly deny the role of the Creator, his silence on the question of a divine author suggested His superfluity.

The American branch of anthropology put forth the theory of “polygenesis,” which saw humankind as originating from several distinct episodes of creation. The most prominent natural historian to lend his support to this view was the Swiss émigré Louis Agassiz. In looking at ancient remains of Egyptian tombs, for instance, Agassiz declared that Egyptians were no less different from whites five thousand years ago than they are now, thus “‘to assume them to be of the same order [as whites], and to assert their common origin, is to assume and to assert what has no historical or physiological or physical foundation.’”62 Viewing human races as discrete groups created by God rather

than as segments within a common humanity, descended from an original pair, Agassiz unwittingly implied that Genesis could not be trusted.

Around the same time, another group of anthropologists began in earnest to study foreign cultures’ religious traditions. What individuals like E.B. Tylor and Sir John Lubbock discovered was that the more they explored the religious rites and ceremonials of others, the less uniquely special Christianity appeared. As historian James Turner put it, “baptism appeared remarkably like one more purification ritual, the Eucharist like the widely diffused ceremonial eating of a god, even the Incarnation like many another myth of a God-man.” While this comparative perspective did not lead to many conversions to other religious faiths, it did leave the distinct impression that Christianity was shaped by historical change much like other religious traditions.

More significant still was the work of English geologist Charles Lyell, who in 1830 released the first of three volumes titled *Principles of Geology* (1830-1833). Therein Lyell advanced the argument that natural forces, over eons of time, had produced the current character of the Earth. This view stood in direct opposition to a strict reading of the Old Testament, which saw the Earth as a special and recent creation of God, only six thousand years old. Although Lyell did not intend to challenge traditional religious beliefs, his work nevertheless made it clear that geology was no complacent handmaiden of religion; it was a branch of natural science that would pursue empirical truth no matter where it led. For many Victorians, the fact that geology was not directly supporting a Christian account of creation was a cause for pause.

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Already beleaguered by the ideas of prominent representatives in astronomy, anthropology, and geology, Protestants now faced a group of German scholars who applied historical and philological methods to determine the date, authorship, and cultural circumstances prevailing at the time of the Bible’s composition. Emboldened by their method, theologians and philosophers like David Friedrich Strauss began to arrive at some rather unsettling conclusions. In *Das Leben Jesu* (1835-36), Strauss denied the supernatural events in the Gospels, affirming instead that they were products of a primitive human mind. While conservative American theologians like William B. Clark denounced German scholars as “‘the great fountain from which nearly all the more recent infidelity has flowed,’” Strauss did not fail to make a strong impression.

At issue was whether philological similarities in style and substance threatened Christianity’s claim to the singularity of its divine revelation through the person of Jesus Christ. The implication of anthropologists like Tylor and Lubbock was that Christianity, like all other religious traditions, was a product of historical change. Anthropologists were of course not wrong to identify the historical origin of Christianity; after all, Christianity is a faith rooted in historical time, grounded in the earthly ministry of Jesus and the subsequent development of the Church. What was distinctive now was an awareness of religious traditions outside of the West, especially the myths and stories that resembled those in Christianity. For reflective Victorians, such questions raised doubts that could not be easily assuaged.

All of these explanations—for an ancient universe, for multiple original creations of humankind, for the fundamental similarity of religious traditions, for the antiquity of

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64 Quoted in Turner, *Without God*, 147.
the Earth, and for the application of historical and philological methods to the Bible—
prepared the groundwork for the release of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species by Means
of Natural Selection* in 1859. Here Darwin explained the origin and perpetuation of
species in language drawn mainly from biology. Almost absent were any references to
God or to his supernatural works. Although naturalistic explanations had a long history in
science, not until Darwin did anyone apply them so thoroughly and so convincingly to
biology. Which is not to say that everyone found Darwin’s theory palatable. One astute
writer declared that “‘physical science, at the present day [1860], investigates phenomena
simply as they are in themselves. Whatever deliberately omits God from the universe is
closely allied to that which denies him.’” 65 Darwin would have demurred, but he would
have conceded that the omission of God as an active agent of the creation account made it
harder to see divine purpose in nature.

Darwin’s naturalistic explanation for the development of organic life was suspect
of atheism because Protestants had long come to see nature as the most eloquent
testament of God’s existence, a tendency that commonly blurred the distinction between
natural and divine theology. Representative of this view is the Congregational clergyman
Samuel Harris, who in 1852 stated that “‘if God is the Creator of the universe, how is it
possible but that the study of the creation be interlinked at every point with the study of
the Creator, and thus become, to the devout mind, the study of theology.’” 66 Stating this
Protestant proclivity in sharper terms was the Unitarian L.J. Livermore, who observed


that Darwin’s theory “‘tears out the richest and most explicit pages in the theist’s book of heavenly knowledge, [and] changes what to the eye of faith is the clearest and most edifying scripture into a hotchpotch of semi-arabesque scrawls.’” First in the *Origin of Species* and later in other works, Darwin obscured the hand of God in creation by introducing a naturalistic mechanism that stripped nature of its claim to be God’s laboratory.

Over time scientific developments constituted an alternative way of looking at the world, a fact that left many educated Americans after mid-century with the uncomfortable yet undeniable sense that religion did not possess exclusive explanatory power. Scientific thinkers did not achieve their success by boldly announcing their opposition to religion; they gained it by following a research agenda that excluded supernatural considerations in favor of naturalistic descriptions. Thus the change in intellectual life—away from one ensconced in religious language to one dependent on naturalistic categories—was subtle. For example, the Protestant evolutionist Edward Drinker Cope did not deny that God created the world; rather, he asserted that “‘the Creator of all things has set agencies at work which will slowly develop a perfect humanity out of his lower creation.’” The Congregational minister Newman Smith concurred: “the same powers of development, the same law of evolution, seem to have been followed, alike, in nature and in the Bible.” For ages Christians believed that God

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67 Ibid., 99.
68 Ibid., 183.
69 Ibid., 162.
had created the world in a direct and unmediated way; increasingly after mid-century more and more of them looked to evolution to explain the origin of organic life.

Although premised on subtle changes in interpretation, the secularization of intellectual life was not hard to see. The geologist Joseph Le Conte, who originally opposed the theory of transmutation, by the 1870s revealed just how far the tide had turned in intellectual circles: “in evolution,” he declared, “we reach the one infinite all-embracing design, stretching across infinite space and infinite time, which includes and predetermines and absorbs every possible separate design. There is still design in every object, but no longer a separate design, only a separate manifestation of one infinite design.”

The student idealists whose story is at the center of this dissertation shared the apprehension of many Protestant intellectuals that they were living in a time characterized by a strident form of scientifically induced unbelief that sought to undermine the stability of Christianity and therefore of idealism. Although students mounted no complete or thorough defense of these commitments, their writing suggests that the leading intellectual currents then prevalent were taken seriously.

VII

In reaction to the feared juggernaut of natural science, student idealists developed an intuitionist sensibility that, while shallow as an apologetic, did provide necessary, if temporary, protection. Effusions about “beauty” and “goodness” could not, by themselves, help students escape the crumbling edifice of Victorian intellectual life, but

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70 Ibid., 125.
they could—and did—assist students in momentarily weathering materialism’s frontal assault.

Intuitionism did something else: it helped students survive the menace of materialist science by giving them the language of a normative tradition with which to defend their ideals. Although many Protestant institutions had, by the late nineteenth century, begun to actively minimize their denominational identity and attendant religious activities, enough remained in the way of “Christian values” to enable students to use it as a protective device. Perhaps the greatest evidence for the efficacy of this admittedly weakened inheritance is the paucity of religious unbelief among undergraduates. James McCosh, who probably knew undergraduates as well as anyone, testified towards the end of his heralded two-decade-long term as Princeton’s president that very few students adopted skepticism as an enduring outlook. So, while intuitionism did not provide a coherent intellectual outlook, it did manage to offer students an idiom latent with norms with which they could defend their beliefs from the moral threat posed by materialism.

Cynics may continue to think of students as intellectually insouciant and unresponsive to the moral aims of a liberal education. But based on archival material gathered from the period 1870-1910, my dissertation reveals that more than a few collegians cultivated a serious mental life that drew its inspiration and its substance from a religious tradition that, while weakened, was still able to convey its principles and

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71 The most complete description of this process can be found in George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).


73 Turner, *Without God*, 188.
objectives for defensive intellectual purposes, if not for positive belief. In describing students’ appropriation of this tradition, I will be doing more than honoring Leonard’s wish to be remembered; I will be correcting a tendency of many scholars to see students as solely devoted to frivolity and fun. What follows then is a study of that select group of collegians for whom academics was an intellectually and morally engrossing activity.
CHAPTER TWO

ART: “BEAUTY IS SPIRITUAL”

I

In October 1869 Princeton’s Emilius W. Smith won the highest accolade for student writing. Featured in the *Nassau Literary Magazine*, Smith’s prize essay articulated a set of convictions that many collegians during the last third of the nineteenth century held in common. One of the most important of these beliefs saw art as “an eloquent and impressive mode of conveying instruction in spiritual truths.” Viewing art as a means for comprehending the “great truths of revelation,” Smith suggested that “art may be made to express to the sight the sublime scenes in the life of Christ, to speak of the miraculous deeds performed by the Apostles, or to unfold the glories seen in the isle of Patmos.” Remarkable only for their explicitness, Smith’s convictions garnered support from other student idealists who commonly saw art as a servant of religion. Perhaps more students were interested in fraternities than in art, and for many football was king. But Smith was hardly alone. An anonymous writer in the *Vassar Transcript* argued that art “is the offspring of Religion, and it is only in the delineation of the

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75 Ibid., 91.
spiritual, and in giving shape and expression to religious views and aspirations, that she attains her highest perfection.”

Such high views of art became directly relevant to students’ educations in the later nineteenth century because the teaching of and about art then spread rapidly through college curricula. Among elite women’s colleges, Vassar established a separate art school in 1877. A year later Wellesley founded a similar institution with the distinction of being the first in the United States to allow students to major in the history of art. In 1882 Princeton announced plans for a university museum, which was intended to complement the growth of art history courses from around the world. Collegiate men at Harvard enjoyed a growing number of art history courses towards the last decade of the century; by the 1912-13 academic year, Harvard offered eighteen courses like “History of Medieval Architecture,” “History of Japanese Art,” and “Greek Numismatics.” What these and other institutions sought to impart to their students was more than aesthetic refinement: it was a moral conception of life.

76 “Moral Influence of Painting and Sculpture,” The Vassar Transcript 1 (1867): 8, Vassar College Archives (VCA).


80 Mary Ann Stankiewicz, “Virtue and Good Manners: Toward a History of Art History Instruction,” in Smyth and Lukehart, Early Years, 185.
This lofty estimation of art naturally led to a positive evaluation of the artist. A poem by Marion Pelton Guild, appearing in the *Wellesley Prelude* on October 26, 1889, conveys the eulogistic tenor of students’ views:

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Only the artist’s quickened sense
Hears, through the abyss of grief and wrong,
   Far echoes of a primal song,
Sees glimmers of a light intense.
   And thus, not ignorant, but free
From earth’s despair, he truly tells
The discords of our jangling bells;
   But under all, God’s harmony.

Yea, e’en if through some dire mischance
His own hopes fail, his eyes grow dim,—
   God’s truth shines out, unknown to him,
Through his art’s mystery, to our glance.81
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That such tributes betrayed a tendency among idealists to see the artist as an instrument of God is demonstrated by the following poem by University of California student Mary Bell:

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The gleaming opal that he [the artist] holds within his hand—
   The everlasting glory of the sunset
Emanating like God’s voice from Heaven—
   The varied soul, with countenance of light—
To him all color lends its charm mysterious

Above the realm of sound—as light and love
Bless human hearts and souls—the artist’s canvas
Glow neath the brush. By that same means that trees
And flowers have voiced God’s thought in varying hues,

The artist knows the meeting place of Heaven and earth.
God’s thought in nature—God’s thought revealed in art!82
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For idealists, belief in the religious instruction of art and in the divine work of the artist was linked to the conviction that aesthetics or art was morally enlightening. For example, an anonymous Vassar student claimed that “painting and sculpture, . . . so far as their evident purpose is to incite in us an admiration for the beautiful, become, from their very nature, mighty agents of virtue.”83 A.V.K., a schoolmate, wrote an article titled “Elaborate Aesthetic Culture, A Help to the Activity of the Moral Nature.” Therein this collegian observed that “in the study of aesthetics, certain powers are developed, and certain feelings called into play which seem especially conducive to moral elevation.”84

A major stimulus for student reflection on religious and moral themes were fine arts courses. Harry Brown, Harvard class of 1890, copiously recorded Charles Eliot Norton’s “Fine Arts 3” homily on the moral foundation of national pride. Brown’s notebook entry for March 9, 1889, states that “the standards of morality were less high then [James Boswell’s England] than now, but it would be no less praiseworthy now to be pure in thought, and to avoid indecent allusions, to avoid profanity, to avoid in talking with intimate friends what you would avoid in talking with a delicate and refined woman.”85 Later that day, Brown recorded that “the most dangerous thing in the world, Herodotus says, is to tell a lie; and the next is to owe a debt, because, among other

82 Mary Bell, “The Artist,” The University of California Magazine 4, No. 6 (October 1898): 575, University of California, Bancroft Library (BL).

83 “Moral Influence of Painting and Sculpture,” 8.

84 A.V.K., class of 1880, “Elaborate Aesthetic Culture, A Help to the Activity of the Moral Nature,” The Vassar Miscellany 9 (February 1880): 224, VCA.

reasons, the debtor is so often obliged to tell lies . . . . Lying is a very general vice; it exists everywhere. It is the vice of feebleness, of cowardice; it is the vice of the man who has no self-respect.”

Whether listening to Norton’s digressions on eighteenth-century British biographers or taking in his more deliberate lectures on ancient Greek historians, students heard character-forming themes.

Norton’s injunction to take the moral life seriously was linked in his mind with the expression of intellectual vitality. Brown’s class notes for September 29, 1888, state that “if you enlarge and invigorate the intellectual life, you are at the same time enlarging and invigorating the moral life. A man may enjoy art and poetry in an intellectual way; the sensual enjoyment may be his; but the possession of the full enjoyment requires a moral adaptation to them.”

Another of Norton’s students, James Paton, Harvard class of 1884, recorded that “it is by their moral ideas that the place of every nation is determined in [the] scale of civilization, not by intellectual development, which can never take the place of moral worth. It of course does not follow that intellectual excellence is [in] any respect to be despised, only it must not be unduly exalted. Both intellectual and moral excellence is necessary to a high development.”

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86 Ibid., 275.
87 “Even the lazy and indifferent among Professor Norton’s many pupils now cheerfully admit that they got more good out of his courses than they were aware of at the time. This was inevitably the case because the constant distinction between what is fine and what is not, with the underlying reasons, cannot fail to have its effect in other directions than that to which it is immediately applied.” Edward Robinson, “Value of the Study of Art to the Students in Colleges and Universities,” Bulletin of the College Art Association of America 12 (1918): 101.
90 James M. Paton, “Notes in Fine Arts VI,” (n.d.), Box 479, 39, HUA. For a more complete discussion of Norton’s theory of the fine arts, see Charles Eliot Norton, “Educational Value of the Fine
Continuing a tradition that in America stretched back to the antebellum period, students in the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s freighted art with religious significance and normative concerns. This tendency was stimulated by the moral objectives underlying fine arts courses, as the case of Charles Eliot Norton makes clear.

II

Many humanists, college presidents, and commentators outside the academy shared idealist students’ interest in the moral resonance of the fine arts. In an article on “The Relations of Art to Education,” Yale art historian James Hoppin declared that “true aesthetic culture develops those feelings and those tendencies of mind that are thus favorable to virtue, and good manners, and even a higher faith.” Echoing this line of thought was Pennsylvania State College English Professor Abraham H. Espenshade, who argued that “art has . . . an important bearing upon the manners, the conduct, the character,—upon the whole life of a people.” University of Wisconsin President John Bascom, who wrote the elegant Aesthetics; or the Science of Beauty, explained that “the love of the beautiful is often a powerful auxiliary of virtue, by engaging the faculties in an ennobling form of activity, thus at once preparing the ground against vicious

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92 Norton was not unique in his normative approach to art. See Stankiewicz, “Virtue and Good Manners,” in Smyth and Lukehart, Early Years, 183-193.


inclinations, and bringing the mind nearer to the yet higher intuitions and enjoyments of right action.” And cultural commentator George Hickey stated that “its [art’s] vocation is to elevate by the treatment of noble themes, to convey moral and even religious lessons.”

Such enthusiasm for art’s didactic potential does not suggest that observers were of a single mind, though they often did share underlying commitments. In his *Principles of Art*, John C. Van Dyke, art critic and Rutgers professor of the history of art, wrote in 1887 that the notion of teaching morality through art is a “trifle antiquated and has long outlived its usefulness.” To the question of what then should be the proper relation between art and morality, Van Dyke answered that “morality is a matter of political or ethical science and has only a passive bearing on the arts. It must not be transgressed. Painting need not preach, but it must listen to and respect moral truth. There must of necessity be a morality of art, but there cannot be an art of morality.”

Van Dyke was not alone in making the distinction between art that honors “moral truth” and the “art of morality.” Washington Gladden, famed Congregational clergyman and Social Gospeler, wrote in his *Relations of Art and Morality* that “it is not necessary that the artist, whether he be painter or poet or storyteller, should preach or baldly moralize; he need not draw out the lesson for us in didactic form; . . . but we do demand that the artist who deals with human life shall not divest himself of his humanity; and that

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95 John Bascom, *Aesthetics; or, the Science of Beauty* (Boston: Crosby and Nichols, 1862), 8.
96 George Hickey, *Art and Heart* (Lansing, 1896), 169.
97 John C. Van Dyke, *Principles of Art* (New York: Fords, Howard & Hulbert, 1887), 188.
98 Ibid., 190.
he shall not conceal his sympathy with goodness and purity and honor.” Observers like Van Dyke and Gladden shared a similar Christian view of aesthetics that enabled them to insist that art be moral, but criticize it if it was moralistic.

III

Idealists’ penchant for art that instructs the conscience was part of a general, if fragile, consensus on the ennobling character of aesthetics during the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s. But a consensus does not mean that everyone agreed with this approach to art. Indeed, running below the rhetoric of a moral art were fingerlike fissures that were poised to fan out and become calamitous cracks. Suggestive of these deeper disagreements is an essay that appeared in the *Vassar Miscellany* titled “The Relation of Aesthetics to Religion.” Therein an anonymous writer warned that “we are drifting back to the heathen idea, to the romantic ideal, that aesthetic beauty is a synonym for spiritual beauty, and that a poetical rapture is the highest feeling of which the heart is capable. Our religion is becoming one of incense, chants and sweet melodies, a religion of beauty which ignores any dark and awful background.” This student opposed an aesthetic religion because she feared a return to the paganism of Greek antiquity, wherein “Beauty was the divinity of the Greeks, the love of art was their worship and grace was the shrine before which they knelt in adoration.”


100 “The Relation of Aesthetics to Religion,” *The Vassar Miscellany* 8 (June 1879): 468, VCA.

101 Ibid., 467.
Critics tended to judge any aesthetic distinction as signaling the corruption of religion by art.\textsuperscript{102} Writing in the \textit{Vassar Miscellany} in 1883, C.G.L. pointed out that “the fact that a thing is artistic is not an all-sufficient recommendation. When we place a picture on our walls or a poem on our shelves because a touch of genius or a flowing rhythm makes it attractive, when, if stripped of these, we would hardly think it worthy of our ash barrel, we have practically denied the existence of any moral standard of right and wrong, and may break the whole Ten Commandments if we do it artistically.”\textsuperscript{103}

Not every skeptic chose such direct and sober means of criticism.\textsuperscript{104} Claire Williams, Smith College class of 1911, put her doubts to verse:

\begin{quote}
A Commonplace Person went out one day
To learn to be artistic,
And many she found to show her the way
Wonderful, shadowy, mystic.

‘Now Art,’ said they, ‘is another World,
Which the Commonplace ne’er may enter;
Transcendent, intangible, woozy, weird;
A World of which Soul is the centre.

‘Here nothing is good that you ever can use;
You must not burden your Soul
With petty details like the things that are real;
Else how can you reach the goal?
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{103} C.G.L., class of 1886, “Some Aspects of Modern Art,” \textit{The Vassar Miscellany} 12 (March 1883): 234, VCA.

\textsuperscript{104} Many students who did not write for their school’s serious literary periodicals did employ more humorous sources. At Harvard, the premier humorist magazine was \textit{The Lampoon}; the University of California featured \textit{The Blue & Gold}. 

37
‘Learn to feel Beauty’s ecstatic thrill,
And to whisper, all-awed, ‘This is Art,
Which reveals to my Soul what was hidden before,
(And be sure you say Soul, not Heart).

‘For unless you can feel and unless you can thrill
At this other World’s revelation

In the Souls of the Chosen Few who know,
You are hopelessly commonplace—‘
The Person waited to hear no more,
But silently hid her face,

And fled to Outer Darkness; and there
She sat and thought for a while:—
And the gloom of the Darkness scattered before
The Commonplace Person’s smile.  

Collegians skeptical of aesthetic religion and of art were part of a larger gathering
of dissenters during the 1880s and 1890s that generally conceived of art as either tending
toward or inhabiting decadence. The Episcopal priest Clement Butler, writing in the
Church Review in 1885, stated that “when we look for the true moralizing ministry of art,
we find but little of it in comparison with its overwhelming influence in favor of
superstition and licentiousness.” Writing on the “Decadence in Modern Art,” English
positivist journalist and politician Frederic Harrison supported Butler in casting his
judgment in rather broad terms: “In literature, in drama, in painting, in sculpture, even in
architecture and in music, we are now bidden to admire what is simply novel; and the test
of true genius is discovered to be the disgusting or the eccentric.” The consequence,

105 Claire Williams, “About College,” The Smith College Monthly 17 (January 1910): 222, SCA.

background to this article can be gleaned from Frederic Harrison, “Christianity at the End of the Nineteenth
according to Baptist minister T. Harwood Pattison, “is not that we have too little taste, but that we [have] become aesthetic overmuch.”\textsuperscript{108} Viewing art as a corrupting influence upon Christianity, and ancient art as potentially corrosive to faith, Pattison admitted to be “of the number who believe that it would be no loss to the Christian world if all [of the artistic treasures of] Palestine were sunk in the Mediterranean to-morrow.”\textsuperscript{109}

Not all art critics were tendentious. Gladden, for instance, thought that aestheticism’s followers had simply carried humankind’s innate love of beauty too far: “If our modern votaries of beauty were content simply to reclaim for that divinity the rights of which she has been robbed, all would be well. Instead of that, they are pushing now to have her exalted to the throne of life; to elevate the standards of taste above the standards of morality; to put aestheticism in the place of Christianity.”\textsuperscript{110} For many students of Gladden’s disposition, it was not art per se that was the problem; it was that for some art was replacing religion.\textsuperscript{111}

Students who worried about the idolization of art were not principally mimicking their elder counterparts’ disapproval of certain cultural tendencies; they were responding to real developments within their own ranks. For example, Daniel Mason, who studied at Century,” in J. Vyrnwy Morgan, ed., \textit{Theology at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century} (Boston: Small, Maynard, and Co., 1900), 1-31.


\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 331.

\textsuperscript{110} Gladden, “Christianity and Aestheticism,” 19.

Harvard during the 1890s, explained that “the inspiring quality of Norton’s ‘Fine Arts 3’ and ‘4’ lay in their attitude rather than their subject matter—in his power to make you feel by the contagion of example that beauty was the supreme value in life.”112 George Edward Woodberry, one of Norton’s most devoted disciples, dedicated his long Phi Beta Kappa poem to his mentor:

Fain would I paint for coming youth to view
Him whose lone light, a generation through,
The fairest flower of Harvard to him drew,
And was our prophet of the life ideal.
He through himself best made his great appeal,
Lover of beauty found, in every art,
And that fair treasure could to us impart,
The loveliness that shall eternal be,
The spirit of divine antiquity

Ah, long ago the inexorable years
Dismissed us to life’s labor with our peers,
Yet not from him divided did we go;
His counsel stayed us; still would memory show
The man we honored, who, all else below,
Laying of character the cornerstone,
Taught us, in this rude world, to stand alone; 113
……………………………………………

And Ellery Sedgwick, who, like Mason, studied under Norton in the 1890s, reminisced that for him “Beauty became not aesthetic satisfaction merely but took her place among the Moralities.”114


IV

Disagreeing with the critics was Smith College professor of art history Alfred V. Churchill, who insisted that the problem was not that the age was “aesthetic overmuch,” but that it left too many people without a modicum of aesthetic refinement. “I ask you,” he began, “how many men and woman [sic] you have personally known who were in peril of being drugged into quiescence by overdoses of art? There are thousands among us who run the risk of a brutish indifference to one who is in any such danger as that.”

From Yale Hoppin agreed: “there is nothing more urgently needed in America, than to erect a spiritual kingdom, in opposition to the oppressive kingdom of materialism that overrides everything.”

Although Churchill and Hoppin meant to combat commercial materialism with art and the appreciation of culture, their language suggested that art had, as the critics maintained, threatened to replace Christianity with a non-theistic religion. In a paper read before the College Art Association in 1915, Churchill indicated as much when he stated that “we are also coming to perceive, slowly, that the spiritual life is not limited to the exercises of religion, not at least in the narrower sense of that term as ordinarily employed.”


115 Alfred V. Churchill, “Fine Art As a Requirement for the Bachelor’s Degree,” (n.d.), in Alfred V. Churchill Papers, SCA.


George Raymond, noted educator and art critic, attested to art’s inclusion in the spiritual kingdom. Although Raymond was ordained as a Presbyterian pastor and studied theology at the redoubtable Princeton Theological Seminary, he occasionally spoke in ways that contributed to the sense that art could at least function like religion, if not actually be religion. “In times of intellectual and spiritual storm and stress,” he began, “when night is above and waves below and winds behind and breakers ahead, its [art’s] voice can sometimes speak peace to the troubled waters, and bring a great calm; and then, in the blue at our feet, we can see not only a little of the beauty of a little of the surface of the little star in which we live, but something also of the grandeur of all the stars of all the universe.”

Here was art functioning as consoler of tension and provider of cosmic perspective. Such remarks leave little doubt why art could appear to some students and cultural critics like a fraudulent religion.

There were good reasons why the stray remarks of Hoppin, Churchill, and Raymond could be taken as evidence for the case against art and aesthetic religion. The concluding twenty years of the nineteenth century witnessed the rise of an “Aesthetic Movement” that elevated the beautiful and refined elements of high culture to a new level. Critics had a name for this new level—it was decadence.

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119 Decadence is identified as one of the primary characteristics of the Aesthetic Movement of the 1890s. See Amy Cruse, *After the Victorians* (London: George Allen, 1938), 44-55; Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 26-27. Also, see Sarah Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age*
tried and found guilty for homosexual practices, the movement’s indifference to morality seemed to gain credibility. Thus Gladden warned that “no subtler or more dangerous foe of civilization is now abroad than the moral indifferentism which infests so much of our art; and which accustoms us to look coolly and curiously on the plastic forces of human character, caring little, as Taine says, whether they are good or evil; which is amused with tracing the ‘bent’ of human dispositions, and equally pleased whether it is upward or downward.”

Gladden occasionally fulminated at a tendency in art that others had coolly diagnosed. According to Frederic Harrison, “the essential claim of ‘modernity’ is to assert the absolute independence of Art, and to defy any sort of condition of limit, whether of tradition, philosophy, morality, or even good sense.” Norton agreed: “It is the creed of a powerful school of artists, perhaps the predominant school at the present day [1888], that art and morality are absolutely independent, and that it is an impertinence to ask for anything in a work of art more than that it should be well executed.”

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120 Although Wilde was never charged with sodomy, he was convicted of “gross indecency,” which was connected to his homosexual activity.

121 Gladden, Relations of Art and Morality, 50.


Norton, a moderate in the debate over the relation of art to morality, argued that art required moral choices, “[thus] the selection of theme, motive, subject, is as much part of the artist’s work as the character of the form which he gives to it.” But critics of the decadents could not be comforted by the notion that art required moral judgment. These individuals demanded that art have an overriding mission, that it manifest a purpose beyond artistic expression, that it serve a cause greater than itself. Gladden put it thus: “In all ages since [the time of ancient Greece], the best work has been done in all the arts by men who fed their strength at the highest sources. Love of country, love of humanity, love of truth, love of God—these may furnish inspiration for great art.” “Art must have some inspiration above itself; when it turns its look inward and begins to be absorbed in contemplating itself, its arm is palsied and its work is done.”

In America, the 1880s and 1890s did indeed witness a growing interest in a variety of art forms, symbolized by what historians have called “the Aesthetic Movement.” While the actions of decadents exaggerated the movement’s immoral impact, a fundamental change in the conception of art had taken place. Where in the antebellum period the work of American artists often left their audience “‘impressed with the most overwhelming convictions of the immortality of the soul,’” the last third of the nineteenth century saw art move in a more areligious direction. For some college

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126 Quoted in Harris, Artist in American Society, 135.

127 For a discussion of the “agnostic religion of art” in the Gilded Age, see Kathleen Pyne, Art and the Higher Life: Painting and Evolutionary Thought in Late Nineteenth-Century America (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 48-134.
students, the agnostic tenor of the times led to the adoption of an autonomous conception of beauty that functioned as the supreme principle of life.

V

Despite the criticism of some students and cultural commentators, the aesthetic sensibility made its way into the classroom on the wings of vaulted oratory. “The love of beauty, the service of it, the production of beautiful things are the test and measure of the true worth of the individual, and of the nation,” intoned Norton. “They are the final measure of civilization. All its other acquisitions, wealth, power, the mastery of nature, social institutions, religious beliefs, even intelligence itself, are in the long run of concern only as they enable men to live beautifully.”

The aesthetic sense was also conveyed through examinations. A test administered at Harvard in the academic year 1874-75, in “Fine Arts 1,” asked students to “Define the meaning of the term Ideal Beauty.” The following year, students in the same course were asked, “In what respect is the ideal landscape of the Italian religious painters to be considered right and beautiful; and how is it limited?” And in the academic year 1897-98, in “Fine Arts 3,” Norton called students to think about the relation of beauty in the Fine Arts to beauty of conduct and character. ‘It suited the essentially Greek character of Plato’s philosophy to dwell upon the goodness of beauty and the beauty of goodness, on the morality of art, and the artistic nature of morality’ . . . —Sir A. Grant. ‘For the sake of that which is beautiful’—the highest expression which Aristotle has ror [sic] the moral motive.’ ‘A brave man will endure fearful things as he ought and as reason bids him for the


129 Fine Arts 1, 1874-75, Exams, Box 1, HUA.

130 Fine Arts 1, 1875-76, Exams, Box 1, HUA.
Norton was not the only humanist who seemed intent on transmitting the importance of beauty to his students. H. Heath Bawden, who taught “Psychology of Aesthetics” as professor of philosophy at Vassar, asked his students to “Define art. Define beauty.” A few questions later, Bawden puzzled his students with “’the drawing is incorrect, but full of feeling.’ ‘The performance (musical) was inaccurate, but full of fire.’ In each of these judgments the first predicate refers to form, the second to content. Is the standard or criterion of beauty a formal one or one which involves the content of the work of art? State what seems to you the principles which should govern the determination of the answer to this question.”

Apparently interested that students grapple with beauty, Bawden queried: “Beauty seems to be in inverse ratio to utility and often to ethical significance. How would you undertake to solve this apparent paradox?” At the University of California, Professor Alexis Lange asked his students in “Philosophy of Art” “What is beauty in art?” And at Wellesley, as late as 1908, Instructor Edith Rose Abbot asked her students “What do you consider the most satisfying treatment of the following qualities in fifteenth century art? Prove the discussion by illustration. Dignity, tenderness, power, poetry, beauty.”

131 Fine Arts 3, 1897-98, Exams, HUA.
132 Course D, Psychology of Aesthetics, Exam Questions (May 27, 1905), Student Materials, Box 179, VCA.
133 Ibid.
134 Alexis F. Lange Papers, “Lectures on Goethe,” C-B 981, Carton 1, BL.
135 Edith Rose Abbot, Art 3 Examination (June 1908), WCA.
As one of the enduring themes of aesthetics, students commonly encountered beauty in their textbooks. For example, Professor Anne Morgan had her students in “Aesthetics” read William Knight’s *The Philosophy of the Beautiful*.\(^{136}\) Therein Knight defined beauty as objective and subjective, then proceeded to discuss several arguments against the view that beauty is wholly objective. Under the first point students read that “our judgments and feelings as to Beauty are wholly due to custom or habit, that they are formed by education and inheritance.”\(^{137}\) The second argument held that beauty is that which produces pleasure. Here shrewd readers would have detected some impatience on the part of the author. “To all intents this [argument of beauty as private pleasure] is an abandonment of every attempt to theorise upon the subject.”\(^{138}\) Knight continued: “A theory . . . is an attempt to explain by some sort of intellectual construction the obvious phenomena of experience. This, on the contrary, is the je ne se quoi, or the agnostic doctrine.”\(^{139}\) A third view identified beauty with symmetry and proportion. And here again Knight’s judgment intruded: “To place the essence of Beauty in harmony or symmetry alone, or in the fitness with which one thing is adjusted to another, is to raise a mere condition into the rank and dignity of a cause.”\(^{140}\) The fourth theory was that of utility, which Knight judged to be “as meaningless an assertion [in evaluating beauty] as

\(^{136}\) See *The Wellesley College Calendar*, 1892-93 (Wellesley: Wellesley College), 40, WCA.


\(^{138}\) Ibid., 35.

\(^{139}\) Ibid.

\(^{140}\) Ibid., 36.
that it consists in what is not useful.”141 Fifth, to the theory that explained beauty by its
association with other more desirable things, Knight responded in characteristic fashion:
“The very rise of the principle of association, its commencement, is a sign of the
existence of something which governs association ab extra.”142 Careful readers would
have noticed that while Knight acknowledged various theories of the beautiful, he
seemed unwilling to allow any one of them to explain the phenomenon in its entirety.143

While the significance of beauty to students cannot be ascertained with
mathematical precision, there is good evidence that suggests some measure of
internalization took place, a process whereby eager students made this concept their own.
Consider the case of Mary Ella Whipple, Wellesley class of 1879. Recorded in Whipple’s
notebook that she kept from 1873-1889 are extensive comments on beauty under the
Keatsian subtitle, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty.” Drawn to the mystery in nature,
Whipple stated that “the physical world is God’s great kindergarten and the beauty we
see in it his truth.” She asked: “Do we ever hear the ripple of the waves on yonder
‘point,’ and listen to the many dialogues of the spring birds without feeling that there is in
there a hidden meaning?”144 However enthralling, nature’s beauty could not be compared
with “intellectual” beauty, especially that expressed in the arts. Hence Whipple queried:
“Is not God’s greatness more accorded to us . . . in a Raphael . . . than in the face of any

141 Ibid., 37.
142 Ibid., 42.
143 Ibid., 46-47. Further insight into Knight’s philosophy of the beautiful can be seen in William
144 Mary Ella Whipple, class of 1879, “Notebook, 1873-1889,” n.p., WCA.
beautiful woman he chose to paint for a Madonna? In a Beethoven more than in the musical throat of a bird?”  

Whipple’s notebook is significant not just because it shows a student reflecting at length on one of the perduring themes in the fine arts; it is crucial because it reveals a student’s attempt to hierarchically order her meditations. After stating that “the creative power God has put in man” was “more beautiful than any material thing he has created,” Whipple ultimately effaced the difference by stating that in art, as in nature, “beauty is truth.” She then introduced “a third note in the chord, the beauty of the moral world.” Preserving the nature motif, Whipple wrote that “among all the wilderness there blossom flowers of purity, modesty, and courage more beautiful than lily, violet or columbine in the external world. This moral beauty is living truth.” The fourth and presumably highest level of truth was reserved for spiritual beauty. “Beauty is spiritual,” Whipple declared, “and in spiritual things we have it unalloyed, unembodied, in its very quintessence. ‘Love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,’—these are beauty . . . . The thought of God, growing in us from the first pale gleam of the morning to the perfect day, is the beauty of beauties, the truth of truths.”

145 Ibid.

146 As is true with the writings of more systematic thinkers, students’ formulations were not always completely logical or consistent. Nevertheless, the main lines of student thinking are clear enough.

147 Whipple, “Notebook.”

148 Ibid.

149 Ibid.
Margaret Hamilton Wagenhals, Smith class of 1903, also was drawn toward God
by way of her thoughts on beauty. In a poem published in the *Smith College Monthly* in
1901, Wagenhals wrote:

> Beauty is everywhere, we see it budding
> With the warm new-born leaves of early spring;
> Sparkling in sun-kissed summer streams; and glowing
> In meadows hushed with autumn’s golden wing.
> .................................................................
> Lying on the purple slopes of distant mountains,
> Muffled in clouds, or outlined sharp and clear,
> From which our thoughts, up to their summits climbing,
> Leap to the heaven that seems to lie so near.150

Students like Whipple and Wagenhal were not just content to answer questions
about beauty on their exams, ruminate on it in their notebooks, read it in their books, or
exalt it in their poems; they also wished for its incorporation into the architecture and
curriculum of their collegiate institutions. At Vassar, E.L. Garrett, class of 1899, wrote a
whole essay on “The Value of Aesthetics in College.” Therein she argued that
“college is dependent upon beauty to a degree which it little suspects for the promotion of
its very end and aim. This end is two-fold, to impart general culture and to prepare for
creative work . . . . In no less degree should such considerations prevail in the
construction of the college buildings, whose beauty should not be lightly sacrificed to
purposes of durability or utility. For they have an educational value for every student,
employee and visitor; they stand as much as did the old Greek temples for embodiments
of the ideals of the nations and communities which built them.”151 At the University of

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151 E.L. Garrett, class of 1899, “The Value of Aesthetics in College,” *The Vassar Miscellany* 27
(June 1898): 444-445, VCA.
California, H.M. Wright, class of 1894, wrote that “there should be . . . a course of lectures on the history and significance of the successive schools and tendencies . . . in the several branches of the Fine Arts, together with incidental instruction in elementary technical details, and inclusive as well of such lectures as may serve to emphasize the correlation of the Arts with the principles of social and aesthetic development.”

Archival material from six prominent collegiate institutions suggest that an aesthetic sensibility did make its way into the curriculum: Professors wrote up exams with beauty as a central analytical subject; assigned books that explored the theory of aesthetics; and lectured on beauty’s significance for the entire civilization. Such a concerted pedagogical effort could not but have had its effect. In private as well as public writing, students of the late nineteenth century reflected the importance of aesthetics by using it as a prism through which to see the hand of God. And for a few students, art ascended to the place of religion and functioned as the preeminent priest.

VI

In a cultural context in which aesthetic concerns had successfully shaped curricular matters, it is not surprising to note a marked growth in college officials’ interest in the fine arts. In his first address to the trustees of Vassar College, founder Matthew Vassar included in his aims for the college “Aesthetics, as treating of the

152 H.M. Wright, class of 1894, “Art in the University,” The Berkeleyan 1 (February 3, 1893): 6, BL.

153 The most useful history of art remains that of Priscilla Hiss and Roberta Fansler, Research in Fine Arts in the Colleges and Universities of the United States (New York: Carnegie Corporation, 1934), 3-31.
beautiful in Nature and Art, and to be illustrated by an extensive Gallery of Art.”¹⁵⁴ Vassar College’s Annual Catalogue for 1869-70 stated that “an opportunity will be afforded every student in the regular course, previous to the middle of the Sophomore year, of receiving a course of elementary instruction in Drawing from the Professor of that art, without extra charge.”¹⁵⁵ Students in their junior and senior years enjoyed “Lectures on the Theory of Art” and “Lectures on the History of Art.” In 1877 Vassar established a separate collegiate School of Art capable of granting its own diplomas.¹⁵⁶ The result? From 1869 to 1905, the percentage of distribution of Vassar student electives in art rose sharply, from 11.6 to 23.3 percent.¹⁵⁷

Apparently inspired by Vassar’s example, Wellesley founded an independent School of Art in 1878. Scholars have noted the rapid growth in Wellesley’s art library, evinced in the collection of “stereoscopic views, photographs, graphic arts, and painting.”¹⁵⁸ The Wellesley Calendar for 1888, for example, reveals an extensive list of themes offered in the history of art, including the “Architecture of Ravenna,” “The Schools of Siena, Tuscany, Umbria, and Padua,” and “English Painters of the Eighteenth


¹⁵⁵ The Fifth Annual Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Vassar College (New York: Southwest Green, 1870), 19, VCA.

¹⁵⁶ Providing a brief but good study of art at Vassar is Pamela Askew, “The Department of Art at Vassar: 1865-1931,” in Smyth and Lukehart, Early Years, 57-63.


Furthering the work begun was the acquisition of Alice Van Vechten Brown in 1897 from the Norwich Art School. Within two years of her arrival, the growth in art instructors, courses, and student elections in art was such that “it was necessary to remove from the art building all classes in other subjects.” So important was art to a Wellesley education that, by 1900 undergraduates here, as in no other college in the United States, could major in the history of art.

At Harvard, the history of the teaching of the fine arts began as a distinct disciplinary unit with Norton, who in 1874-75 assumed the new post of “Lecturer on the History of the Fine Arts as Connected with Literature.” That same year, Harvard offered “Principles of Design in Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture (Fine Arts 1) by Charles Moore and “The History of the Fine Arts and their Relations to Literature” (Fine Arts 2) by Norton. Harvard’s commitment to the fine arts acquired an important institutional presence with the founding of the Fogg Art Museum in 1894-95.

At Princeton, James McCosh, who assumed the presidency in 1868, stimulated greater interest in including the fine arts in the curriculum. Major progress in this direction was achieved with the appointment of Allan Marquand as professor of art history in 1882. That same year university patrons General George McClellan and William Cowper Prime promised funds for a university museum. Prime also announced

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159 *Wellesley College Calendar* (Wellesley: Wellesley College, 1888), 41-42, WCA.


his “willingness to give to the College his collection of porcelain and pottery, ‘the finest in the country,’ as soon as a fireproof building could be provided.”

Equally significant as Prime’s gifts was a pamphlet he coauthored titled “The Establishment of a Department of Art Instruction.” Therein Prime and McClellan articulated a rather common rationale for the study of art. “Works of art,” they began, “are the only trustworthy record of—not alone the history—but of the tastes, the mental character, and the manners and customs of various peoples in various ages. Their study is the study of man in all time.” Ambitiously conceived to include art from Greece, Egypt, Assyria, Phoenicia, France, Germany, Italy, China, and Japan, art instruction at Princeton soon grew to encompass the History of Sculpture or of Painting; the genealogic history of all arts, as parts of the continuous history of the family of man; the history of periods and times, such as the fifteenth and sixteenth century of our era; the origins and characteristics of schools of painting; the decorative arts of various civilizations, ancient and modern; the history of architecture and its characteristic products; the history of works in clay, in iron, in ivory, in silk, and stuffs—in short, whatever be the special subjects of direct instruction in classes, it will be certain to benefit the student and aid him in his general education.

Developments in the study of art at Vassar, Wellesley, Harvard, and Princeton reflected a more general trend in colleges. A 1912 study by Professor E. Baldwin Smith found that of the one million students in the United States, 163,000 were enrolled in colleges that offered art courses. Of these, 145,000 studied in departments entirely dedicated to the study of the history of art. And of the 420 art history courses given

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163 Ibid., 10. Also, see David Van Zanten, “Formulating Art History at Princeton and the ‘Humanistic Laboratory,’” in Smyth and Lukehart, Early Years, 175-182.

164 William Cowper Prime and George B. McClellan, Suggestions on the Establishment of a Department of Art Instruction in the College of New Jersey (New Jersey: W.S. Sharp Co., 1882), 4, ML.

165 Lavin, Eye of the Tiger, 11.
annually in the country, 88 were offered in separate departments of the history of art.\textsuperscript{166} During these years art instruction was conducted mainly in the departments of classics, history, romance languages, biblical literature, and Semitic languages.\textsuperscript{167}

Underwriting the institutional growth in aesthetics was the widely held belief that the fine arts appealed to women’s “essential nature.”\textsuperscript{168} Thus John Raymond, the second president of Vassar, stated in his 1873 “sketch” of the college that “whatever might be added to former ideals of womanly culture on the score of breadth and thoroughness, there must be no lowering of the standard of womanly refinement and grace. The claims of aesthetic culture were therefore at once recognized; the provisions made for instruction in the arts of design and in music must be ample, and adequate time be allowed for this culture in the regular curriculum.”\textsuperscript{169} Although many educators and some students assumed that women had an innate aesthetic sense, it is also true that an appreciation of the beautiful was regarded as important for anyone claiming to be liberally educated.

VII

Despite the real growth in art courses during the years 1870-1900, and the curricular emphasis on the humanities, many humanists remained rather unimpressed with the place of art in undergraduate education. This apparently fastidious evaluation stemmed from their perception that natural science was setting a negative tone for

\textsuperscript{166} A rather extensive list of early courses organized by colleges is reproduced in Smyth and Lukehart, \textit{Early Years}, 12-36.

\textsuperscript{167} Hiss and Fansler, \textit{Research in the Fine Arts}, 27.

\textsuperscript{168} This point is nicely summarized by Mary Ann Stankiewicz, “The Creative Sister: An Historical Look at Women, the Arts, and Higher Education,” \textit{Studies in Art Education} 24 (1982): 48-56.

More specifically, humanists claimed that scientific training neglected crucial humanistic values. Abraham Espenshade, for example, argued that scientific studies fail to “recognize the important influence which the imagination and the sensibilities must inevitably exert in determining our thoughts and actions and, consequently, our degree of happiness.” He continued: “it [natural science] makes no effort to call into full and normal activity the very forces that would most tend to humanize and sweeten our lives. It, therefore, does not cultivate and stimulate our spiritual nature.”

If scientific training did not speak to the “spiritual nature” of humankind, it most assuredly could not educate. For “true education” was, above all, a symmetrical education. Thus Hoppin wrote that “true education . . . aims to produce a harmonious development of the nature, neglecting nothing essential, and cultivating nothing disproportionately, to the total exclusion of other things.” Scientific education, on the other hand, “is often in a striking degree partial and incomplete . . . . Employing almost exclusively the logical and reasoning faculties, it leaves out of account the freer intuitions of the mind and the illuminating power of the imagination. Art makes use of these, and frequently through its clear and rapid intuitions it comes at the wholeness of truth, where

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172 Hoppin, “Relations of Art to Education,” 603.
science sees but in part darkly.” According to these humanists, only a true education—that is, a humanistic education—could illumine the religious essence of humankind.

Humanists who complained that natural science did not address the spiritual nature of students were responding to a real change in the Zeitgeist of the university. Harvard’s preeminent president (and former chemist) Charles W. Eliot described the new tenor thus: “In every field of study, in history, philology, philosophy, and theology, as well as in natural history and physics, it is now the scientific spirit, the scientific method, which prevails.”

For many sensitive minds, the triumph of “the scientific spirit” evoked the specter of philosophical materialism. English man of letters William Samuel Lilly defined this threat as that outlook which renders “everything which the senses cannot verify; everything beyond the bounds of physical science; everything which cannot be brought into a laboratory and dealt with chemically” as unreal and thus unworthy of contemplation. Perceiving materialism as ominous to “human causality, human spontaneity, [and] human responsibility,” Lilly lamented that art had “bowed her sacred head to the Materialistic yoke.”

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173 Ibid., 611.

175 When many others in the academy lionized the scientist and cheered his emphasis on research, some students and humanists registered some poignant doubts. Compare my discussion with that of Veysey, Emergence, 140 ff. For humanists’ critique of science after 1910, see Reuben, Making of Modern University, 215-219.

176 William Samuel Lilly, On Right and Wrong (London: Chapman and Hill, 1891), 22. The author provides a more complete (dialogic) discussion of materialism in William Samuel Lilly, Ancient Religion
Like their older humanist counterparts, idealist students regarded natural science with skepticism. W. M. Fullerton, Harvard class of 1886, observed that “to feel, to be conscious of beauty where it really lurks, is the great thing, perhaps the greatest thing in life. And always to be asking ‘why’ or ‘how’ about everything may be truly scientific, but is not nearly so much worth the while as some people think.”177 Putatively eschewing all manner of ratiocination, Fullerton argued that “the beauty of a beautiful object is an influence to be breathed in as the air, simply because it is beautiful. Beauty is always intuitionally perceived.”178 It is clear that for Fullerton beauty had to be perceived “naturally,” for to make it the object of thought, to subject it to reason, was to remove it from life as it is lived and thus to extinguish it.179

Supporting Fullerton in his resistance to a rational and scientific study of beauty was an unidentified writer, who, on November 18 and December 2, 1908, covered Hugo Munsterberg’s lectures on aesthetics in Wellesley’s College News. In the first of these reports, the writer gave witness to the diversity of modern methods in studying beauty:

At first we saw what psychology has done to examine those objects, in nature and art which we call beautiful, and tried to see how they were constituted in size, rhythm, color, etc., so as to cause pleasure. Next we tried to study the processes in our mind and its characteristic reactions which awaken pleasure in us. We considered the theory of motor reactions, that of the stimulation of corresponding

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178 Ibid., 26.
179 Fullerton’s pursuit of beauty eventually led him to London, where he became active in aristocratic homosexual circles. Later, in Paris, he became one of Edith Wharton’s lovers. For an insightful treatment of his life in France, see Susan Goodman, Edith Wharton’s Inner Circle (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).
mental states, that of the unpractical relation necessary in observing the object of beauty, and finally the theory of fluctuation. 180

After conveying the modern complexity of the beautiful to the reader, the student asked a series of questions designed to cast doubt on the emerging conviction that psychology, as an experimental science, could exhaustively explain all aesthetic phenomena. 181 “Have we really reached the ultimate meaning of that which we call beauty? Is beauty nothing but a source of personal pleasure? Is the beautiful object created merely to arouse in the individual certain sensations, more or less refined and more or less complex, which are pleasurable.” 182 Although the student’s journalistic ethic of objectivity prevented her from turning the report into a memoir, she nonetheless divulged her own view in stating that “men feel that beauty means something more than their personal pleasure—that it has an objective value—that it is eternal. Beauty means something aside from the sensation of pleasure.” 183

Part of the reason why this student could not accept a thoroughly psychological explanation of beauty is because she imagined it connected to other, equally important, ideals, such as truth. “If beauty is only to give us pleasure,” reasoned this writer, “why should we not say, truth is merely an idea with desirable consequences. If so, there is no

180 “Prof. Munsterberg’s Lecture,” College News 8 (November 18, 1908), n.p., WCA.
183 Ibid.
objective truth, but only that depending upon . . . individual needs."184 For this student beauty and truth were inextricably linked.

In the second report, the writer drew an important distinction between psychology and an individual’s “immediate life experience.” Scientific insights, this writer observed, could be true, but not sufficient. “They are constructed to serve as a means, not an end. They are true and necessary, but not real.”185 A person’s raw experience, on the other hand, allows for a pure awareness of beauty that requires no psychological intervention. In explaining her experience of a tree, the student writes, “I do not see it [the tree] as a botanical object or a chemical one. It is not a combination of cells nor a physical object merely . . . . Every line of that tree I feel as a certain expression, as a certain suggestion. Each color means a certain rhythm, a certain repose, a certain tension, a certain exaltation. Each element comes to me as a suggestion, as something real. Not by psychophysics, but by reality, do I understand that tree in every line.”186

What is significant about this student’s analysis is not the philosophical inviolability of the argument, but rather the discrimination between rival epistemological schemes that were believed to portend considerably different outcomes. The student asks, “Do we want to believe that each experience is like a flash,—disconnected, meaningless like a dream,—chaotic and unreal? Or do we want our world organized and more than chaos,—not merely a flash-light experience, and valueless?”187 For fellow students

184 Ibid.
185 “Prof. Munsterberg’s Lecture,” College News 8 (Dec. 2, 1908), n.p., WCA.
186 Ibid.
187 Ibid.
dissatisfied with psychological explanations of the beautiful or of life in general, this student had an answer: “There is a step which we must make to reach beauty, truth, morality and religion. A step which makes us understand all transcendental idealism.”

That step, as already indicated by her previous comments, was the choice of an individual’s “immediate life experience” over psychological theories. By privileging her own experience over the abstract formulations of academic psychology this student was able to see beauty, recognize truth, and enter into a broadly religious frame of mind.

Student writing on aesthetics during the first few years of the twentieth century is marked not so much by an unwillingness to consider a new way of understanding old ideals as by a keen ability to discriminate between plausible and implausible claims made by psychologists. For instance, the writer in the College News was willing to concede that “certain objects cause us pleasure, and other objects, notably the unharmonious and ugly, displeasure.”

What this and other like-minded collegians were reluctant to accept was the notion that the old ideals of truth and beauty could be fully explained through physiological processes. “Are we willing to believe . . . the last word on the subject?”, asked a student. “Is there no absolute truth, but merely the individual preference for one statement rather than another? And in the same manner is there no absolute beauty, but merely certain combinations which are individually more preferable to us than another combination? Is there not a something there which the psychologist alone cannot

\[188\text{ Ibid.}\]
\[189\text{ Ibid.}\]
explain?”190 “After all,” this student writes, “the conviction that aesthetics begins with
psychology is a shallow one, and is an artificial and mechanical construction. There is a
way of looking on beauty objectively.”191

By now it should be clear that student idealists resisted an analytical and scientific
understanding of aesthetics because they worried that philosophical materialism would
undermine their belief in the objectivity of beauty, in its ability to be recognized across
time and space, and, significantly, in its capacity to highlight religious truths. Idealists
seemed to reason that if beauty was imperiled, if it was simply a product of culture—or
worse: if it was just the expression of someone’s neurophysiology, then so was religious
truth. Lost was any normative instruction that could be gained thereby.

VIII

There is ample evidence to support the idealist perception that natural science was
indeed encroaching upon the study of art. At Wellesley, for example, Morgan introduced
“Types of Ethical Theory” in 1892-93, a course that involved the “psychological
investigation of the laws of human mind as propaedeutic basis for theories to account for
moral experience and justify ethical methods; the doctrine of evolution applied to account
for the modes of individual conduct and the history of social and civil institutions and
customs; the types of ethical theory verified in the differing phases of ethical conduct
revealed in literature and other art records.”192 In 1895-96, Morgan offered “Psychology

190 Ibid.

191 Ibid. See Munsterberg, “Psychology and Art,” 640 ff, for support of this student’s view.
192 *The Wellesley College Calendar*, 1892-93 (Wellesley: Wellesley College), 40, WCA.
as Introductory to the Philosophy of Art,” “Elementary Studies in Aesthetics and Ethics,” and “The Philosophy of the Beautiful and History of Aesthetics.”

At Vassar, the Annual Catalogue for 1904-05 described Professor Bawden’s “Psychology of Aesthetics” as aiming to “trace the genesis of the aesthetic consciousness and the art impulse; to understand the psychological principles which underlie all forms of aesthetic appreciation, involving a study of the emotional consciousness and aesthetic imagery; to examine the psychological laws of artistic production and criticism. Especial attention is paid to the results of recent work in experimental aesthetics.”

The emergence of courses dedicated to studying aesthetic properties through psychological means does not suggest that these courses were intended to discredit the traditional foundation of art, even less that professors were motivated by some malevolent wish to exterminate more established notions of beauty. Indeed, in the great majority of cases, professors who taught these hybrid courses appear quite charitable in their views toward morality and religion, or at least sought to reconcile their modern understanding of beauty with historical precedent. Ethel D. Puffer, who taught philosophy at Wellesley, is a good example. In her 1905 book, The Psychology of Beauty, Puffer attempted to reconcile the traditional understanding of beauty with a nonreductive psychology: “This is the essence of beauty,—the possession of a quality which excites

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193 The Wellesley College Calendar, 1895-96 (Wellesley: Wellesley College), 50, WCA.  
194 The Fortieth Annual Catalogue of Vassar College (New York: A.R. Haight, 1904), 31, VCA.  
195 For example, according to Wellesley Instructor of Ethics Estelle Hurll, Anne Morgan’s thought was “distinctly theological and metaphysical; she was a deep thinker and keen logician, and above all she was imbued with the lofty Christian idealism which [Wellesley President] Dr. Durant cared most to inculcate through philosophical teachings.” Estelle Hurll, “Anne Eugenia Morgan: Her Service to Wellesley,” in Anne Eugenia Morgan Papers, n.d., WCA.
the human organism to functioning harmonious[ly] with its own nature. We can see in this definition the possibility of an aesthetic which shall have objective validity because founded in the eternal properties of human nature, while it yet allows us to understand that in the limits within which, by education and environment, the empirical man changes, his norms of beauty must vary, too.”  

Substantially the same balanced approach to beauty is seen in the works of George Santayana, who taught “Aesthetics” and “Philosophy of Art” at Harvard. Like Puffer, Santayana rejected a wholly idealized view of beauty, insisting that “Beauty . . . is a value; it cannot be conceived as an independent existence which affects our senses and which we consequently perceive. It exists in perception, and cannot exist otherwise.”

And yet Santayana maintained that beauty, as a quality in things, “had an independent existence.”

Despite these well-meaning attempts to balance a scientific understanding of beauty with the way it was approached earlier in the nineteenth century, the net effect was to cast doubt on beauty as historically it was conceived. Significantly, this meant


199 It is plausible that college students’ conception of beauty bore the imprint of earlier educational regimes. See Frank F. Frederick, “The Study of Fine Art in American Colleges and Universities; Its Relation to the Study in Public Schools,” Addresses and Proceedings of the National Education Association (Detroit, Michigan), 1901, 695-703.
calling into question such imagined characteristics as its universality, objectivity, and uniformity. Writing “On the Scientific Method in the Study of Art,” Allan Marquand made this point clear: “there is no such mystery [such as universality] in works of art. There is no super or sub rational quality in . . . art from human comprehension; . . . no hope that by this method we could ever reach judgments of permanent value, or anything like consensus of thinking minds.”

IX

American academic humanists in the Gilded Age responded to the growing sense that beauty was provincial and subjective by advocating a special place for the fine arts in a liberal arts education. Representative of this view is Thomas Lindsey Blayney, Vice President of the American Federation of Arts, who, in 1910, declared that a course in art history “should concern itself with the philosophic and historic side of the subject. As I conceive it, this course should be a senior course, capping, as it were, the whole sub-structure of the curriculum. By reason of its intimate relationship to the historical and literary disciplines, it would serve, as no other subject could, to gather into a related whole all the dropped threads of the students’ former courses.” At the University of Syracuse, School of Fine Arts Dean George Comfort recommended that lectures in the


201 Allan Marquand, “On Scientific Method in the Study of Art,” in Allan Marquand Papers, Box 10, folder 22, n.d., 3, Princeton University, Rare Books and Special Collections (RSC).

history of art be given during the last year of college and be supplemented by museums which could illustrate characteristic periods of art through casts, photographs, and engravings. According to the historian Mary Stankiewicz, “the proposed timing of these lectures would have made them parallel to the traditional senior course in moral philosophy taught by American college presidents, again confirming the moral function of art.”

Historians interested in chronicling the evolution of the humanities during the late nineteenth century have noted the emergence of the fine arts as an integrative part of the new curricular paradigm. The strongest evidence that the fine arts actually functioned in this way comes from Harvard, where many of Norton’s students commented upon the fact that his courses collected or gathered the loose strands of their education into something of a whole. (Other schools apparently followed Harvard in this respect, but the evidence here is not as compelling.)

To the extent that the fine arts functioned as the new linchpin of a liberal education, it marked a departure from the moral philosophy course, which prior to the Civil War provided students with a coherent, if pretentious, religious view of the

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204 Turner, “Secularization and Sacralization,” in Marsden and Longfield, Secularization of the Academy, 74-106.

205 See, for example, Robinson, “Study of Art,” 68 ff.

206 The evidence for some schools suggests that there was no integrative course. See, for example, the lamentation of H.A. Overstreet, “The American College Course: By a Graduate of the University of California,” Educational Review 27 (1904): 168-178.
Over the course of the nineteenth century the decline of the moral philosophy course was closely related to the expansion of the elective system and the consequent collapse of the classical curriculum, in which it held pride of place. The fine arts, though inspired by artistic, religious, and philosophical works, emphasized beauty as the supreme moral arbiter.

But ending the story with the effective replacement of moral philosophy with the fine arts fails to take adequate account of natural science and the threat that it posed to the coherence of the curriculum, to the ideals of students, humanists, and college presidents. For when the implications of this doctrine are taken seriously, idealists’ appeal to beauty loses some of its reputation for timidity. True, the new liberal creed did not contain much that antebellum Christians would have recognized. But then these individuals never had to confront a genuinely alien and threatening scientific community; quite the contrary: they enjoyed the generally amicable relationship between science and religion.

Students who were concerned about aesthetics or interested in art during the last decade of the nineteenth century could not rely on the scientific establishment for support.

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Neither, as I have suggested, could they expect affirmation from many Protestant pulpits. For many student idealists then, the threat of natural science was counteracted by patching together loose fragments from Christian, Romantic, and Transcendental sources and shaping them into an intellectual and affective worldview.\textsuperscript{210}

Like their older idealist counterparts, students who reflected on aesthetics during the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s began with the conviction that art was an effective conduit for divine revelation and an instrumental aid in moral instruction. By the 1890s, however, at the height of the Aesthetic Movement, and under the influence of humanists like Norton, student conceptions of beauty, though still cast in a normative light, became more ambiguous. Rejecting empirical analyses of art, student idealists constructed an eclectic framework within which to think about art and beauty. While their meditations might have lacked the doctrinal coherence of their antebellum predecessors, they succeeded in staving off, for at least a while, the tide of scientific materialism.

\textsuperscript{210} Like some older British and American intellectuals, student idealists in the United States retreated to idealism as a way of coping with the materialism of the age. See Pyne, \textit{Art and the Higher Life}, 127 ff.
CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE: “GIVE US HEALTH AND PURITY”

I

Princeton student Edward Strong Worcester began his “Maclean Oration” in 1895 by asserting that literature and life were inextricably linked, so that “what touches one affects the other also, and what men write and read is the best gauge of the heart-beats within.”211 The seriousness with which Worcester approached prose fiction was rooted in the conviction that “it was the most influential of literary forms.” Utilizing the common distinction between realist and idealist fiction, Worcester argued that the former “preach[ed] silently but surely the poor gospel of self-sufficiency, while in too many sin itself is painted in glowing colors or insinuating detail.”212 Openly preferring the latter, Worcester called for “‘wholesome stories that lighten the burdens and refresh the souls of men.’” “Give us health and purity,” he insisted, “fresh air and sunshine, ‘sweetness and light.’”213 Only by reading literature laden with norms, claimed Worcester, could students hope to live truly salutary lives.

211 Edward Strong Worcester, “Morality in Fiction,” The Nassau Literary Magazine 51 (October 1895): 129, Princeton University, Mudd Library (ML). The Maclean prize was traditionally given to one of the orators chosen by the Literary Societies from the Junior Class who pronounced the best English oration during commencement week. This speech appeared during Worcester’s senior year.

212 Ibid., 130.

213 Ibid., 132.
Collegians’ preference for “moral letters” was especially marked during the period 1875-1900 when literary studies were establishing a distinct identity in college curricula.\textsuperscript{214} Evidence for this can be seen in the inauguration of American literature courses at Smith (1880), Wellesley (1886), Harvard (1897), University of California (1899), among others.\textsuperscript{215} We have already seen how Gilded Age women at Vassar, Wellesley, and Smith took a disproportionate number of their classes in “English.”\textsuperscript{216} Students at Harvard enjoyed a growing number of literature courses as the century came to an end; by the 1910-11 academic year, Harvard offered undergraduates over a dozen courses like “Lives, Characters, and Times of Men of Letters, English and American,” “Eighteenth-Century Periodicals, particularly the Tatler, Spectator, Rambler and Adventurer,” and “History of English Literature from the Elizabethan Times to the Present.”\textsuperscript{217} These courses corresponded with Harvard’s “literary revival,” a phenomenon that can be seen with especial clarity in periodicals like the \textit{Harvard Monthly}.\textsuperscript{218}

Such enthusiasm for literary studies was not limited to eastern institutions. At the University of California, Professor Charles Mills Gayley reported that the Department of English offered thirty-one courses in the academic year 1894-95. “Of these, twenty-four,

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\textsuperscript{216} Hermione L. Dealey, “A Comparative Study of the Curricula of Wellesley, Smith, and Vassar Colleges,” (1915), Vassar College Archives (VCA).


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covering seventy-five hours of work (slightly more than three hours a week each for half the year), are designed for undergraduates, and seven (of two hours a week each) for graduates.”219 John Smith Lewis’ survey of 109 colleges and universities revealed that in 1890 forty-five institutions used American literary materials, up from twenty-six schools in 1870.220 The significance of this growth is that prior to 1850 literature had no special place in college curricula.

Idealist students who tended to see poetry as capable of promoting good or evil enthusiastically supported the growth in literature courses. For example, an anonymous writer in the University of California’s Berkeleyan claimed that “the skillful painting of the poet makes us love and respect the good and hate and despise the evil more intensely and more genuinely than the mere abstract fact presented in ungarnished form, could ever do.”221

One of the sources of poetry’s power resided in the person of the individual poet. An anonymous student writing in the University of California’s Occident opined that “the poet has a deeper and more stirring influence, an influence over the feelings and passions of the human heart . . . . He is licensed to treat those subjects in a manner different from the prose writer, and in a way of his own to reach the feelings, the very source of all acts, good or evil, and of all human happiness.”222 A fellow collegian concurred: “poetry has

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220 Lewis, “History of Instruction, 104.


222 “Is Byron’s Influence Pernicious?” The Occident 13 (November 4, 1887): 45, BL.
an influence and whether that influence is for good or for evil, must be largely due to the mind of him who, if he did not create, at least embellished the incidents or the characters with which he deals.”

Viewing the poet as a determinating factor in moving the reader towards vice or virtue, idealists did not shy away from identifying certain writers as “pernicious.” One student wrote that “[Lord] Byron, in his poetry, gives us nothing but his own passions, nothing but his own corrupt thoughts. Certainly there are grand and noble thoughts, and beautiful sentiments in his poems but at heart bad had overpowered the good . . . . His heroes revel in dissipation, while they are made to represent himself in their exulting over their revels. It is not so much in his obscenity, which pervades every page of his works, that his poems should be condemned as pernicious, but in the more secret and less expected snares of his teaching.”

James Murray, professor of English at Princeton, agreed:

It has been the fashion in certain quarters to praise Byron’s Don Juan as containing the noblest strains of poetry, as marking the highest reach of his poetic genius. We must protest against such a judgment . . . . This poem stabs in open or secret thrusts with such an air of cool and haughty scorn every principle of honor, every source of moral purity, every sweet and wholesome view of life, that we do not hesitate to say the best and purest souls not only have no joy in it, but must fling it away with a scorn as indignant as his was bitter and cruel.

Idealists’ belief in the normative nature of prose fiction and poetry was premised on the hoary idea that good literature—by definition—possessed larger “philosophical”


224 “Is Byron’s Influence Pernicious?” 46-47.

ambitions.226 Answering the question “Is the Philosophizing Tendency of Present English Works of Imagination Injurious to them as Works of Art?” in the “negative,” H.R.R. claimed that a book is not “injured because it has a moral flavor. On the contrary,” the writer pointed out, “the ethical element places within reach of the novelist a new power.” Hence “the philosophizing tendency of modern literature has made works of imagination thoughtful, without impairing their power to please.”227 But not all students agreed. Responding to the proposed question in the affirmative, C.P.S claimed that art has no place in the writings of the “philosophizing novelist; plot and character are supplanted by opinions; the novel has become a treatise, or a series of lectures,—not professing to please, but to instruct.”228

Part of the problem for student critics was that philosopher novelists tended to write plots so driven by a moral argument that little was left for the student to do but accept or reject the case set before them. Hence C.P.S. complained that “no temptation is offered to our curiosity to seek further. In the disquisitions of a Kingsley, or an Eliot, no suggestive bits of thought are left for us to finish—no clues for us to follow out in

226 “Every novel should have some grand, important lesson to impart. The evils of life are so many and various that the influence of the novel is certainly needed on the side of justice, truth and right. Hence, after all, the most important characteristic of the good novelist is an enthusiastic love of right and a burning hatred of wrong.” G.F. Greene, class of 1882, “The Ideal Novelist,” The Nassau Literary Review 36 (September 1880): 53, ML. Concurring with Greene is schoolmate A.G. Cameron, class of 1886, “Moral Tendencies in Literature,” The Nassau Literary Magazine 41 (May 1885): 293-295, ML. This view was not restricted to Princeton: for Harvard, see W.M. Fullerton, class of 1886, “L’art Pour L’art again,” The Harvard Monthly 1 (November 1885): 72-78, HUA.


228 C.P.S., “Is the Philosophizing Tendency of Present English Works of Imagination Injurious to Them as Works of Art?” The Vassar Miscellany 6 (January 1877): 60, VCA.
The deeper quandary was that for some collegians didacticism could not be reconciled with the artistic elements of a good novel. “We notice first that the very breadth of view which the philosophizing novelist possesses is injurious to the artistic effect of his work; he cannot bring himself down to real interest in the events and personages of his story. In the portrayal of any character, . . . his intense conception of duty forbids the yielding of one iota to pleasingness of effect.” More important than who “won” the debate, or how many students supported one or the other side, is the fact that students took “philosophical novels” seriously enough to sustain a debate.

Such disputations would have made perfect sense to humanists of the late nineteenth century. Although not all of them sided with student idealists in their classes, many agreed with their basic contention: that literature achieves its highest purpose when it contains a moral lesson. James Murray put it thus:

We do not say it is the business of the poet or moralist or essayist to turn preacher, and make his poetry or his novel or essay a sermon . . . . But this we do claim, and make an appeal to all the greatest works of literature to justify us. Literature never strikes her deepest notes except as the great eternal laws of righteousness, which give human life its deepest significance, which make man so noble in the scale of being, and invest all his relations with so undying pathos, form the basis of the thought or feeling, or at least harmonize with them. No man believes that Dante wrote his Inferno to teach eschatology; that Shakespeare wrote his Macbeth to unfold the awful retributions of the human conscience, or that Goethe wrote his Faust to give us a view of the plan of redemption. This was not the aim. It need not have been. But the greatest poems always must embody this material; not strictly because it is such material as may be used, but such as must be used if the deepest aesthetic chords in the human soul are to be touched.231

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229 Ibid., 61.
230 Ibid., 60-61.
231 Murray, Study of English Literature, 19.
Students’ moral sensibility shaped their understanding of how literature changed over time. Alex T. Ormond, Princeton University class of 1877, who would go on to serve his alma mater as a philosopher, claimed that eighteenth-century writers like Laurence Sterne and Henry Fielding lacked serious “moral purpose.” In describing Fielding’s ethical transgressions, for instance, Ormond lamented that “his characters are men and women in whom appetite and passion prevail over reason and conscience. They manifest a lawlessness in the pursuit of self-gratification that clashes perpetually with the peace and welfare of others. Such a principle is the moral antithesis of that law of Christian love which imposes the obligation of self-denial in the service of our neighbor.”

Not everyone agreed that the eighteenth century was so bleak. Harriet Chalmers Bliss, Smith College class of 1899, conceded that the age was one of “hypocrisy, unbelief, and indifference,” but for her this was all the more reason to celebrate the life of Samuel Johnson, who was “not simply a moralist but a believer.” Thus Bliss regarded Johnson’s essays (especially those published in The Idler in 1761) as “a species of sermon . . . . They tell us that life is short and that therefore ‘interstitial, idle moments’ should not be allowed to fall useless to the ground; that cowardice and inactivity are folly; genius is inefficient without learning; that wealth is impotent; that perseverance is

232 See, for example, Alexander T. Ormond, Concepts of Philosophy in Three Parts (London: Macmillan Co., 1906).


necessary."\textsuperscript{235} For Bliss, Samuel Johnson was a salutary influence in a morally blighted age.

By contrast, Ormond held that the nineteenth century introduced a moral sea change when writers like Sir Walter Scott “redeemed fiction from the moral degradation into which it had fallen under Fielding and his contemporaries."\textsuperscript{236} What Ormond admired about Scott was that “the atmosphere of his stories is thoroughly wholesome and stimulating, his ideal of life is generous and pure, his moral perceptions clear, and his sympathies wholly on the side of virtue.”\textsuperscript{237} Whether considering the “skeptical” eighteenth century or the more “believing” nineteenth, collegians tended to read literature with the Solomonic principle in mind: “He that walketh with wise men shall be wise.”\textsuperscript{238}

\textbf{II}

If idealists’ formal writings are a reliable guide, novelist George Eliot figured prominently in their thinking about the ethical implications of English literature. N.P.M., Vassar College class of 1886, associated Eliot’s “Dinah,” “Bulstrode,” “Mr. Irwin,” and “Janet” with the affirmation of religion, which if not represented in an explicit way, is abundantly displayed “in pervading spirit.”\textsuperscript{239} According to this student, Eliot’s religion

\textsuperscript{235} Ibid., 104.

\textsuperscript{236} Ormond, “Moral Progress,” 5.

\textsuperscript{237} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{238} “The Influence of Poetry,” 3. For a brief but positive evaluation of students’ reading preferences, see James Canfield, “What are College Students Reading?” \textit{The Outlook} 74 (May 16, 1903): 163-166. For a more detailed description of their reading selection, see D.H. Stevens, “What College Students Read,” \textit{The Outlook} 92 (July 17, 1909): 651-652.

\textsuperscript{239} Support for this interpretation comes from Thomas G. Selby, \textit{The Theology of Modern Fiction, Being the Twenty-Sixth Fernley Lecture} (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1896), 22; and William Myers, \textit{The Teachings of George Eliot} (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1984), 17-37.
“was as broad as the rude faith of the uncouth Indian who forms his doctrine by the green earth or the blue dome of the heavens. It was as noble as the purest story of the love of the Holy Christ. And yet after all it seems but a philosophy which tinges her religious characters.”240 Like Bliss at Smith, Vassar’s N.P.M. recognized a religious message in literature: “Each of these [Eliot’s] characters is a sermon for humanity, a sermon that moves and touches us as only a sympathetic friend could. It says ‘Be noble.’”241

Not all students were so quick to grant the religious convictions of Eliot or to derive a simple message from her novels. Writing in Princeton’s *Nassau Literary Magazine* in 1885, R.H. Beattie admitted that Eliot’s oeuvre was marked by a belief in an “ethical system”; but this system influenced people through such things as “heredity, environment, tradition and experience”—not identifiable religious doctrines or creeds.242 Hence Beattie linked Eliot’s religion with a “submission to duty.” He continued: “No hope of immortality, no white-robed angels brighten her life. But instead of angels are our fellow-men. For man’s consciousness of God she substituted his consciousness of his species.”243

240 N.P.M., class of 1886, “Four Religious Characters of George Eliot’s Novels,” *The Vassar Miscellany* 14 (May 1885): 1380, VCA.


At Harvard, Robert Morss Lovett, class of 1892, conceded that “the novels of George Eliot are among the moral forces of the age.” But, he went on to point out, “in her system duty is no longer the ‘stern daughter of the voice of God,’ but the offspring of the moral sense. It draws its inspiration, not from the expectation of a Valhalla or a paradise beyond the grave, but from humanity, real and present in its needs and possibilities.”\(^{245}\) Students like Beattie and Lovett did not take the religious lesson or normative connotations in Eliot’s writings as evidence of her belief in God, but instead regarded them as testaments suggesting that they were “in the presence of a struggling soul that has not found peace.”\(^{246}\)

Collegians wrote nearly as much on Matthew Arnold as they did on Eliot. Idealists seemed especially attracted to Arnold because he held up high literary standards. Hence Fannie Maclean, University of California class of 1885, stated that “we need to read books, in which we come in contact with the best and purest thoughts of great men, so that the clear light and warmth of their thoughts may make us great in heart, in mind—kings and queens of knowledge.”\(^{247}\) The effect of Arnold’s high principles, this student believed, would lead people to fling the doors and windows of their inner person wide

\(^{244}\) Robert Morss Lovett, “George Eliot’s Ethics,” *The Harvard Monthly* 10 (June 1890): 143, HUA.


\(^{246}\) Beattie, “Ethics of George Eliot,” 331. While shrewd students were reluctant to grant Eliot the mantle of divinity, some scholars have been equally unwilling to attribute positivist proclivities to the British novelist. See, for example, Martha S. Vogeler, “George Eliot and the Positivists,” *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 35 (December 1980): 406-431.

\(^{247}\) Fannie Maclean, class of 1885, “Matthew Arnold’s Message,” *The Occident* 6 (April 24, 1884): 177, BL.
open “so that ourselves and others might enjoy its light and beauty in our everyday life.”

In admonishing each other to read books that contained the “best thoughts,” students were keenly aware of the fact that they were being taught a moral lesson. Hence Mary Buell Sayles, Smith class of 1900, noted that “Arnold is didactive [sic], eminently instructive. We are conscious of being taught by him,—admirably taught, it is true; yet we feel, when we finish an essay that we understand it fully, have grasped the point it was to make; have finished it for all time.”

Next to lofty literary standards, some collegians expressed admiration for Arnold’s skepticism. One student who went by the letter “P” put his appreciation of the British poet’s doubting proclivity to verse:

And yet though [Arnold] canst not keep Heaven’s tranquil ways:
Vast human sympathy invades thy shrine,
World-weary cries strike up and smite thy ears;
The spell falls on thee of these evil days;
The doubts and tumult of weak men are thine,
And thou art greater for thy doubts and fears.

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248 Ibid., 176.

249 Mary Buell Sayles, “Arnold and Ruskin,” The Smith College Monthly 5 (October 1897): 20, SCA.

250 See Gertrude P. Spaulding, class of 1882, The Wellesley Prelude 3 (May 14, 1892), n.p., Wellesley College Archives (WCA). Professors too seemed to have regarded Arnold’s skepticism as at least an organizing principle, if not an important theme in its own right. See, for example, Vida D. Scudder, Topical Outlines for the Study of Modern English Literature (Boston: Frank Wood, 1892), 15. For a discussion of Arnold’s doubt in the larger context of American culture, see John Henry Raleigh, Matthew Arnold and American Culture (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961), 47-87.

251 The Harvard Advocate 26 (November 15, 1878): n.p., HUA.
The doubt that attracted some students repelled others. Writing in the *Vassar Miscellany* in 1891, Margaret Floy Washburn analyzed Matthew Arnold’s poems for their ethical implications. “Arnold’s view,” she began, “is that grounded deep in the human heart is a ‘moral plan’ which has only to be followed, and all will be well.” Washburn eventually rejected this ethical system, in part because of its pessimistic and subjective character, but also because it appeared too anemic to overcome tumultuous times. She concluded her essay thus: “The man [Arnold] who could write that this world—‘Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light[,] Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help from pain, And we are here as on a darkling plain, Swept by confused alarms of struggle and flight, Where ignorant armies clash by night’—such a man has not only failed to find happiness, he has not even attained calm, and the ethical system that leads to neither is most severely a failure. It is pure and lofty, but it is not ‘that which satisfieth.’”

Further evidence of students’ shrewd and discerning minds can be seen in their commentary on Shakespeare. Eunice Fuller, Smith class of 1908, wrote a rather

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252 See Raleigh, *Matthew Arnold*, 73 ff., for a discussion of the resistance that some college officials demonstrated in responding to student demands to hear Arnold.

253 Margaret Floy Washburn, class of 1891, “The Ethics of Matthew Arnold’s Poetry,” *The Vassar Miscellany* 20 (June 1891): 313, VCA.


255 In some cases, students’ writing on Shakespeare was more complex and sophisticated than what was written by their older (and thus presumably wiser) Victorian counterparts. See, for example, J.F. Timmins, *The Poet-Priest: Shakespearean Sermons, Compiled for the Use of Students and Public Readers* (London: James Blackwood & Co., 1884), who used Shakespeare’s plays to transparently clothe moral maxims. Also, see the curious J.G. Hall, *Shakespeare vs. Ingersoll* (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers Co., 1888), for a catalogue of Shakespeare’s “religious tenets.” For a mature critique of Shakespeare written by a humanist, see “The Absence of Religion in Shakespeare,” in George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1900).
lengthy essay in the *Smith College Monthly* titled “Shakespeare’s Interpretation of Christianity.” Therein Fuller argued that Shakespeare’s plays “are not moralities and his characters do not succeed or fail in that they are or are not embodiments of his preferred variety of Christian virtues.” What impressed Fuller was that “not only was Shakspere’s idea of Christianity uncolored by sectarian prejudice, but it was untouched by any of the self-conceit of the ordinary Christian.” Fuller was not saying that there was no religious element in Shakespeare’s work; in fact, she conceded that his oeuvre possessed a certain Christian spirit. What she did maintain was that Shakespeare did not write dramas to advance ecclesiastical dogmas (like Spain’s Pedro Calderón de la Barca, for example) but instead drew upon a broad philosophical and humanistic reservoir to enrich his plays.

Students’ meditations on Shakespeare do not of course suggest that everyone found England’s bard enthralling: there are many instances of collegians tiring over Shakespeare (just as they would have wilted over any writer). These students would have found the exclamation of novelist Jean Webster’s protagonist especially apt: “It was Saturday, and Patty had been working ever since breakfast, with a brief pause for luncheon, on a paper entitled ‘Shakespeare, the Man.’ At four o’clock she laid down her

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256 Eunice Fuller, “Shakespeare’s Interpretation of Christianity,” *The Smith College Monthly* 15 (December 1907): 138, SCA.

257 Ibid., 142.

258 Many students agreed with Fuller on the role of Christianity in Shakespeare. See, for example, Alex T. Ormond, “The Christian Element in Shakespeare,” *The Nassau Literary Magazine* 32 (April 1877): 267-270, ML.
pen, pushed her manuscript into the waste-basket, and faced her room-mate defiantly.

‘What do I care about Shakespeare, the man? He’s been dead three hundred years.’”

Despite occasional expressions of academically induced frustration, students’
writing reveals a genuine interest in Shakespeare, especially in the ethical and religious
implications of his plays. For example, Mary C. Strong, Wellesley class of 1885, wrote
her senior essay on Shakespeare’s rendition of English statesman and prelate Thomas
Wolsey. After briefly describing Wolsey’s rise to political and religious power as Lord
Chancellor and Papal legate, Strong stated somewhat sententiously that “the corrupting
influence of favor and power stimulated the worst elements of his [Wolsey’s] nature, to
the weakening and destruction of the good.” If there is any doubt whether idealists like
Strong really did derive an ethical lesson from such historical figures, the following
conclusion weakens the skeptic’s case:

The lesson which he [Wolsey] teaches with his dying breath is that in order to
secure true and lasting happiness man must hold himself loyal to his king and his
God, not being misled by the lives of pleasure and ambition. His desire for
superiority and power became, by continual indulgence[,] inordinate. As a guide it
led him through paths burdened by the most despicable sins and crimes. It brought
with it vanity, deceit, hypocrisy, dishonesty, disloyalty. It destroyed the
usefulness and happiness of hundreds. It eradicated from his nature humility,
sympathy, love—all moral greatness.

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260 As with other issues, students’ interest in the religious morality of Shakespeare reflected a
larger conversation and debate occurring beyond their immediate sphere. See, for example, John H.
Ethical Significance of Shakespeare’s Tragedies,” *The Outlook* (December 1900): 990-996; and Frank

261 Mary C. Strong, class of 1885, “The Development of the Vice of Ambition as Shown in the
Character of Cardinal Wolsey,” in Course Papers, 1884-1885, n.p., WCA.

262 Ibid.
In sum, idealists cultivated a genuine interest in the moral resonance of writers like George Eliot, Matthew Arnold, and Shakespeare. While students admired these individuals’ stories, poems, and plays, they were not ignorant of writers’ particular debility or inconsistency. Time and again collegians demonstrated a keen ability to balance their appreciation of authors with a critical evaluation of their life and work.

Students’ preoccupation with the moral content of literature took place during a time in which some intellectuals in the Anglo-American world clung to a “secularized morality” after claiming belief in God otiose. Representative of this view is Felix Adler, leader of the Ethical Culture Movement. While very few students reached Adler’s terminus, many wrote in a way that suggests they believed in the supremacy of ethics over Christian faith, a consequence perhaps of Victorian society’s predilection for moral rhetoric.

III

Noticing that many collegians were attracted to normative questions in literature, educators argued for subtle means of instruction. For example, Wellesley President Caroline Hazard declared in her 1899 inaugural address that

direct influence is useless; growth that is forced is sure to be unhealthy. But the tender plant can be placed under favorable conditions for growth. There is a moral atmosphere, as well as a physical one, and this upper ether is capable of control. The channels of communication between the unseen and the visible must be kept open, and this can be effected by the will. The upward glancing of the eyes, the opening of the mind to beauty and goodness whenever seen or felt, this can be accomplished by a voluntary act. To train the mind to appreciate and to choose


and to govern,—these are the great fundamental tasks which lie at the root of all education.\textsuperscript{265}

Agreeing with Hazard was Acadia University President George Barton Cutten, who stated that “in forming character the indirect method is often more effective than the direct. The moral principles which are insinuated are more liable to find a resting place in consciousness and to be worked out in life than are those which are directly and emphatically stated.”\textsuperscript{266}

When student idealists were asked why they preferred more indirect means of moral suasion in literature, they often had a ready answer. “When it [poetry] becomes didactic and avowedly begins to teach lessons, moral or otherwise,” explained an anonymous writer in the \textit{Occident}, “it often fails to fascinate; and why? Because the mind, expecting to be artistically delighted, is not prepared for sermonizing, no matter how good and forcible that may be.”\textsuperscript{267}

In most cases, students did not find moral themes objectionable; they simply thought that didactic content should be rendered imaginatively, allowing them to recognize the truth they already knew. Hence an anonymous writer at the University of California wrote that “a novel need not always deal with good deeds, or with upright men and women as the sharers in its scheme of action. But it can influence us by conducting the authors of evil deeds to some just retribution, and by rewarding the good with some peace of mind, if not with happiness; by drawing back from what is bad, and by

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{265} Caroline Hazard, \textit{A Record of the Exercises Attending the Inauguration of Caroline Hazard, Litt. D., As President of Wellesley College} (October 3, 1899), 12-13, WCA.
\bibitem{267} “The Ideal Novel,” \textit{The Occident} 7 (October 17, 1884): 85, BL.
\end{thebibliography}
approving and sympathizing with what we in our consciences acknowledge to be worthy of emulation.”268

IV

Some of the idealists who appealed for subtle means of moral instruction and implicit forms of teaching were exploring the penumbra of an alternative ideological and religious approach to literature. One of the most suggestive examples of this interpretive bent appeared in the May 1894 edition of the Smith College Monthly. Here student Edith Hawkes groped for a definition of literature. Unlike many peers, professors, and college presidents at the time, Hawkes apparently did not conceive of literature as reaffirming Christian precepts or confirming conventional ethical beliefs. Her definition was more amorphous (and thus potentially more radical) than traditional formulations. Appealing to Dante, Hawkes wrote that the sort of literature that feeds the essence or “soul” of humankind “might be insufficiently defined as that expression which is conscious of the vagueness, the mystery, the illimitableness, and the intense reality of human experience, and which tries in form and matter to imitate this shy life.”269

Hawkes’ meditation was more than just a way of admitting that limits to language make it hard to express the ineffable in life. It was an attempt to show how literature was especially endowed to reveal the fundamental mystery of existence itself. “The disguised

268 Ibid., 86.
269 Edith M. Hawkes, “The Unearned Increment,” The Smith College Monthly 1 (May 1894): 23, SCA. One can only speculate as to where Hawkes got her ideas; she, like most students, left no direct explanation of the provenance of her beliefs. Suggestive of an answer though is Katharine Lee Bates, Vida D. Scudder, and Sophie Jewett, Outlines of Lectures on Modern English Literature (Boston: A.T. Bliss & Co., 1895-96), 16, WCA, which contains a subsection titled “The Romantic Revival,” including a “Quickened Sense of Mystery and Wonder.”
meaning [in literature],” wrote Hawkes, “may peep out shyly from behind the cloak of satire, irony, or parody; or the form may be allegorical; behind common-placeness itself a hidden meaning may lurk. This indirectness is the very soul of the subtile [sic]. It is also the salvation of the heart of literature.”

Although Hawkes’ language retained particular Christian terms like “soul” and “salvation,” her more general and important point remained elusive. What is clear is that Hawkes did not use literature as a means of praising the Christian God or hoisting moral standards; instead she approached it as a prism through which life’s spirituality could be seen.

A clearer articulation of idealists’ hermeneutic appeared in the *Nassau Literary Magazine* in October 1894. Here student Benjamin Lewis Hirshfield published his “Maclean Prize Oration” as “The Idealist in Literature.” Like his schoolmate Edward Worcester, Hirshfield was struck with the wide chasm separating realism from idealism. With the former, said Hirshfield, “we have a correct prosaic literature that represents life, but has no deeper significance and leads to nothing higher than itself.”

“Turn to the Idealist, and behold! He leads us at once into the realm of the sublime. He

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perceives with the true poet’s insight that somehow every leaf and star and man are
unified by an invisible bond; Aye, more; [sic] believing that the individual man is worth
more than any fact or law, he finds in him the one supreme phenomenon that the world
presents. There are in the soul heights and depths and expanses of outreaching mystery
which elicit his wonder and awe; there are aspirations for the unattainable to which his
sensitive soul responds with a flood of inspiriting words that rouse the heart to faith and
duty.”

Such transports were not as unusual as they might appear. One of the most well
remembered cases of poetry’s potency occurred in a Hiram Corson English class at
Cornell University, where a student is said to have had something of an otherworldly
experience. Under the influence of the mesmeric Corson, “[the student] was no longer the
sullen undutiful scholar, he was the poet and the poem, he was rapt in beauty, he was
plunged in an emotion never suspected. This was the capital experience of his life. Ever
after, poetry was his companion, his solace, his hidden joy.”

Fred Newton Scott, professor of English at the University of Michigan, recalled
wistfully that from his early years English was “my haven in the storm of passion, it was
my refuge from the terrors of life.” In English, he confessed, “that old dead world, the
world of Shakspere and Wordsworth and Tennyson, that world from which the accidents,


276 Gerald Graff, Professing Literature: An Institutional History (Chicago: University of Chicago
Press, 1987), 48. A subtle analysis of ecstatic literary experiences can be found in The Fred Newton Scott
Anniversary Papers: Contributed by Former Students and Colleagues of Professor Scott and Presented to
Him in Celebration of His Thirty-Eighth Year of Distinguished Service in the University of Michigan, 1888-
the trivialities, the carking cares have been obliterated by the hand of time, was the
stillness of the ages. Its peace, its almost miraculous beauty, the winning rhythms of its
poetry and prose, soothed my overwrought nerves. The conflicts of life seemed to be
harmonized. So closely had Scott associated poetry with religion that an inattentive
reader might have easily assumed that he was writing about Christianity as a source of
existential comfort; such a reader could not have been further from the truth. Like the
effusions of George Raymond, Scott’s unconstrained emotions demonstrate that
literature—like art—could function like religion.

In The Aims of Literary Study (1910), Corson set down one of the clearest
expressions of the spiritual ambitions of literary idealism. “The true aim of culture,” he
declared, “is to induce soul states or conditions, soul attitudes, to attune the inward forces
to the idealized forms of nature and of human life produced by art.” This spiritual
condition was to be attained not by filling the head with the “trumpery of barren
knowledge,” but by reproducing poetry “sympathetically within ourselves—in other
words, we know it [poetry] to the extent to which our own spirits respond to the spiritual
appeal which it makes to us.”


278 See Samuel Thurber, “Aims and Methods in the Study of Literature,” Education 16 (April
1896): 449-456, for an explicit example of poetry as gospel. The larger case for this phenomenon is made
by Hilary Fraser, Beauty and Belief: Aesthetics and Religion in Victorian Literature (Cambridge:


280 Ibid., 19. Corroborating Corson is Woodrow Wilson, “Mere Literature,” in Arthur S. Link, ed.,
True, not many students could testify to a deep knowledge of literature. But if this is true, said Corson, it was because schools were distracted with “their grammars, their rhetorics, their philologies, their psychologies, their histories and cheap philosophies of literature, their commentaries and annotations,” instead of preparing their students to “know works of genius in their absolute character.”281 Thinkers like Corson held that the only “literature worth studying was that presenting an intrinsic dividend in emotional, spiritual, or aesthetic appeal and which excluded literature mainly important as social documentation.”282

V

Humanists like Corson were following the widely practiced habit of using literature for normative purposes.283 English examinations constitute an especially good example of this practice. For instance, Louise Manning Hodgkins, professor of English literature at Wellesley, asked her students “is the moral character of a poet to be considered in the estimation of his productions?”284 In the academic year 1887-88, colleague Vida Scudder asked her students “1. What was the Spanish ideal of character, as illustrated in The Cid?” She then applied the same question to the cases of France (“. . . as illustrated in Roland?”); Germany (“. . . as illustrated in Siegfried?”); Britain (“What has the English ideal of character borrowed from each of these,—what

282 Lewis, “History of Instruction,” 144.
284 Louise Manning Hodgkins Papers, Exams, “English Literature, Course I,” n.d., WCA.
rejected?"); and Italy ("What was the Troubadour ideal of character, as illustrated in the young poet of the Vita Nuova?"). In 1888-89, Hodgkins asked her students in “English Poetry” “What are the moral standards of the old ballads?” At Vassar, instructors of English Jennette Perry and Mabel Loomis asked their students in “Sophomore Literature” “What was the intellectual and moral condition of England in the fifteenth century?”

Why did professors use their examinations and lecture time to draw out the ethical significance of certain writers and nations? Because, as Fred Scott explained, the primary goal of a liberal education was to build character. “Moral courage, self-reliance, respect for the truth in every aspect of it, both material and spiritual, sympathy for our fellow-beings and an active desire to help them and co-operate with them, a love of justice and fair play, belief in democratic institutions, loyalty to our republic—these are the elements of character which our schools were . . . primarily established to develop.”

Student class notes provide yet another conduit into the normative aim and content of a literary education. Claudia Bennett’s 1884 notes for Wellesley’s “English Literature” describes “Anglo-Saxons” as “Strong and Firm”; “Patient and Practical”; “Earnest and Social”; “Freedom loving”; “Pure in life”; “Respectful to women”; “True to a high sense of duty.” Bennett’s schoolmate Elizabeth P. Abbe applied the same formula to Alexander Pope. Her “Sophomore Literature” notes describe Pope as “1.

285 [Vida Scudder], Exams, “English Literature, Course II” (January 1888), WCA.
286 [Louise Hodgkins], “Course V—English Poetry,” Curricular Materials, Department of English Literature (January 1889), n.p., WCA.
287 Exams, Sophomore Literature, Student Materials Collection, Box 134 (June 4, 1891), VCA.
289 Claudia Bennett, “Sophomore Literature: English Literature,” (spring 1884), 5, WCA.

Commencement exercises were yet another avenue of moral instruction. Professor James Murray used his June 28, 1883 speech on “The Debt of Civilization to Literature” to remind his auditors that “literature in its highest and best forms . . . always embodies a high and pure moral element.” Murray did not deny that literature could also be used to disseminate some rather sordid ideas; but he concluded that “when all is said that can be said, and every line pointed out which has the slightest moral taint upon it, the fact remains which no well-read man can dispute, that the great body of literature is sound, pure, and wholesome,—the greatest authors conspicuously so.”

There is evidence that some students did internalize the didactic message many professors delivered. Eliza H. Kendrick, Wellesley class of 1885, chose to write her senior essay on “Sincerity as an Element of Success.” “It [sincerity] is the essential of a perfect character, not as one element of it,—as each petal is essential to the perfect flower, but rather as a virtue underlying all the rest, like the soil from which the flower springs, which gives to every petal its beauty and fragrance.” Being central to character, sincerity could not be violated without jeopardizing one’s calling. It is “not


291 Rev. James O. Murray, The Debt of Civilization to Literature, An Address Delivered at the Annual Commencement of the University of Michigan (June 28, 1883), 16.

292 Ibid., 17.


294 Eliza H. Kendrick Papers, “Sincerity as an Element of Success,” (October 29, 1884), WCA.
only true that insincerity does not pay,” she pointed out. “One may go further and say that . . . success in any line of endeavor is all but impossible.”

Students of Kendrick’s disposition demonstrated a sophisticated moral calculus when they affirmed virtuous traits like sincerity. “I know that it is better to be sincere and fail continually,” reasoned Kendrick, “than to achieve the most brilliant worldly success at the cost of sincerity, for this is ‘to gain the whole world and lose one’s own soul.” Kendrick did not just fear the consequences insincerity would bring to her soul (serious as this was); she also showed a concern for how deceit would affect her conscience. “Man may deceive others,” she averred, “he may deceive himself[,] but when he consents to it, he does to himself the greatest injury which he can possibly do, in weakening his own intellect and conscience, in blinding his own eyes to truth.”

VI

Nothing assisted the process of internalizing morals better than the imagined and even more real presence of a rival. During the final three decades of the nineteenth century, no single issue facing students in literature was more vexing than this field’s relation to natural science. In an essay titled “Literature as Science,” Ethel Wilkinson, Vassar class of 1893, drew a stark distinction between the “natural” and “scientific” (probably philological) approaches to literature. According to Wilkinson, “to study literature as literature is to see it from the interior, to be imbued with the spirit of it, to know it as an interpretation of life; it is to make it a part, not simply of one’s scholarship,

295 Ibid.
296 Ibid.
297 Ibid.
but of one’s life.” The philological approach to literature, on the other hand, was “to
regard it from the exterior, to approach it as a body of matter about which generalizations
are to be made, facts to be collected; it is to classify it, to know about it but not to know
it; it is to make it a part, not of one’s self, but of one’s scholarship.”

Though tactfully written, Wilkinson’s essay did not hide her distaste for the
“scientific method” in studying literature. “Every person with a true literary instinct, and
an apprehension of the signs of the times,” she declared, “can testify to the absurd lengths
to which some of this minute scientific study is carried. Deep meanings never suspected
by the innocent author are found in every word; symbolical allusions are detected at
every turn; sometimes even the statistical method is applied to our monuments of
literature.” According to Wilkinson, the problem with the philological approach is that
“systematization and tabulation are substituted for reverent, delightful study of literary
masterpieces, facts about literature for literature itself. Ferreting out historical allusions,
derivations of words and archaeological details is made to be the employment of the
student, instead of cultivating in himself a real appreciation of the spirit of the author,
familiarizing himself with the fair phrases and noble rhythms of great English prose and
verse.” Although disturbed by the “deep meanings” that a scientific intervention could
draw out, Wilkinson’s main concern was how this method distracted readers from the
moral purpose of the author.

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299 Ibid., 469-470.
300 Ibid., 470-471.
It was not as though Wilkinson wanted science completely removed from the study of literature; indeed, she welcomed “each new [scientific] discovery, every new avenue opened by added knowledge of the natural world.” Yet she held fiercely to the distinction between the “natural” approach to literature and the “scientific” method of studying it. “Let literature go on furnishing material to science; let science go on furnishing material to literature; but let not the two confound their functions.” Such a concession did not belie a real appreciation for the contribution of science: “Scientific method is good in science,” Wilkinson concluded, “but the pseudo-scientific method in literature is death, not life.”

Wilkinson’s opposition to the use of scientific means in studying literature drew the support of W.A. Leahy, Harvard class of 1888, who distrusted novelists who wrote in a “scientific spirit.” Trading on the familiar distinction between idealism and realism, Leahy noted that “while the older [idealist] writers were animated by a spontaneous passion for the noble and the beautiful, . . . our writers, as Zola and James and Dostoievsky, are animated by the very spirit which impelled Darwin,—a certain sublime, impartial, all-embracing curiosity.” According to Leahy, the problem with this approach to literature was that “no traditions, no moral prejudices, no aesthetic predilections, hem in the spirit of science.” Like his idealist cohorts, Leahy directed his concern toward the natural sciences. But in the absence of a more thorough analysis, student

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301 Ibid., 471.

302 Ibid.

303 W.A. Leahy, “Realism and Reality,” The Harvard Monthly 5 (October 1887): 24, HUA.
apprehension of natural science often blurred the distinction between natural and philological science.

For women students, skepticism towards natural science was significantly related to gender conceptions held by college officials.\textsuperscript{304} At Wellesley, the founding trustees held “misgivings about ‘the higher mathematics’ for young women, but they had none about literature.”\textsuperscript{305} At Vassar, the original catalogue of 1865-66 noted the use of Charles Cleveland’s textbook \textit{English Literature of the Nineteenth Century}.\textsuperscript{306} Therein students would have read the following entry under “the education of females”: “Much prudence and ability are requisite to conduct properly a young woman’s literary education. Her imagination must not be raised above the taste for necessary occupations, or the numerous small, but not trifling, pleasures of domestic life; her mind must be enlarged, yet the delicacy of her manners must be preserved; her knowledge must be various, and her powers of reasoning unawed by authority; yet she must habitually feel that nice sense of propriety, which is at once the guard and charm of every feminine virtue.”\textsuperscript{307} The absence of any discussion of natural science here implies that it was not considered a “necessary occupation.”


\textsuperscript{306} \textit{The First Annual Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Vassar Female College} (New York: John A. Gray and Green, 1866), 30, VCA.

Nevertheless, a liberal education of the type that Vassar was trying to establish did require training in the natural sciences. Still, women’s literary sensibility was thought to be a necessary corrective to a materialist age. Thus John Raymond, second president of Vassar, admitted that “in an age when the wonderful growth of physical science, and the absorbing demand of material interests are more and more engrossing the thoughts and energies of educated men, it is to devolve on cultivated women in some way to supply the loss, and to aid in preserving and transmitting to the civilization of the future an element of refining culture which it can so ill spare.”

Students who ardently resisted the application of scientific methods to literary texts received support from idealist professors. In a commencement address before the alumni of St. John’s College, in Annapolis, Maryland, Hiram Corson delivered one of the epoch’s most vehement protestations against the “Papacy of Science.” “In the interest of intellectual freedom, . . . the spiritual and eternal interests of man demand that a protest should be made against a rapidly developing scientific despotism, and that Scientists should not only keep within their legitimate domain of the phenomenal and the conditioned, but should ‘reexamine their stock in trade, so that we may make sure how far the stock of bullion in the cellar . . . is really the solid gold of Truth.’”

Woodrow Wilson captured the sentiment of more than a few humanists when he tartly pointed out that “’Mere Literature’ is a serious sneer, conceived in all honesty by

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309 Hiram Corson, The University of the Future, An Address Delivered before the Alumni of St. John’s College, at the Annual Commencement (July 7, 1875), 18.
the scientific mind, which despises things which do not fall within the categories of
demonstrable knowledge. It means nothing but literature, as who should say, ‘mere talk,’
‘mere fabrication,’ ‘mere pastime.’”\(^\text{310}\)

The hostility in humanists’ writing was especially manifest in the 1890s, when the
number of English and American literature professors who employed technical
philological means appeared to reach a critical mass. Their method tended to be
“dissective, analytical, [and critical-historical].”\(^\text{311}\) Of course it was this appropriation of
scientific strategies that reluctant humanists judged misguided. Margaret Sherwood, who
taught English Romanticism and the poets of the nineteenth century at Wellesley, put it
thus: “Our work in literature, forgetting its sisterhood to philosophy, has drawn too near
to empirical science, becoming more and more concerned with enumeration of fact for
fact’s sake, and not for its significance as a help in interpreting the inner life.”\(^\text{312}\)
Sherwood was writing from that branch of English that was “belletristic, aesthetic,
interpretive, and synthetical [sic].”\(^\text{313}\)

Idealists critical of “science” were driven by the concern that such an approach to
literature would compromise certain high principles, a process linked to the secularization
of the field.\(^\text{314}\) If this assertion seems implausible, consider the urgency in Hirshfield’s

\(^{310}\) Wilson, “Mere Literature,” 240.

\(^{311}\) Lewis, “History of Instruction,” 138.


\(^{313}\) Lewis, “History of Instruction,” 138.

\(^{314}\) Gerald Graff, \textit{Professing Literature}, 59 ff. For secularization’s emergence at Princeton, see
Darrell Guder, “The History of Belles Lettres at Princeton: An Investigation of the Expansion and
Secularization of the Curriculum at the College of New Jersey, with Special Reference to the Curriculum of
essay: “Birth, life, death—is this all? Is this the end of all the yearning and struggling of endless generations? No, no! Do not deprive us of this one great force [of idealism] that has moulded philosophic thought, promoted heroism, impelled reform, advanced liberty, permeated all life.”

In the context in which the “multi-titled Doctor of Divinity” was being replaced by a secular and more narrowly trained professional, idealists reacted by looking to literature for existential meaning.

A close reading of student material reveals that idealists’ predilection for philosophical, ethical, and or religious themes in literature was prompted by the threat posed by materialist science (identified with the natural sciences). It is thus not a coincidence that when students spoke of literature, of its truths, meaning and significance, even (or especially) its spiritual depth, they often identified scientific materialism as a threat to be contended with. Harvard’s Charles R. Nutter’s “Notes and Papers in English 9” records this tendency with unusual clarity. In an entry dated May 20, 1892, Nutter noted that the greatest service Matthew Arnold rendered his age was to “stand for . . . humanity against the physical sciences, which has [sic] advanced all along the line during the past fifty years.”

“Science,” asserted Nutter, “has opened new fields of knowledge. It has been triumphant, . . . reformed life, [and] revolutionized our whole conception of life. Literature, on the other hand, has clung to its old ideas. Science has won, and literature has lost. The age tends to materialism.”

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315 Hirshfield, “Idealist in Literature,” 146.

316 Charles R. Nutter, “Notes and Papers in English 9,” 1891-1892, HUA.

317 Ibid.
For our purposes, it is less important to investigate whether Arnold was in fact an enemy of science than to explore why he was seized upon as an effective weapon with which to fight off scientific materialism. In his penetrating *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, the literary scholar Hoxie Neale Fairchild claimed that in the course of the nineteenth century an impression grew that only natural science could deliver real truth; this assumption, he argued, created a need for a different language with which to speak about truth. Attention to the writings of students during the last third of the nineteenth century shows that they responded to this critical moment by flocking to poetry and English and American literature, where they encountered the likes of Arnold, who already was enjoying a reputation as something of a poet-priest.

Of course natural science did not seem a threat to everyone. Not surprisingly, some students preferred it to literary studies. Writing in the *Vassar Miscellany* in 1872, an anonymous writer confidently claimed that “we of the nineteenth century would not, for a moment, cherish the thought of giving up the intellectual enjoyment afforded us by the discoveries of science, even for the old-time delight in poetry. The names of

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320 Fraser, *Beauty and Belief*, 159.

VII

The intellectual life of students during the period 1870-1900 carries a discernible idealist coloring perhaps owing to the influence of certain humanist professors. In students’ varied formulations, however, this idealism lost some of its intellectual coherence, though none of its affective power. Whether reading prose fiction, poetry, or plays, students recorded a deep emotional and intellectual response. This was especially true towards the final years of the nineteenth century, when many of them came to regard natural and philological scientific approaches to literature as threatening to their ideals.

Student writing in literature bears a striking similarity to their meditations in art. Where collegians writing about art began with the conviction that this field was an effective conduit for divine revelation and moral instruction, their counterparts in literature called for stories that would “lighten the burdens and refresh the souls of men.” Just as student conceptions in art grew ambiguous during the 1890s thanks to the rise of an “Aesthetic Movement” and the influence of humanists like Charles Eliot Norton, their views of novels and poetry also underwent a discernible transformation. On display most clearly by the last decade of the century, idealists demonstrated a visceral reaction to

322 “The Effect of Advancing Civilization on Poetical Literature,” The Vassar Miscellany 1 (April 1872): 19, VCA.

323 Much more will be said on the philosophical orientation of professors in the next chapter, but for now see Bruce Kuklick, A History of Philosophy in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 111-128.
what one of them called “the laboratory method in the study of English.”

Although the thrust of this response was negative—students expended most of their energy criticizing “science” rather than building a case for why they found idealism so compelling—it had a distinctly positive outcome: students were able to inhabit an intellectual and emotional world that was largely of their own making.

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CHAPTER FOUR

PHILOSOPHY: “THERE IS A COSMICAL GOOD”

I

Built on the foundation of Medieval Aristotelianism, Cambridge Platonism, Scottish Common Sense thought, and German Idealism, American philosophy in the early nineteenth century enjoyed a rich inheritance.\(^{325}\)

Drawing upon Scottish Common Sense thinkers like Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart, American philosophers endowed the mind with intuitive powers that laid the foundation for religious belief, epistemic confidence, social responsibility, and personal integrity. Stressing duties to God, the nation, community, and the self, early academic philosophy served moral and religious convention. Although there were notable apostates of this philosophy (Francis Bowen turned away from the Scottish school around mid-century), and evidence that other theoretical innovations had found an audience (James Marsh’s 1829 edition of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflection* went through 1,500 copies in its first year), most philosophy teaching in antebellum America remained securely in the hands of those who drew sustained nourishment from Glasgow and Aberdeen.

Although traces of Scottish Common Sense thought can be detected in the writing of students during the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s, what is important for our purposes is the markedly negative tone of their writing on natural science. For unlike most American antebellum thinkers, who approached science from a deep sense of its compatibility with religion,326 idealist students in the Gilded Age conceived of natural science as a menace to religion and to their most cherished beliefs. This sentiment comes through in the writing of C.F.W., a Vassar student who wrote a piece entitled “Is there an Absolute Right?” Appearing in the Vassar Miscellany in 1875, this essay began with the cheerful observation that “the destructive work of science is finished.”327 Such a claim reflected the fear of natural science that became a reliable characteristic of idealists during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century.328 Idealists’ consternation stemmed from positivists’ insistence that all knowledge be empirical and thus able to be verified by the means and methods of the natural sciences.329

One of the reasons why idealists distrusted science was that they feared it would attenuate the notion of an objective moral law. Responding to Darwin’s theory of evolution, C.F.W. cautiously stated that “it is said from its [moral law’s] analogy to natural phenomena, [that] right must be considered a relative term.”330 Writing with


328 Humanists that were friendly to science are not hard to find. See, for example, George S. Morris, University Education (Ann Arbor: Andrews and Witherby, 1886).


greater conviction, this student reasoned that absolute right existed despite the “alleged fact that all the accepted laws of morality are entirely relative and variable.” By the end of the essay, C.F.W. stated that “the only standard of right must be the nature of the Creator.” Such a conclusion suggests that for this student (and probably others like her) awareness of Darwin’s controversial theory of evolution and of the real possibility that moral laws were culturally relative could not shake her belief in God as the source of right conduct. Vassar philosophy professor H. Heath Bawden seemed to have students like C.F.W. in mind when he wrote that “with some, the hope seems to linger, of finding a fixed, infallible, and final authority. They are not satisfied with relative and derivative standards. They seek certainty, especially in matters vital to morals and religion.” “In spite of arguments [from natural science,],” declared this student, “we all believe in the reality of absolute being, absolute truth and absolute moral law. Justice, love, purity, these are the primary attributes of the soul,—we can not conceive them as changeable.”

At the time that students like C.F.W. were responding to natural science, the discipline of philosophy was undergoing monumental changes. At Harvard, philosophy in the 1870s was shaped by Charles W. Eliot’s system of electives. The system, together with the specialization of courses, allowed professors effectively to teach whatever they

331 Ibid., 425.
333 C.F.W., “Is There an Absolute Right?” 425. The origin of C.F.W.’s views is not clear. She would have read Noah Porter’s *The Elements of Intellectual Science* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1871) in her senior year “Mental Philosophy” course, but this work does not discuss Darwinism or evolutionary science.
wanted. Thus when George Herbert Palmer became Francis Bowen’s assistant in 1872, he declared an interest in studying “speculative systems unencumbered by doctrinal preconceptions of right and wrong.”

William James, who had been teaching “Psychology” in the philosophy department since 1877, became an assistant professor in 1880. Two years later Josiah Royce arrived from California, securing a stronghold for philosophic idealism in the Harvard curriculum.

Thanks in part to Eliot’s reforms, philosophy courses now consisted mainly of lectures. Recalling James in this pedagogical format, one student stated that “unexpectedly in the midst of expounding some psychological theory he would rise quickly, stand with one foot on the round of his chair, elbow on knee, chin resting in his hand, and begin to draw a complicated, explanatory diagram. When, after puzzling over it, he could not work it out, he would resume his seat, saying, “‘Oh well, I never can do a thing like that.’”

Adding to an already stellar cast, Harvard lured Hugo Münsterberg in 1892 from Freiburg, Germany, completing the core of what was arguably the first great American philosophy department.

At the new University of California, philosophy made its appearance after 1865 in the form of courses on the history of philosophy and the philosophy of Kant and other

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continental thinkers.337 From 1875 to 1881, California offered courses in mental
philosophy, moral philosophy, and Greek literature and philosophy. A chair was
established in moral and intellectual philosophy in the academic year 1881-82. In 1884
George H. Howison joined the faculty, which already counted among its number Ernest

At Wellesley, an 1874 announcement informed students that the college would
offer philosophy courses in logic, psychology, ethics, and the history of philosophy.
Beginning in 1881 all juniors were required to take a course in logic. The first elective
course appeared in 1884: “Speculative Philosophy, Theism, and the History of
Religions.”338 Geared toward students who were not beginners, this course linked
philosophical inquiry with belief in God. Mary W. Calkins, who had previously taught at
Berkeley, capped a brilliant career at Wellesley with her 1907 publication *The Persistent
Problems of Philosophy*. A follower of Royce, Calkins rejected materialism and
expressed the belief that the universe is mental in nature.339 In 1897-98, the philosophy
department at Wellesley offered courses like “The Philosophy of the Beautiful and
History of Aesthetics,” “Ethics on the Basis of Psychology,” and “The Regenerating Life
of the Christ.”340

337 See Elmo A. Robinson, “One Hundred Years of Philosophy Teaching in California, 1857-

338 Jean Glasscock, ed., *Wellesley College, 1875-1975: A Century of Women* (Wellesley:
Wellesley College Press, 1975), 130.

339 Patricia Ann Palmieri, *In Adamless Eden: The Community of Women Faculty at Wellesley*

340 *Wellesley College Calendar, 1897-98* (Wellesley: Wellesley College Press, 1898), 52, WCA.
Like Wellesley, Smith and Vassar gave philosophy considerable attention. Researcher Hermione Dealey found that students at Smith were especially attracted to “Greek Philosophy,” “Modern Philosophy,” and “Ethics.” Her work shows that in the academic year 1914-15 “86 additional courses were elected [by students] in Philosophy.” At Vassar, students found room for philosophy courses like “Logic,” “History of Modern Philosophy,” and “Metaphysics.” Based on her comparative study of the curricula at Vassar, Wellesley and Smith, Dealey concluded that “the modern girl desires in Philosophy . . . something of the present-day.”

Students like C.F.W who took advantage of their school’s ample course offerings in philosophy would have been prepared to confront the intellectual forces shaping their lives. One of these was ethical relativism, the belief that there are no universally valid moral principles, so that prohibitions (against murder, for example) are only valid relative to culture or individual choice. Writing in the Berkeleyan, an anonymous student wrote that “relativity is now [1877] the universal doctrine—the uppermost thought of the age.” But like his counterpart at Vassar, this writer assured his readers that “faith in a Supreme Being can never be shaken.” This is a revealing though not necessarily


inconsistent reassurance since the writer also asserted that “truth is not and never can be absolute.”346 Read critically, such seemingly paradoxical statements reveal the complexity of student intellectual life: Collegians affirmed belief in God and seemed inclined to believe that morals were absolute in nature, but they also acknowledged that ethical prescriptions bore the imprint of human hands. Illustrating the Gordian nature of faith is a poem by University of California student Thornington Clarke Chase, class of 1901. Titled “The Philosopher’s Lament,” Chase wrote that

My heart has tossed on sullen, troubled seas,
This wondrous world, replete with mysteries
Has rocked my fragile bark where Doubt’s chill breeze
O’er the unfathomed Deep of Knowledge blows.
Yet hoped I, through Minerva’s pilotage,
To some day reach the shores of Certainty;
Alas! Man’s baffled Reason never knows
A North or South upon Life’s angry sea!
The Beacon-lights of Faith alone can guide
The drifting craft on this Eternal Tide.347

Although there is hardly any evidence for a full-blown skepticism among students—with regards to either moral law or belief in God348—a closer look at the contour and character of their intellectual interests fills in their religious outlook.

Consider the case of University of California student Clara Bartling, who published her

346 Ibid.
347 Thornington Clarke Chase, “The Philosopher’s Lament,” The Occident 41 (August 30, 1901): 66, BL.
348 One writer at Vassar considered college education to be inherently conducive to religious unbelief. See J.E.D., “Does a College Education Tend to Produce Atheism?” The Vassar Miscellany 7 (April 15, 1878): 17-20, VCA. Another anonymous writer argued that students at Smith were not receiving proper spiritual training. See “The Barriers Between Us and a Spiritual Life,” The Alpha 10 (March 5, 1890), n.p., Smith College Archives (SCA). Corroborating this last is George F. Parsons, “The Growth of Materialism,” Atlantic Monthly 60 (1887): 157-172. A more tempered perspective can be found in John Bascom, “Atheism in Colleges,” North American Review 132 (1881): 32-40.
“Prize Thesis” in the Berkeleyan on August 6, 1878. Titled “The Future of Morality,” Bartling argued that “the type of morality of any people is dependent upon various social conditions, and is commensurate with the civilization of the times.” Bartling meant to affirm more than just the social context that has always and everywhere shaped faith; she effectively argued that religion was of human origin, that in the future the highest form of piety would be an utterly human religion, and that its devotees would be “living for the sake of human beings, for their good and improvement.”

Bartling mixed her religion of humanity with traditional religious beliefs. In her essay, Bartling dealt systematically, albeit cursorily, with a number of points suggesting the “utility” of prevailing religious ideas. In this she received general support from schoolmate M.W. Shinn, class of 1879, who argued that observance of historic moral laws was key to the “vast march of humanity.” Like other students at Berkeley, Shinn conceded that the Zeitgeist cultivated certain suspicious maxims, such as “Do evil that good may come” and “The end justifies the means.” Taking the side of her imaginary opponent, Shinn asked “if, then, a thing which, like lying, is in general out of harmony becomes in a particular instance in harmony—what wrong in employing it?” She replied: “Even were there nothing to be answered in such a view, even were the doctrine of the end justifying the means certainly true, it does not follow that it is a safe doctrine.”

350 Ibid., 24.
351 M.W. Shinn, “The End Justifies the Means,” The Berkeleyan 6 (October 1878): 131, BL.
352 Ibid., 132.
Although students of an intellectual turn of mind could not totally avoid the philosophical relativism of the age, neither did they simply succumb to it. Some, like C.F.W. and Shinn, remained skeptical that scientifically inspired ethical theories could fully explain away a transcendent basis for moral law. Others like Bartling seemed ebullient with the hope that a new moral order, built upon the basis of human striving, could create a brighter future.

II

Glimpses into the philosophical explorations of students come not just from essays published in literary publications; our knowledge also derives from class and reading notes. In an unspecified political philosophy class at Vassar, student Louise G. Chase, class of 1911, wrote the following definition of morality: “The system of conduct determined by consideration of the greatest general good.” For Tuesday, October 5, 1909, Chase noted that “evil results from making morality a purely individual affair.” Two days later, Chase recorded that “a man can’t be just without being moral or moral [without being] just. Justice is morality in action.”

Chase’s schoolmate Mary E. Carter wrote the following in her notebook upon reading Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*: “What is the good? The good is that at which all things aim.” Another entry for October 10, 1910, stated that “The good is final, it is that for which all else is done.” The next day Carter wrote in conclusion that “[a] moral

353 Louise G. Chase, Student Materials, Box 96, n..p., VCA.
354 Ibid.
355 Mary E. Carter, Student Materials, Box 116, n..p., VCA.
act depends upon the fact that a man should know what is right, should do it deliberately and for a right motive.” At Harvard, student A.M. Bierstadt, class of 1912, recorded the following in George H. Palmer’s “Philosophy 4”: “It is very bad policy to do anything bad, says Plato, since this arouses an insurrection in a man.” Evidence for the personal resonance of such instruction is not lacking. Bierstadt observed that “when we are virtuous again and again, we find ease in being so, e.g., a man has not the virtue of honesty until he can be honest without any effort.” While we do well to remember that these notes do not necessarily reveal what students actually believed (indeed, they are a better, though not infallible, predictor of the lecturer’s convictions), such records do show that they were exposed to normative lessons in philosophy classes. Significantly, these records also suggest that some students did read philosophical thinkers like Plato accurately, deducing a sound basis for moral judgment.

Evidence for the ethical content of philosophy is even more abundant in examinations. A test administered in June 1874 by Harvard’s Francis Bowen, Alford

356 Ibid.


358 Bierstadt, “Student Notes.”

Professor of Natural Religion, Moral Philosophy, and Civil Polity, asked students to “Define Conscience, Duty, the Right, Rights.” Several questions later, Bowen queried “What are the Moral Sentiments?” The final question of the exam asked students to “Define the laws that regulate the formation of character?” At Wellesley, on June 18, 1886, Instructor Lucy Andrews asked freshmen in “Ethics” to “give exposition of duty as a condition for true life.” Mary Case, Associate Professor of Psychology and History of Philosophy at Wellesley, called upon her students in “Psychology as Propaedeutic to Philosophy” to “show that the wrong act involves physical, prudential, and moral control.” Wellesley students then were asked “What should the person have done in order to perform the right instead of the wrong act?”

It is worth underscoring that professors did not just have students regurgitate what they learned in class or read in books; they actually invited students to demonstrate independent thinking. At Princeton, author-clergyman Charles W. Shields and minister-President Francis L. Patton called students in their “Ethics” class to “state and criticize any definition of Ethics you may remember, and defend the one you prefer.” An exam by Assistant Professor of Moral Philosophy George Stevenson Patton, administered on

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360 [Francis Bowen], Exams, “Philosophy 5,” (June 1874), Box 1, HUA.
361 Ibid.
362 Lucy Andrews, “Freshman Examination in Ethics,” (June 18, 1886), Wellesley College Archives (WCA).
363 Mary Case, “Philosophy 6,” Philosophy Department, (June 1897), WCA.
364 Ibid.
365 [George Stevenson Patton and Francis Landey Patton], “Examination in Ethics,” (May 28, 1901), Princeton University, Mudd Library (ML).
June 4, 1902, instructed students to “indicate your own ethical position, and criticize anything in the lectures or the text-book with which you do not agree.”

Students’ autonomy was also evident in their selection of a topic for their senior-year essay. The philosophy department at Smith listed the following subjects (among others) for the class of 1882: “The Idea of the Beautiful,” “The Evolution of Morality,” “The Limits of the Obligation of Truth.” In his somewhat tendentious study of philosophy departments, G. Stanley Hall found that in writing papers students titled their work “Is it right to do evil that good may come?,” ‘Is falsehood ever justifiable, and if so, when?’, ‘The moral character of Hamlet,’ ‘My favorite virtues and why?’ ‘How far is Plato’s Republic truly moral?’

III

Continuing a discussion of ideals that were at the heart of the old moral philosophy course in the “classical” curriculum, humanists in the Gilded Age grounded principles like truth and duty, goodness and right, in a social context. At Harvard, the well-read Unitarian minister and Professor of Christian Morals Andrew Peabody taught a course on “The Ethics of the Social Questions—The questions of Charity, Divorce, the Indians, Temperance, and the various aspects of the Labor Question (Socialism, Communism, Arbitration, Cooperation, etc.), as problems of practical Ethics.” At Vassar, H. Heath Bawden, Professor of Philosophy, devoted an entire subsection of his

366 [George Stevenson Patton and Francis Landey Patton], “Examination in Ethics,” (June 4, 1902), ML.
367 “Subjects for Essays,” Department of Philosophy, Student Material, Box 1392, 1882, SCA.
369 The Harvard University Catalogue, 1890-91 (Cambridge: Damrell & Upham, 1890), 76.
“Ethics” course to “Ethics and Politics.” Students consulting Bawden’s outline to the course read that he would address “the ethics of property or wealth. The ethics of capital and labor, of trusts and monopolies, of trades—unionism, speculation in stocks, rebates . . . . The Ethics of Social Relations: Tipping, woman’s suffrage, temperance-reform, charities, divorce-laws, capital punishment, commercialism, professionalism, class-distinctions, etc.” In 1905 the University of Wisconsin offered “‘Social and Political Ethics,’ which examined ‘the rights of personal liberty, freedom of contract property, national independence, and suffrage.’”

Just as professors related ethics to an intricate web of social factors, they also located it in a historical context, which itself was novel. Vassar’s President James Taylor asked students to “state the additions to ethical theory by (a) Socrates, (b) Aristotle, (c) the Stoics, (d) Jesus, (e) Hobbes’ position in ethical history.” At Princeton, Professor of Philosophy Alexander T. Ormond asked students “How did Epicureanism arise? Compare its doctrines of Virtue and the Highest Good with the corresponding doctrines of Stoicism?” By locating ethics within society and

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371 Quoted in Callahan and Bok, *Ethics Teaching*, 21.

372 For a typical example of a contemporary textbook covering the history of philosophical approaches to ethics, see Henry Calderwood, *Handbook of Moral Philosophy* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1883), esp. 43-76.

373 Exam, “Ethics,” Student Materials Collection, Box 134, 1903, VCA.

374 [Alexander Thomas Ormond], “Examination in History of Philosophy,” (February 1, 1904), ML.
acknowledging its various historical incarnations, professors provided students with a contextual understanding of normative thought.

Professors did more than ask students to analyze the writing of ethical theorists: they called them to judge these writers’ ideas based on their own reading and experience. A Princeton exam in “Ethics” administered on May 27, 1902, instructed students to “state and criticize the theories of Bain, Mill, Spencer and Clifford in regard to the ultimate character of the idea of oughtness.” President Taylor asked students to “show how conscience has been claimed to be derived from unmoral beginnings and state arguments against such theories?”

Another source of academic philosophers’ belief system is their lecture notes. Lyman Atwater, Chair of Logic and Moral and Political Science at Princeton, stated in his 1878 “Lectures on Ethics” that “in order for an act to be morally good it must be materially and formally right as to matter and as to manner. It is a very important principle that the act and intention must be right.” Agreeing with students like University of California’s M.W. Shinn, Atwater asserted that “the ends do not justify the means. A bad intention vitiates the moral merit of an act even if it leads to good, as in the instance of a man telling the truth when he meant to tell a lie. The moral quality pertains not only to the acts but to the latent disposition of the soul from which they spring.”

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375 [Charles Woodruff Schields and Francis L. Patton], “Examination in Ethics,” (May 27, 1902), ML (italics added).

376 Exam, “Ethics,” Student Materials Collection, Box 134, 1903, VCA (italics added).

377 Lyman Atwater, “Lectures on Ethics, 1878,” Lecture Notes, Box 3, 17, ML. For an in-depth understanding of Atwater’s moral philosophy, see Lyman Atwater, Ethics and Political Economy, from Notes Taken in the Lecture Room (Princeton: William S. Sharp, 1878).

Functioning as the centerpiece to philosophy courses in the nineteenth century, textbooks also were an effective means of conveying professors’ theory of “oughtness.” When the first class of students at Vassar opened Francis Wayland’s classic *The Elements of Moral Science* in the fall of 1865, they read that “as the right and wrong of an action reside in the intention, it is evident that where an action is intended, though it be not actually performed, the intention is worthy of praise or blame as truly as the action itself, provided the action itself be wholly out of our power.”

Underlying Atwater’s and Wayland’s ethical theory was the Scottish Common Sense belief in the mind’s ability to intuitively perceive the right and hold fast to its dictates. Echoing Thomas Reid, Atwater proclaimed that “in regards to the first truths of morality, they are self-evident to all whose minds are not perverted. Veracity, kindness, honesty, duty to God, are self-evident.” Intuitionist convictions received support from William James, whose empirical training did not prevent him from recognizing certain visceral factors. Writing in his “Notes for Philosophy 4” (1888-89), James admitted that “we have preferences inexplicable by utility, or by the direct influence of the environment, preferences for certain kinds of behavior, as consistency, veracity, justice, nobility, dignity, etc etc. Those who contend for an innate faculty are therefore right from a psychological point of view.”


In a book titled *Duty: A Book for Schools*, Seelye declared that “every person knows some duty. He knows it in his own heart. He may not be able to tell why it is, but he knows that he ought to do right, and he is just as certain of this as he can be of anything.”

In sum, the teaching of ethics in American colleges during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century reveals two distinct tendencies: on the one hand, there was a continuation of eighteenth-century Scottish thought that considered the intuitive recognition of ideals to be the highest priority; on the other hand, there was a new insistence that all ideals taught in philosophy be related to some historical context.

IV

Scottish Common Sense intuitionism enabled educators, professors, and student idealists to imagine and affirm principles of the highest order. Commonly referred to as “the Good, the True, and the Beautiful,” this lofty trilogy was thought to furnish the very foundation of a liberal education. The significance of these ideals stemmed from the notion that they mirrored the very nature of humankind. Thus educational reformer and Hegelian philosopher William T. Harris announced that “the three highest activities of the soul deal with the beautiful, the good and the true. Religion deals with the revelation of the Divine as the good. Art deals with its manifestation as the beautiful, and the truth in science and philosophy deals with the definition of the Divine for pure thought.”

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Once this venerable troika was identified with the august human soul, there was but a short step to God. Hence it is no surprise to hear President Seelye, upon his inauguration at Amherst, on June 27, 1877, explicitly tie these “transcendentals” to God: “Truth is inconceivable without God. Neither truth, nor beauty, nor goodness would have any meaning, or be anything more than words, which the unthinking brute might speak as well as man, unless they point to Him and come from Him in whom all beauty, truth and goodness find alone their exhaustless and eternal source and sun.”

With authorities pronouncing high praise for these concepts, it is not surprising to hear students singing in a harmonious key. Addressing her peers on Vassar’s Class Day in 1877, a “Miss Sheppard” gave her panegyric a recognizable form: “The good, the true, the beautiful—for these we strive. Because we are moral, we seek the good; because we are intellectual, we demand the true; because we are aesthetic, we long for the beautiful.” Writing in the Berkeleyan in 1893, University of California student Mary Bird Clayes declared that “there is a mighty Triumverate in the world of thought, more powerful than any the world of action has ever seen; this Triumverate has fought in battles more portentous to mankind than any that disturbed the Roman world; it has called forth an array more glorious than all the heroes that surrounded Troy. The good, the true, the beautiful are three inseparable and interdependent ideals forming the keynote of Philosophy.”

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385 “Miss Sheppard,” Address on the Class Motto, Baccalaureate Sermon and Class Day Exercises, 1877, 21, VCA.

386 Mary Bird Clayes, class of 1892, “Study of the Philosophy of Dante,” The Berkeleyan 1
Subjective in nature, ductile in theory, and diffusely applied, an intuitive approach to the highest ideals was not likely to remain within the safe confines provided by its more religiously orthodox advocates. Indeed, its very ambiguity seemed to invite speculation, if not innovation. Consider the intriguing case of the Congregational minister Alexander McKenzie. A pastor’s son, McKenzie’s early success in school led him to Phillips Academy, Harvard, and Andover Theological Seminary. In 1866 he accepted a call to the ministry and became the pastor of the First Congregational Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he would serve for the next forty-seven years.

Although nothing in McKenzie’s elite educational background and long service as a pastor would give the impression that he held unorthodox religious views,387 a commencement address delivered at Smith on June 22, 1881 titled “The Spiritual Element in Study” provides evidence to the contrary. In this talk, McKenzie tried to ground education and particularly humanistic study in Protestant Christianity; what he actually achieved was a broadly religious meditation that featured strong Transcendentalist overtones.388 At one point McKenzie averred that “things have more than the thought which we who look upon them give to them. They have their birthright of thought. There is a living spirit in the grain [of a piece of wood] which even now is frolicking in the sunshine which illumines these fields; and in the stars which look down

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388 For a trenchant critique of idealism that discusses its radical departure from Christianity, see Frederic Harrison, “Pantheism and Cosmic Emotion,” The Nineteenth Century 10 (August 1881): 284-295.
on these peaceful valleys.”

Although mentioned in the larger context of finding truth in all things, such rapturous remarks could not have but left students wondering what in fact was the nature of religion? Apparently anticipating this question, McKenzie concluded his address by stating that “we are to be on our guard against limitations of knowledge. It may be that there are limits, but we do not know where they are, nor are we called upon to consider them.”

One can only imagine the looks on the faces of President L. Clark Seelye and Smith’s trustees!

While McKenzie’s oratorical flashes did not set off a rush to Transcendentalist religion, there is evidence to suggest that such views did find a warm reception. Comparing Plato’s “World-Soul” to Emerson’s “Over-Soul,” Smith student Edith Hawkes admitted that Emerson’s conception is “the Spirit of the world that speaks through us. The elaboration of this simple, fundamental thought can be most easily understood from Emerson’s own words, for what he has expressed cannot be more concisely said. Being comes from a hidden source, ‘that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man’s particular being is contained and made one with all other.’”

Hawkes’ interpretation does not prove that she accepted Emerson’s theory as a roadmap for life; nevertheless her writing in philosophy and literature does suggest that she internalized a certain amount of Transcendentalist thought.

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390 Ibid., 16.

391 Edith Hawkes, “Plato’s World-Soul and Emerson’s Over-Soul,” The Smith College Monthly 2 (December 1894): 2, SCA.
As I have suggested, it would be inaccurate to conclude that idealism—whether of a Transcendental or other type—led all sympathetic students away from traditional religious conceptions. Most likely the majority of these individuals recognized in idealism a kindred philosophy quite compatible with their prevailing religious sympathies. Evidence for this more sensible reading comes in part from Smith student Elizabeth Reeve Cutter, who in March 1896 published “An Impression of Plato’s Dialogues” in the *Smith College Monthly*. “Just as back of the human face there is the soul,” Cutter began, “the eternal part that causes the expression of the eyes and mouth, yet is more than these—so in the dialogues behind all the moods and phases of character depicted, the drifts of conversation, and what seemed to Plato sometimes the important deductions about government and education and art, lies the soul of the book—the eternal truths.”

Some students were attracted to idealism not only because it seemed compatible with Christianity in its philosophical presuppositions, they were also drawn to it because they believed that thinkers like Plato successfully articulated what it meant to be human and thus offered insights into perduring problems. Smith’s Mary Almée Goodman drew upon Matthew Arnold when she explained that “in spite of the Hebraizing influences which have played so large a part in controlling the latter day generations[,]”

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we are not as different in our mental and moral structure to-day from the Greeks of Plato’s time as might be imagined.”394 “Among the discussions which deal with the nature of the essential,” Goodman continued, “none are more fruitful than those which treat of the relations of pleasure and knowledge to the good. Then as now the pleasant and the good were hard to distinguish.”

Cutter’s schoolmate Margaret Elmer Coe displayed her attraction to Platonic thought in an essay published in the February 1897 edition of the Smith College Monthly. Therein Coe insisted that “Plato’s words still remain unsurpassed for nobility and grandeur; ‘the soul of one who, when he sees the beauty of earth, is transported by the recollection of the true beauty, would like to fly upward, but cannot;’ and so climbs slowly ‘from the love of one fair form to that of two, and from fair forms to fair actions,’ until at last it sees the vision of absolute Beauty in the ideal world.”395

For students like Cutter and Coe, idealism provided a sufficiently broad but safe context within which to explore their intellectual interests, affective needs, and spiritual yearnings. For these students, philosophy affirmed the motives of right action and generally reinforced an absolutist understanding of “the Good.” But for nonconformists like Hawkes, idealism was nothing short of a window to a wider world that bore only a faint resemblance to Christianity.

394 Mary Almée Goodman, “Plato’s Doctrine of the Supreme Aim of Life,” The Smith College Monthly 3 (April 1896): 19, SCA.

VI

One of the reasons why idealism could appeal to students of varying ideological persuasions was that the same language used to affirm religious truths could also be employed to extol humanistic values. One puzzling example comes from Cutter: “Can we better define the soul than as a pair of winged horses and a charioteer? When a man [like Plato] brings us thoughts like these we do not know how to account for them, much less to describe them; but in vain attempt to tell something of their power and beauty, we call them by two names which men have always used to express what is beyond them—a revelation and an inspiration.”

Christianity and non-Christian idealism share a crucial faith in what the theologian Rudolf Bultmann described many years ago as an “invisible spiritual world and in the conviction that man by his very nature belongs to this spiritual world.” This basic fact appears to have struck students’ minds with especial force because in their writing they mixed Christianity and idealism without much concern for the integrity of either tradition. But as we have seen with McKenzie, the mixing of Christian with other ideologies was not the privileged preserve of students; it was a practice indulged in by their elders, too.

Although student writing is not always clear and crisp, it does demonstrate a critical reading of prominent thinkers like Plato and Emerson. Hawkes explained that “to Plato change meant only imperfection in actual life and so he gave it a lowly place in his


philosophy; he thought only the finite and defective could change; the Infinite was perfect and immutable. This sharp division is the source of all the inconsistencies in his theory; and results in such difficulties as these,—how can that which is changing be a copy of an eternal ‘idea’ which is unchangeable? Or how can the ‘finite’ soul be one with the Infinite? Or how can that which is divisible be like that which is indivisible?”

Going even further is Katharine Ware, Smith class of 1894, who asserted that “Plato’s theory of Ideas, so beautiful in itself, made him arbitrary and dogmatic in his practical application thereof, even Puritanic . . . . In the service of those Ideas, he would limit too narrowly man’s experience. That service blinded him to the desirability of change, to the possibility of advance even beyond his conception of those perfect patterns ‘in the mount.’”

For other students, it was not just particular idealist thinkers that came in for criticism; the problem was with the study of philosophy itself. With novelist Grace Gallaher’s protagonist in Vassar Stories, these jaded students said that “they can’t stand any more philosophy, . . . and all those borey [sic] things you dote on.” Even the passage of time did not improve the estimation of philosophy for those who disliked it. Reminiscing on his years as an undergraduate at Columbia University during the early

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399 Katharine Ware, “Suggested by Plato’s Republic,” The Smith College Monthly 1 (January 1894): 5, SCA.


1870s, Brander Matthews confessed that “I think, although I am not at all certain, that I must have had a course in philosophy, but if I did it left no trace, and it imparted no mental training.”

VII

Not everyone’s experience was like that of Brander Matthews. Based on the evidence consulted at six prominent institutions of higher learning, many students applied themselves to philosophy and this interest resulted in their ability to respond thoughtfully to the intellectual challenges of their day. But why did these students take philosophy—especially idealist philosophy—seriously? Is there any explanation beyond the personalities involved? One important factor was the attenuation of Protestant thought as the intellectual centerpiece of the curriculum, notably displayed in the stubborn but steady decline of its principal carrier, the moral philosophy course. In need of some ideology that could function as the linchpin of the curriculum, some educators and likeminded students enlisted idealism to combat scientific materialism, which held that matter and its properties could account for all phenomena.

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403 An insightful discussion of this argument can be found in George M. Marsden, The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

404 Historians disagree as to whether the decline of moral philosophy was precipitated by its own secularist impulse. Declensionist readings can be found in Meyer, Instructed Conscience; Frederick Rudolph, Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977); Sloan, “Teaching of Ethics.” More sanguine are Howe, Unitarian Conscience; and Allen Guelzo, “The Science of Duty”: Moral Philosophy and the Epistemology of Science in Nineteenth-Century America,” in David Livingstone, D.G. Hart, and Mark Noll, eds., Evangelicals and Science in Historical Perspective (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 267-289.
The single most important reason why students were drawn to idealism during the 1880s and 1890s was due to the emergence of scientific materialism as a dominant ideology. During this time, philosophy was increasingly being pulled into the orbit of science (which while distinct from materialism was often associated with it). In fact, philosophers had come to depend so much upon natural science for their theories and methods that James complained that it had become the “idol of the tribe to the present generation.”405 While not everyone shared James’ misgivings, a number of prominent individuals witnessed to the fact that natural science and its methods of inquiry had assumed a significant place in intellectual life and thus in university education. Addressing a crowd at the opening of the American Museum of Natural History in Boston, Harvard President (and former chemist) Charles W. Eliot declared that “in every field of study, in history, philology, philosophy, and theology, as well as in natural history and physics, it is now the scientific spirit, the scientific method, which prevails.”406 The engineer and mathematical physicist R.S. Woodward testified to the fact that scientific categories had become useful to many fields: “Consciously or unconsciously, the terminology, the figures of speech and the modes of thought of science are being applied to all subjects and objects of human concern.”407


As a rigorous method of inquiry, science could evoke little criticism. It was when it approached the status of an ideology and became scientific materialism that some humanists began to wonder what effect this approach would have upon the study of humankind. In an early essay, John Dewey anticipated the diminishing significance of humanity that a purely scientific understanding would bring. “Physics, chemistry, biology, geology, each separately, and all in their combination, [have] reached a point where they thrust forth their arms to claim man as a mere fact within the world of nature, the realm of events in space and time. And with man included wholly in the physical kingdom vanishes wholly the last remnant of excuse for even the shadow of the supernatural.” Indeed, there was an unmistakable sense in which the rise of scientific materialism was correspondingly related to the diminishment of humankind’s significance. “For a hundred and fifty years past [1900],” observed James, “the progress of science has seemed to mean the enlargement of the material universe and the diminution of man’s importance . . . . She it is who stands firm; he it is who must accommodate himself. Let him record truth, inhuman though it be, and submit to it!”

Some readers will doubtless conclude that humanists’ fears were exaggerated. Indeed, considering the question on a purely rhetorical level, such as that exemplified by Princeton President James McCosh, this critique seems warranted: “Does it [positivism]...

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not undermine every belief in goodness, in affection, in beauty, and in truth, to which
men have ever clung? Does it not leave the soul as the moon is supposed to be left, and as
some think the earth will be ultimately left, with its rocks, its extinct volcanoes, but
without atmosphere, without water, without life?”

Although McCosh’s overall thought is more complicated than this quotation
suggests, he was concerned that his less discriminating students would become positivists
in college. It was primarily for the sake of these individuals, I think, that McCosh
indulged in such rhetorical excesses. Those who were more prepared to discern the times,
like the philosopher Ernest Albee, well knew that there are idealists who consider
themselves empiricists and rationalists (though in a modified sense). For these thinkers,
the binaries of “dogmatic materialism” and “subjective idealism” were ‘bygone
theories.’ For the most part, the intricacies of Albee were lost upon students who
continued to prefer the strict separation of idealist from materialist thought.

But the shadow of positivism was not without its source. Indeed, in fearing a
materialist explanation of existence, humanists were not responding to developments in
remote fields or in distant disciplines: Philosophy itself was grappling with its own
identity: Was it still part of the humanities, or was it really a branch of the physical
sciences? Philosophers who answered the question by siding with the field’s historic
character tended to take a dim view of the appropriation of empirical means to solve

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412 This question is fruitfully taken up by Wilson, *Science*, esp. 56-75.
philosophical problems; whereas those thinkers who favored the adoption of a scientific method looked forward to the respectability and legitimacy that its use would confer.\textsuperscript{413}

An analysis of philosophy courses at Harvard from 1880-1910 suggests that while courses with an idealist inflection persisted throughout the period (e.g., Josiah Royce taught “Metaphysics.—The fundamental problems of Theoretical Philosophy. Realism and Idealism; Freedom, Theology, and Theism” around the turn of the century), overall the department did move in a “scientific” direction. This pattern was punctuated by William James’ “Psychology—Bain’s Mental Science—Lectures,”\textsuperscript{414} Charles C. Everett’s “The Psychological Basis of Religious Faith,”\textsuperscript{415} Edwin B. Holt’s “Experimental Psychology (elementary laboratory course).—The psychology of sensation, and of the elementary mental processes,”\textsuperscript{416} and Robert M. Yerkes’ “Animal Psychology.”\textsuperscript{417}

That Harvard’s philosophy department routinely offered courses of a scientific nature is not surprising given the fact that an aspiring scientific psychology had yet to gain its complete separation from philosophy.\textsuperscript{418} Despite the ongoing presence and

\textsuperscript{413} Ibid., 57.

\textsuperscript{414} The Harvard University Catalogue, 1880-81 (Cambridge: Charles W. Sever, 1880), 82.

\textsuperscript{415} The Harvard University Catalogue, 1890-91 (Cambridge: Damrell & Upham, 1890), 75.


\textsuperscript{417} Ibid., 356.

vitality of idealism, many professors and students continued to worry that university education was being threatened by natural science, and thus was susceptible to the promotion of scientific materialism.

VIII

In an intellectual context in which some humanists were uncertain about what effect natural science would have upon the study of humankind, and others feared the emergence of scientific materialism as an ideology, students responded to philosophical Pragmatism with ambivalence. An essayist covering William James’ seminal talk titled “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results” first summarized Pragmatism’s method of resolving philosophical impasses: “If two philosophical principles appear to conflict, but the truth of one would involve the same practical results as the other, if it were true,—there is no difference between them, they have the same significance. There is no difference which doesn’t make a difference.”419 One could almost hear James in this student’s report. In his essay “What Pragmatism Means,” James had asked “What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle.”420 This student had not only understood the core of James’ argument; he had also discerned the struggle to find lasting ideals in a time increasingly defined by natural science.421 For many likeminded students,

419 “Philosophers Meet,” Californian 12 (August 29, 1898), 1, BL.


421 “Philosophers Meet,” 2.
Pragmatism was “not a star which dwells apart. It revolves in the orbit of empiricism.” And this association was enough to prompt idealists to think of Pragmatism as beholden to science, which they often conflated with scientific materialism.

Reporting on a talk given by the philosophical pragmatist John Dewey at the University of California’s Philosophical Union, on October 4, 1898, an anonymous writer recorded his criticism of the guest speaker’s apparent disavowal of the highest ideals: “As to conduct Dewey doesn’t believe that . . . perfect righteousness is its end. Yet he does not clearly state what that end is. And he gives us a freedom which is not freedom at all. There is a cosmical good, and the individual must put himself in harmony with that—then he is free.”

A few weeks later, on October 28, philosopher Ernest C. Moore presented a summary of Dewey’s position in the same venue titled “Professor Dewey on the Motive, The Criterion, and the Ideal of Conduct.” Rejecting Kant’s “Categorical Imperative”—in which conduct must be universal to be true—Moore asserted that there was “no law-giving as distinct from law-receiving self. We do not get the concept of duty from outside . . . . The obligation is laid upon us from within. It is an obligation of our own nature, an

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422 Lora Baird Leonard, “Pragmatism as a Method,” The Smith College Monthly 16 (February 1909): 273. None of the Pragmatists dealt with here were in fact materialists. Both Dewey and James forged something of a middle ground between materialism and idealism. What is not clear is why students tended to locate them in the former camp without recognizing their latent idealist sympathies. Students appear not to have seriously considered contemporary attempts to lessen the materialism-idealism divide. One example of a student who did understand, albeit belatedly, the via media of his professors is Sidney Hook, The Quest for Being (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1961), 229-238. Also illuminating in this connection is Richard J. Bernstein, “Pragmatism’s Common Faith,” in Stuart Rosenbaum, ed., Pragmatism and Religion: Classical Sources and Original Essays (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2003), 129-141.

423 “Dewey’s Philosophy,” The Daily Californian 12 (October 4, 1898): n.p., BL.
inner obligation. We do not do good because it is the will of God; we do it because it is our own will.”

Moore’s analysis of Dewey was standard Pragmatist fare. In “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” James had announced that “we have learned what the words ‘good,’ ‘bad,’ and ‘obligation’ severally mean. They mean no absolute natures, independent of personal support. They are objects of feeling and desire, which have no foothold or anchorage in Being, apart from the experience of actually living minds.”

“Whether a God exist,” concluded James, “or whether no God exist, in yon blue heaven above us bent, we form at any rate an ethical republic here below.” Almost with a single voice, Dewey, Moore, and James were articulating an ethical system that looked to the horizontal plane of human experience for answers to provisional and ultimate problems.

This humanistic ethical system was not lost on students. After listening to Dewey present a paper at the Philosophy Club at Wellesley, an anonymous writer noted in the College News that the speaker “first discussed the question of Truth, and came to the conclusion that truth was not an absolute final thing but the highest action possible at any

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424 E.C. Moore, Professor Dewey on the Motive, the Criterion, and the Ideal of Conduct (October 28, 1898), Philosophical Union, CU-200, Box 5, n.p., BL.


426 Ibid., 198. Also, see Gerald Myers, William James: His Life and Thought (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 333-370, for an extended discussion of James’ treatment of morality and religion.

given moment or event in the chain of such moments and events in human life.”428 Such relativist interpretations of truth raised sobering concerns—even for those students who admitted being impressed with the philosopher’s oratorical skills. This student concluded his report by stating that “although Mr. Dewey’s creed does not seem a particularly consoling one by which to steer one’s life, his keen, clear, intellectual weighting of existence and its conditions could not help but hold our attention and admiration.”429

Other students were concerned more with the internal properties of Pragmatism than its spokesman’s inability to comfort the human soul. Smith’s Leola Baird Leonard, class of 1909, argued that Pragmatists’ lack of attention to the relation of mental activity to the whole of experience exposed a serious weakness in their foundation.430 Leonard was not persuaded by the distinction that Pragmatists fought so hard to make—that theirs was a philosophy wholly concerned with results, because these, unlike “the nature of things,” could be described with empirical precision.431 For Leonard, “to hold that the idea which has arisen out of a vital difference in the constitution of things may be known by its effects, is to assume a knowledge of a coherent order of objective reality; for without such a knowledge how could the proper effects be known as such?”432 Students

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430 Leonard, “Pragmatism,” 278.

431 Students appear to have exaggerated the distinction between idealism and Pragmatism. In reality no absolute distinction is defensible: even James admitted that “the pragmatist himself has no objection to abstractions.” William James, “Pragmatist Account of Truth,” The Philosophical Review 17 (1908): 11.

432 Leonard, “Pragmatism,” 278.
like Leonard insisted that Pragmatism’s concentration upon results was intimately tied to
deeper philosophical presuppositions.433

Idealist students rejected Pragmatism not just because they refused to believe that
it was a pure methodology with no a priori assumptions; they rejected it because they felt
it did not give them any means with which to make normative distinctions. Leonard put it
thus: “It is certainly as necessary for us to distinguish between good and bad effects as it
is to distinguish between efficiency and non-efficiency. We want to be able to say what
kind of difference in action is desirable and what kind is not. Such a problem is surely a
pertinent one; but pragmatism, by failing to analyze fully the relation of thought to action
in its solution of problems, gives up its distinctive position as a philosophical method.”434

Idealists’ contention that Pragmatism lacked ethical substance raised suspicions
that it could not support belief in God.435 James denied this conclusion and insisted that
Pragmatism, as a method, did provide a way of “settling metaphysical disputes that
otherwise might be interminable.”436 For James, Pragmatism did not lack an ethical
backbone; it rather had “no prejudices whatever, no obstructive dogmas, no rigid canons

433 The extra-methodological quality of Pragmatism is supported by Stanley Grean, “Elements of
Transcendence in Dewey’s Naturalistic Humanism,” American Academy of Religion Journal 52

of Materialism,” 6.

435 My view has been informed by John P. Diggins, The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and
the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and David A.
107.

436 James, Pragmatism, 25.
of what shall count as proof.” So sure was James of Pragmatism’s openness and potential service to ethics and religion that he asked, “How could pragmatism possibly deny God’s existence? She could see no meaning in treating as ‘not true’ a notion that was pragmatically so successful.”

Detrimental to James’ effort of trying to allay students’ doubts was the dependence of his philosophy upon natural science and thus its association with materialism. (And this despite James’ own heroic effort at generating reasoned arguments against materialism.) Dogged suspicion of Pragmatists’ support of this doctrine also put it at odds with defenders of the “classical” curriculum, who generally regarded such philosophies as alien to a liberal education. These loose associations had just enough currency to make them plausible, so that when James criticized against idealists like Josiah Royce some observers mistakenly concluded that Pragmatism must be a type of materialism.

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437 Ibid., 26.

438 Ibid.


440 James frequently discoursed upon materialism in his lectures. See Burkhardt, ed., Manuscript Lectures, passim. Also, see James, “Philosophical Conceptions,” 12 ff. For a succinct description of James’ struggle with materialism, see Kuklick, Rise of American Philosophy, 334 ff.

441 See Burleigh Taylor Wilkins, “James, Dewey, and Hegelian Idealism,” The Journal of the History of Ideas 17 (1956): 332-346, for a helpful discussion of the debate between idealists and materialists. Some scholars have tried to explain the modern conflict by tracing Pragmatism to Romanticism, not scientism. The most convincing of these is Russell Goodman, American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), esp. 69-78.
IX

Among materialism’s many and variously sensitive detractors, few were as eloquent as McCosh. In his extended reflection on the susceptibility of youth to this dreaded ideology, titled Christianity and Positivism, McCosh wrote that “there are susceptible youths who catch the spirit of the times, as lake waters take the hue of the sky above, or as worms take the dye of the herbage they feed on. Just as there was a great run two ages ago toward rationalism, and an age ago towards intuitionism, so there is a corresponding set of youths in our day who will become Comtists, or Millites, or Spencerites, or even Huxleyites: the demand will create the supply; and they will find able men to lead them on over the dreary plain strewn with the skeletons of those who have there wandered and perished.” In a report to the Princeton Board of Trustees, on November 8, 1877, McCosh made his concern even more explicit: “I believe that a debasing materialism is greatly promoted in the present day by many educational institutions encouraging physical, to the utter neglect of mental and moral science; and that an exclusiveness and angularity have been imparted to many minds by their being led to cultivate science without literature or literature without science.”

Such was McCosh’s disquiet that he had the following note inserted in the Catalogue of the College of New Jersey for the academic year 1883-84: “The President

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442 To understand McCosh’s hostility to materialism, one must comprehend his embrace of “Intuitional Realism.” For a thorough discussion of McCosh’s philosophy, see J. David Hoeveler, Jr., James McCosh and the Scottish Intellectual Tradition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 111-146.

443 McCosh, Christianity and Positivism, 182.

444 James McCosh, Course of Study in Princeton College: A Report by the President to the Board of Trustees of the College of New Jersey (November 8, 1877), n.p., ML.
[McCosh] begins this course [in physiological psychology] by showing in opposition to materialism that we have a means of knowing mind by self-consciousness just as we have a means of knowing matter by the senses, and that the two possess essentially different properties, while they are closely connected with each other.”

The dismay felt at Princeton was present elsewhere. At Wellesley, President Caroline Hazard began a lecture titled “What Shall Make Us Whole?” by ticking off a series of conditions she considered positively chilling: “The age has spent itself in scientific inquiry, physical law is studied as never before. The danger of utter materialism menaces us. Physical causes are assigned to all effects.” At Middlebury College, on July 6, 1881, President Cyrus Hamlin made materialism the subject of his “Inaugural Discourse.” Hamlin first denied materialism’s scientific pretensions and asserted that it was really a religion. Such a disguise, he believed, was undertaken in order to cast the pall of agnosticism over Christianity. “Denying all intuition of truth,” Hamlin began, “or truth as necessary and unchangeable, and making the mind a complex of sensations, it [materialism] enters at once upon a theological warfare in order to relegate all religion to the unknown and the unknowable.” Hamlin’s second point was that materialism rendered the judgment of right and wrong, good and bad, nonsensical by elaborating a complete physicalist anthropology. “Its [materialism’s] theory of man and mind takes away all possibility of freedom, and therefore of a self-directive personality; of true

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446 Caroline Hazard, “What Shall Make Us Whole?” Papers of Caroline Hazard, Writings: General, n.d., 1, WCA.

447 Cyrus Hamlin, Inauguration of Cyrus Hamlin as President of Middlebury (July 6, 1881), 9.
responsibility, therefore of merit and demerit, of vice and virtue. Across the nation, many college presidents and humanities professors worried that their schools were promoting materialism, if not intentionally then at least accidentally.

Hamlin’s discourse was not simply a diatribe against materialist thought and its advocates; it was also a ringing affirmation of idealism. In a statement that appears aimed at comforting Middlebury’s trustees, Hamlin described the alternative to materialism in glowing terms: “I can say boldly that this college believes in the existence of mind as distinct from matter, in personality, in human freedom and responsibility, in the intuitions of unchangeable and eternal truth, in a universe, in the reign of law and design, and in the existence of a law-giver and designer who is ‘God over all blessed forever.’” President Hazard could not have agreed more: “It has been truly said that our colleges are the great strongholds of idealism. Woe to us as a people if it should cease to be so, if in the houses of learning crowded by the most ambitious of our young men and young women the gleam should cease to be the motive and incentive that it is.”

“Should I swerve from this philosophy [of idealism],” wrote Hamlin, “which makes a man a person, not a thing; which makes him beside his bodily organism a spiritual intelligence and not a mere complex of sensations; which makes him free and self-

448 Ibid., 10.


450 Hamlin, Inauguration, 9.

451 Caroline Hazard, “Where the College Fails the Girl,” Papers of Caroline Hazard, Publications (1900-1942), n.d., 1, WCA.
determined, self-directed, and not a machine driven by the present motive; which makes him responsible to God and destined to immortality, it will be your most solemn duty to displace me at once as false as to my covenant with you and a base subverter of the designs of the founders of this college.”

Underwriting Hamlin’s oration on the glory of idealism was the belief that institutions of higher learning, like the individuals who make them up, must have a religion. Hence he declared that if you “leave a college without any religious teaching . . . it will make a religion of its own. It will have a theology of its own. It may be the religion of agnosticism. It may have the theology of Herbert Spencer and John S. Mill, or Robert Ingersoll, or some more decent polished system of pantheism.” For many college presidents, it was far better for colleges to have Christianity as the necessary foundation of learning than any surrogate religion.

Following a tradition that stretched back to the origins of the university in the Middle Ages, college presidents during the late nineteenth century explained the raison d’etre of their institutions by assuming a hierarchy in which all fields of knowledge rested upon and derived their legitimacy from religion. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that all fields were to serve religious interests. Henry Durant, Wellesley’s evangelical founder, summarized this view with especial clarity when he spoke of every field, including philosophy, as serving God.

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453 Ibid., 16.
454 [Henry Durant], *Notes of Mr. Durant’s Sermon on ‘The Spirit of the College’* (Boston: Frank Wood, 1890). For a more complete description of Durant’s ideals, see Florence Converse, *The Story of Wellesley* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1919), 1-49.
During the late nineteenth century many students in the humanities feared that natural science would introduce a post-Christian world in which moral judgments would lose their meaning. This concern was especially pronounced in philosophy because this field had historically functioned as the seat of ethical instruction. Consequently, many idealist professors and likeminded students held tightly to the reality of moral ideals, insisting that these were necessary for a proper understanding of human nature as well as the capacity for normative judgments. But moral ideals were just then losing their traditional conduit of the moral philosophy course, a development that scattered these principles throughout the curriculum in such a way that it became difficult to precisely discern their ideological nature. Issuing from these desultory circumstances was the mixture of Christianity with one or another kind of idealism, a tendency shaping the writing of both students and their professors. In extreme cases, such promiscuous combinations led to the subversion of Christianity by some amorphous creed.

In the end, what enabled idealism to carve out a central place in the curriculum and (more rarely) function as an alternative to Protestant religion was the rise of scientific materialism. Beginning in the 1870s and gathering force throughout the last two decades of the nineteenth century, student idealists reacted against natural science and “affiliate” theories like Pragmatism because they conceived of them as (at worst) threatening to their moral ideals and (at best) ethically inert. Although the education of these collegians did not always include a concentrated form of ethical instruction like the late moral philosophy course, it still exposed them to Christian principles that helped students survive the tumult of their times.
CHAPTER FIVE:

“WE ARE FORMING OUR CHARACTERS”

I

From student literary publications and newspaper reports on college speakers, from class notes, papers, and reminiscences, from the testimony of college professors and presidents, there emerges a profile of students in the Gilded Age that is hard to reconcile with the prevailing conception of them as lazy, indifferent, or even hostile to the educational and cultivating aims of a liberal education. My study does not deny that many students in this period struggled to attain the gloss (let alone the substance) that their education was supposed to impart; it simply reveals the extent to which it succeeded. Why? Because the history of higher education in America has given us a distorted picture of the quality and character of student intellectual life. This is a literature that focuses mainly on students’ clever pranks and destructive riots—not the substance of their intellectual lives.455

Cynicism explains part of this omission. While historians are right to subject student writing to as much scrutiny as they would any other human endeavor, they ought to approach student thought with an open mind rather than from the perspective that it

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455 A recent iteration of this tendency can be found in John R. Thelin, A History of American Higher Education (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2004), 163 ff.
was irredeemably bound to class or simply disingenuous.\textsuperscript{456} Most scholars have failed to give student intellectual life much thought, preferring instead to explore other comparably less reflective areas. While not intentional, the effect of this neglect has reinforced the image of a thoroughly social student culture.

Another more informed contingent of historians have probably stayed away from student thought because they have seen it as weakened by the emergence of the elective system and the consequent decline of the moral philosophy course. Viewing the “classical” curriculum as intellectually robust, these scholars have shown little interest in student intellectual life after Charles William Eliot’s 1869 inauguration at Harvard ignited something of a national curricular revolution.\textsuperscript{457} While these historians are probably right to assume that (compared to their antebellum counterparts) many students in the Gilded Age lacked a coherent intellectual framework, their indifference to the actual substance of student writing exaggerates the image of an anti-intellectual student culture.

II

When Gilded Age students declared that art was the “offspring of Religion,” and that its principal aim therefore was to give perfect expression to a spiritual world, they were drawing upon ideas that had broad resonance in the first half of the nineteenth

\textsuperscript{456} While underwriting much of the literature on student life, this conclusion is most explicitly stated in Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, \textit{Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 68.

century. Similarly, when students expressed interest in philosophical themes they were iterating the concerns of their counterparts before the Civil War. In literature, too, students of this period who were drawn toward didactic novels had much in common with their predecessors before the war.

Of course there is no denying that students enrolled in colleges and universities during the last third of the nineteenth century inhabited a different world than their antebellum predecessors. Late Victorians witnessed, among other things, the tremendous growth in cities, recurrent labor strife, and massive immigration. Although students tended not to write about these issues as much as they did, say, the nature of beauty or George Eliot’s novels, these social facts left a distinct imprint upon the age.

Americans living during the period 1870-1900 also witnessed an Aesthetic Movement that treated beauty as an end in itself. Although this development elicited critical remarks from both students and cultural commentators, among idealists the apotheosis of art was tolerated because it was feared that subjecting aesthetics to scientific scrutiny would result in the surrender of certain crucial concepts like beauty to cultural relativism. This was an especially troubling prospect since the final years of the

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century saw art emerge as a curricular linchpin of liberal education.⁴⁶² Hence if principles central to art could be undermined, what would hold education together?

Idealists who worried that traditional conceptions in art could be effaced by natural science reacted to this threat by sacralizing art. For students like Daniel Mason of Harvard, beauty had become the “supreme value in life.” Such pronouncements revealed a significant change in students’ intellectual outlook. During the 1860s and 1870s, when courses like drawing and painting were first being integrated into the liberal arts curricula of many schools, students approached art as 1) a source of religious contemplation; and 2) as a means of moral instruction. By the 1890s, at the height of the Aesthetic Movement, students responded to the rise of science in fear that ideals like truth and beauty were in danger. In this climate, some students no longer regarded art as a means to something higher (i.e., as a means to thinking about God or virtue), but began to see it as an end in itself.

III

An analysis of student writing on literary themes reveals that many Gilded Age students were drawn to normative issues. While not every student shared idealists’ fondness for literary works that carried a “dogmatic” purpose, more than a few preferred books that demonstrated philosophical ambition and contained ethical substance. With Vassar’s H.R.R., these students believed that “the ethical element places within reach of the novelist a new power.”

Some students approached literature with so much didactic interest that they rendered it as “a species of sermon.” Reflecting on George Eliot’s oeuvre, for example, Vassar student N.P.M observed that the novelist’s characters were a “sermon for humanity, a sermon that moves and touches us as only a sympathetic friend could. It says ‘Be noble.’”

There was something new about idealists searching for religious instruction and inspiration in literature. Where antebellum students tended to approach classical thinkers like Virgil or Juvenal for positive reasons—i.e., to gain an “authoritative” endorsement of a classical virtue like honor—their later counterparts drew close to literature mainly because of their misgivings about scientific materialism. Hence Harvard’s Charles Nutter noted in 1892 that the greatest service Matthew Arnold rendered his age was “to stand for... humanity against the physical sciences, which has [sic] advanced all along the line during the past fifty years.”

For many students of Nutter’s disposition, the intellectual world was very much divided between humanistic inquiry and scientific rationality.463 In this Manichean perspective, humanists were expected to bring their moral sensibility to bear upon their subject matter. Hence Claudia Bennett’s notes for her “English Literature” class at Wellesley describes “Anglo-Saxons” as “Strong and Firm”; “Patient and Practical”; “Earnest and Social”; “Freedom loving”; “Pure in life”; “Respectful to women”; “True to a high sense of duty.” Scientists, on the other hand, were characterized as failing to cultivate the “very forces that would most tend to humanize and sweeten our lives.”

According to critics like Abraham Espenshade, scientists not only promoted an imbalanced education; they also ignored the spiritual nature of humanity. Although there is plenty of evidence contradicting Espenshade’s last claim, it is curious that many humanists could not bring themselves to recognize the normative impulse behind scientific labor. For these thinkers, the humanities enjoyed a purchase over the moral life that scientists could not achieve.

The apprehension about natural science impelled some idealists to mine literature and poetry for religious instruction and ethical counsel. This fear also provoked others to explore in the same sources the penumbra of an alternative ideological and religious outlook. For students like Smith’s Edith Hawkes, literary texts were significant not because they drew a person to God or instructed her conscience; they were important because they enabled the individual to see the fundamental mystery of existence.

While Hawkes’ writing stands out as somewhat mercurial (see chapters 2 & 3), one can argue that such students were only following the logic of idealism to its ultimate conclusion. For beyond the expectation that students should be imbued with the spirit of literature—“to know it,” as one student put it, “as an interpretation of life”—there was precious little to hold idealism together. True, many collegians insisted that novels imparted “a sense of the beauty of holiness,” but even these students rarely articulated what, in fact, was the substance of that holiness.

Wishing their literature to be “serious” but not stamped by any explicit religious creed left students in a nebulous place. Students could express interest in novels that

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gestured toward something higher, pointing to something beyond the terrestrial sphere—but they could rarely give this wish any more concrete shape. Like Hawkes, students could use literature to explore vaguely spiritual (as distinct from specifically Christian) aspects of their experience, but one struggles to discern in their writing anything like a coherent intellectual outlook.

One might be inclined to lose patience with the ambiguous writing of students if it were not for the fact that they were responding to a real predicament. Some of their strongest literary influences were not themselves a shining example of intellectual clarity. For instance, one student described George Eliot’s religion as “broad as the rude faith of the uncouth Indian who forms his doctrine by the green earth or the blue dome of the heavens.” Too, as the fortunes of the moral philosophy course began to decline with that of the “classical” curriculum, students were left with very little that could impart unity to their studies. At Harvard, Norton’s inaugural position as “Lecturer on the History of the Fine Arts as Connected with Literature” brought together many strands of students’ education and thus was an exceptional success. Although many schools attempted to create some version of what Harvard accomplished through Norton, few students felt that their studies were bound together by an overarching philosophy of education.465 Many students also lacked meaningful contact with and advice from their professors. Part of this isolation from their teachers resulted from the emergence of a peer culture that now tended to segregate students from their elders. Another, equally important, factor was professors’ pursuit of professional objectives, which tended to reduce the amount of time

they could devote to students. Laurence Veysey described the result as “the awful chasm.”

For all these reasons, students were left to alone to cobble together an intellectual framework that could clarify the dizzying changes taking place in the curriculum and in the world outside their college gates.

In the absence of a clear and directed educational program, some students took matters into their own hands and invested literature with larger purposes. “Every novel should have some grand, important lesson to impart,” began Princeton’s G.F. Greene. “The evils of life are so many and various that the influence of the novel is certainly needed on the side of justice, truth, and right.” Such an objective might well have remained positive had natural science not been threatening to reconceive traditional conceptions of “the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.” But in the context of the late nineteenth century, when more and more importance was being placed on natural science, idealists reacted defensively to the idea that it could probe the depths of the literary soul.

With Woodrow Wilson, these students rejected the scientific approach to literature, preferring instead to “experience it rather than analyze it too formally.”

Where antebellum students approached prose fiction and poetry with a desire to glean normative instruction, their late Victorian counterparts looked to literature mainly

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466 Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 294. Faculty-student interactions is one area where the analytical category of gender has made an important contribution in the study of higher education. Patricia Palmieri has shown that at Wellesley students and professors retained a close bond long after it ceased to characterize relationships at Harvard and other male institutions. See Patricia Palmieri, *In Adamless Eden: The Community of Women Faculty at Wellesley* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 181-195.

467 It is equally true that these conditions induced some students to seek refuge in the world of humor magazines and recreational clubs, of which every school had many. But this tendency has received sufficient scholarly attention and thus is unnecessary to revisit here.

as a defense against the encroachment of scientific materialism. This latter impetus drove students toward two distinct alternatives (one familiar, another unfamiliar): 1) to mine literary texts for their moral and religious significance; and 2) to explore the conceptual borders of their religious worldview. For some students, it appears, literary works filled them with “royal optimism and faith,” others were led to a religious experimentation that bore uncertain fruit.

IV

Although student writing in philosophy exhibits a similar concern with natural science as is found in their reflections on art and literature, here they did manage to articulate a strong counterbalancing belief in “the reality of absolute being, absolute truth and absolute moral law.” This conviction drew support from the content of philosophy courses, which commonly contained an ethical objective. Despite historians’ tendency to think of such normative concerns as a relic of the Victorian period, historian Bruce Leslie found that at Bucknell University President John Harris taught a required senior ethics course “until his retirement in 1919.” Stephen Clement’s work on Vassar reveals that a similar course was offered there beyond the first decade of the twentieth century. The University of Michigan Philosophy Department sustained an interest in ethics well past the 1950s. Hence the presence of normative questions in the curriculum, most particularly in philosophy courses, did not disappear with the end of the Victorian period in 1901. My own work reveals that the persistence of philosophy teaching rooted in ethical concerns

was sustained by the fear that natural science was threatening to introduce a post-Christian world in which moral judgments would lose their meaning.

As we have seen, the presence of normative issues in the humanities curriculum did not mean that all students arrived at the same conclusions. Given the relatively free intellectual sphere they inhabited, it was inevitable that some students would arrive at conclusions that their professors would probably not have endorsed. If student writing can be trusted, some idealists who followed their intuitive hermeneutic floated far away from what can be called “a Christian mind.” At the University of California Clara Bartling was so confident in her deduction that morality found its origin in human society (rather than in divinity) that she dedicated a whole article to it titled “The Future of Morality.”

Although some idealists were led to feed on foreign intellectual pastures, the majority stayed closer to home, to a world framed by Protestant Christianity.\textsuperscript{470} On this basis one may speculate that idealists’ proximity to faith led them to be critical of philosophical movements like Pragmatism that exhibited little interest in classical conundrums like the “nature of truth” or the “pursuit of goodness.” Although Pragmatists like William James tried to convince students that his philosophy was fundamentally open to such questions, idealists like Smith’s Leola Leonard were not persuaded because they were looking for an absolutist basis for their ethical judgments.

Students of Leonard’s persuasion perceived more than just an ethical problem in Pragmatism; they also suspected that this philosophy was closely associated with scientific materialism and thus constituted a threat to idealism. During the 1880s and 1890s, when many philosophers were looking to natural science for a larger rationale for their work, student idealists rejected Pragmatism because it revolved, as one student put it, “in the orbit of empiricism.” Although few students explained in detail why they linked Pragmatism to empiricism, such an association was plausible enough to stamp the former with suspicion. Of course not all students shared this reservation. But for those who did, there was something profoundly troubling about a philosophical tradition that appeared beholden to the dictates of materialist science.

If antebellum American students lived in an intellectual world in which science and religion remained compatible avenues to truth, their counterparts in the 1880s and 1890s lived in a time wherein natural science had grown so important that entire disciplines like philosophy had fallen into an identity crisis.471 Lacking any substantial intellectual counterweight to the claims of natural science, idealists responded to this epistemological imbalance by either rejecting philosophical schools like Pragmatism or, more rarely, embracing an entirely rational explanation for morals. Either way, student philosophical writing reveals that idealists resided in a precarious intellectual place.

V

What conclusion can we draw about the quality and character of student thought during the Gilded Age? On the basis of student writing in literary periodicals, class

papers, notes, and reminiscences from six prominent institutions of higher education, it is clear that a vibrant intellectual life flourished among students of an idealist turn of mind. Although these students’ interests probably never defined their classes, let alone their schools, collectively idealists amounted to more than an eccentricity.

Even if it were possible to arrive at the exact number of students committed to their education, we would still have to acknowledge that many students during the Gilded Age seemed more interested in entertainment and social activities than in academics. Such an observation is too widely noted in the literature to be easily dismissed. Robert Grant, who attended Harvard during the 1870s, confessed that “there was much sociability among the students in my day. There was considerable loafing in one another’s rooms, and sitting around doing nothing.” Reminiscing on his student days at Princeton during the 1890s, M’Cready Sykes was so astonished with the “absurd minimum of real intellectual effort, with such a preposterous paucity of anything approaching real scholarship or even mere acquaintance with more than a meager part of what had been said or thought in the world of educated men . . . that to look at it now [1931] makes one wonder how we were ever allowed to get away with it.”

Even after Woodrow Wilson improved the intellectual atmosphere at Princeton with his preceptor program in 1905, “one in four [students] had been summoned before

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the faculty for various offenses, an average of five times each; more than 10 percent had been sent home, nearly half had been ‘conditioned’ (about three times each), more than a quarter had received ‘pensums,’ or extra class work, for unexcused class absences (one had had twenty hours’ worth), and 15 percent—35 men—had been arrested by the local constabulary.474 Before Wilson left Princeton for the governor’s mansion in New Jersey, he witnessed between 11 and 16 percent of freshmen flunk out and return home to “ponder their delinquencies.”

Students’ reputation for intellectual indifference prompted many outsiders to imagine that all students consisted of the “fast set,” collegians that were more interested in drinking and gambling than in academic matters. Such suspicions drew the response of one pseudonymously named Aleck Quest, who in 1888 explained that the “majority of [Harvard] students are quiet fellows whose utmost gaiety will scarcely bring the traditional blush to the cheek of modesty. Of the remainder, most drink a little, play a little, get into all sorts of foolish and reprehensible scrapes very often, and rather desire a reputation for rapidity than actually get up the high speed; while the ‘fast set’ will comprise, say, one man in every twenty—not an alarming number of wild oat sowers and gleaners, to be sure.”475

Whatever the ratio of the devoted to the distracted might have been, women collegians also struggled to maintain an academic focus. A journalist reporting on Vassar


in the 1880s noticed that there were three classes of students in Poughkeepsie’s premier women’s college: “society people, digs, and the great undistinguishable middle class.”

Writing with an edge of satire, L.R. Smith noted that the social pressure against intellectually engaged students was so great that “many of them, before the end of the first year, discover what education really means, and then become valuable members of society; and, as the incorrigible almost always break down before the end, the Senior class seldom counts many digs among its numbers.” At Smith College, the concern over distractions to the intellectual life prompted student Olivia Howard Dunbar to write an entire article warning about “The Dangers of the Social Element in College Life.”

Although the factors leading away from academic work were present even in the early days of the best women’s colleges, these did not generally define student culture until after 1900.478

Contemporaries challenged the notion that early students at women’s colleges were serious while their later counterparts were slackers. In an article titled “Some Unchanged Aspects of Undergraduate Life,” Smith’s Julia Caverno insisted that students

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476 L.R. Smith, “Social Life at Vassar,” Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine 39 (May 1889): 842. The moniker “Digs” was used to identify any student who was considered to be unduly devoted to his or her studies.


in the 1870s were not all “a consistent mass of ‘digs’ and ‘prods.’” “Then as now,” Caverno argued, “students groaned over work and then did it, grew to like it often in the doing, but said little of that.”

Caverno’s last observation holds an important clue to the distortion that one sees in the historical literature on student life. This body of knowledge has taken public, recreational, and especially riotous activity as constitutive of students’ genuine interests while paying almost no attention to their academic concerns. But if Caverno was right (and I think she was), then the history of students should include this more silent preoccupation.

The misrepresentation of student life is not due to scholars’ ignorance of the imbalance in the sources. Over a hundred years ago, John E. Bradley, then-President of Illinois College, stated that “in the college as in the outside world, industry and good habits attract little attention, while idleness, escapades, and every act which would fain be concealed have a wonderful facility of getting themselves recorded.”

Historians’ insensitivity to Bradley’s observation has produced ill effects. First, it has led scholars to take “idleness” and “escapades” as the predominant—and in many cases exclusive—interest of students. Second, scholars’ failure to approach the abundance of “recreational” sources with skepticism has led them to over-emphasize its importance. Third, this same limitation has clouded scholars’ ability to recognize

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students’ scholarly work, and with it the normative basis underlying their more sober interests.

VI

For modern readers, the most surprising aspect of the intellectual life of Gilded Age students is its normative quality and religious inspiration. Historians have long known that some professors and virtually all the college presidents recognized these two factors as central to the academic enterprise. But with students, the lacuna in the literature has often been filled with the assumption that the moral basis to education was not adequately translated. This assumption, as I have shown, is in need of correction. For students did articulate a normative understanding of their academic work. For example, an anonymous student writing in the Princetonian in 1877 averred that study “assists us to form correct habits in life. As a student works at books, so he is apt to work at other things. If he fritters away his time upon little miscellaneous subjects, it is quite likely that he will make an inconstant and vacillating man. We are forming our characters. We are chiseling out a statue, and every bad habit, whether of body or mind, weakens our hand and lowers our ideal.”

Some students were so confident in the moral implications of educational practices that they advised their fellow collegians what to read: “Read solid books, books whose value is permanent through all time,” urged Ora F. Gardner and Frank L. Janeway, authors of the book Not in the Curriculum: A Book of Friendly Counsel to Students by Two Recent Graduates. “Don’t read literature which poisons the mind or stimulates an

481 “Advantages of Method in Study,” The Princetonian (April 26, 1877), 7, ML.
impure imagination,” continued the authors. “You don’t have to learn all the filthy details of vice to hate it. You don’t have to immerse yourself in a cesspool to appreciate its pollution.”

Of course not all students shared Gardner’s and Janeway’s sensibilities. For example, Harvard’s John Jay Chapman, who studied under Norton and James, recollected that “some word was mentioned now and then about morality and religion, duty, and so forth; but I could not seize or identify these flying thoughts. I knew I had read about all these things somewhere before, but I could not remember where it was.” At Vassar, a student reminiscing on the moralist President John Raymond stated that his “memory of his chapel-talks goes back very far and is very vivid. But it is more an impression of the earnestness and clearness of the speaker and the influence on the students than a recollection of the talks themselves.”

One may also adduce the intractable problem of student cheating as further evidence that collegians were not all morally sensitive. At Princeton, a pseudonymously named “W” boasted that he had tried every possible form of cheating. As was probably the case with other schools, the epidemic of cheating at the University of California grew into such proportions that it virtually dominated the local news for many months during

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484 Harlan P. Lloyd, Life and Letters of John Howard Raymond, Late President of Vassar (New York: Fords, Howard, and Hulbert, 1881), 685.

485 “Confessions of a Shenannygagger,” The Princetonian (April 9, 1880): 210, ML.
the 1880s and 1890s. On September 29, 1893, for example, one writer lamented that cheating on examinations existed in “greater vigor than ever.” The next month, on October 27, an anonymous writer urged all his readers to “do all he can to protect himself from wrong and to reduce the opportunities of this species of immorality to a minimum.” Although the University of California tried to solve its problem by requiring students to sign a statement promising they had “neither received for given help” during examinations, the illicit practice continued to vex college officials for many years.

Instances of student indifference to academic rules and ethical norms led some observers to conclude that institutions of higher learning were awash in immorality. One of the most sustained, if sensational, articulations of this view is Clarence F. Birdseye’s _The Reorganization of Our Colleges_ (1909). Although Birdseye’s sincere concern for the moral welfare of students led him to correctly identify certain conditions that were loosely associated with a general disregard for personal ethics (e.g., colleges in or near urban settings were considered less morally salutary than their rural counterparts), his tendency to speculate about a wide range of evils (including collegiate men’s patronizing of prostitutes) justifiably drew many critics. One of these was Charles K. Adams, who

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486 See, for example, W.D., ’02, “On Cheating,” _University of California Magazine_ 7 (1885): 33-37, University of California (Berkeley), Bancroft Library (BL).

487 _The Berkeleyan_ 2 (September 29, 1893), n.p., BL.

488 _The Berkeleyan_ 2 (October 27, 1893), 113, BL.


490 See, for example, Charles F. Thwing, _American Colleges: Their Students and Work_ (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1878), 48 ff.
refuted Birdseye’s unqualified contention that college life conduces to immorality. Reflecting on the moral condition of students attending schools in Ohio, E.A. Miller concluded that Birdseye’s view was “too extreme all along the line.” In general, contemporary commentators conceded that certain students did use their personal freedom in an inappropriate, even immoral, way; but the majority of students, they felt, lived a responsible moral life.

If most students during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century sincerely tried to live virtuously, one reason is the concerted effort that some colleges made in calling students’ attention to the seriousness of the moral life. At the University of California, President Edward S. Holden told the freshmen in his annual talk in 1887-88 that “the chief end and aim of the University is to help you to train your characters so that you may become upright, just, and honorable citizens in the society in which you live. If your characters are not rightly formed—if your insights are not just—if your hearts are not pure and single—then all the learning that you acquire here will only make you more dangerous to the State in which you live—not more useful nor more serviceable.”

At Harvard, F.C. Sumichrast, longtime chairman of the Department of French, asked freshmen in the academic year 1896-97: “Are you going to be true to us? In everything


open, not concealing, not lying, not attempting to deceive? If you are, you will be true Harvard men; if not, you will be false to your responsibilities, to the honor which is done you by admission here.”

VII

By now it should be clear that many idealist students did take normative injunctions seriously. Those who did tended to identify morals with culture. For idealists, culture functioned as the sphere of the highest artistic and creative expression that served ethical and most importantly religious ideals. This interpretive approach, as I have shown, was particularly vibrant during the 1870s but by the 1910s had become anemic. As the twentieth century progressed, more and more students looked to culture as though it were religion. Representing this view was Princeton’s V. Lansing Collins, who in 1892 said that “culture, to us, is an attempt to assuage the thirst for knowledge concerning that which is behind all things; it is an effort to consummate the quest of that Something of whose existence all things are but tokens; it is a desire to satisfy that inborn soul-longing which unites man with God; it is a striving after a distant, a divine ideal.”

Historians have been keen to point out that the emergence of culture as an educational philosophy represented a departure from an explicitly Christian scheme of tuition. What needs to be stressed is that the moral investment in culture by students

495 F.C. de Sumichrast, “Welcome to the Freshmen Class,” Harvard Graduates Magazine 5 (1896-97): 246. There is an abundance of talks and more formal sermons from all over the country that support the notion that college’s cared about the moral lives of their students. See, for example, John Bascom, Truth and Truthfulness: A Baccalureate Sermon (Milwaukee: Cramer, Aikens and Cramer, 1881); and Frank Strong, The Responsibility of the University Man (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1905), 3-12. 496 V. Lansing Collins, “Culture and Morality,” Nassau Literary Magazine 47 (February 1892): 463, ML.

was a reaction to the rise of scientific materialism. True, not all students experienced the curricular changes taking place in the late nineteenth century as significant, let alone threatening. But for many thoughtful students, the emergence of scientifically inspired courses like Anne Morgan’s “Types of Ethical Theory” or H. Heath Bawden’s “Psychology of Aesthetics” was deeply worrisome. These students may have been clinging stubbornly to the ideals of an age already in steep decline, but they did so because they had correctly recognized the danger facing their beloved “transcendentalists.”

Evidence for idealists’ prescience is not hard to find. On June 20, 1922, the lawyer, writer, and government operative Raymond B. Fosdick delivered a grim oration at Wellesley’s normally pleasant commencement exercises. Titling his talk “Our Machine Civilization,” Fosdick described a dark world in which the devastation wreaked by World War I had extinguished the light of idealism. Although students listening to Fosdick’s oration were probably not aware of it, they were living in an intellectual world very much like the one idealists before the war feared would come true.


498 Raymond B. Fosdick, Our Machine Civilization: An Address Delivered at the Commencement Exercises of Wellesley College (June 20, 1922), Convocation and Commencement, WCA.

If idealist students had accurately anticipated the eclipse of their conceptions of “truth and right,” it was because they had spent some time thinking about how their ideals were being shaped by larger scientific forces. This would not have surprised sensitive educators like James McCosh. In a paper delivered to the Council of the Presbyterian Alliance in 1880, “Old Jimmie” described students as “bent on searching into the foundation of every belief.” Not only did McCosh know that students cultivated a vital intellectual life; he also sensed (and feared) that their exposure to natural science caused some of them to doubt “even the truths supposed to be long ago established, such as the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, and the essential distinction between good and evil.”

Historians may argue over how justified idealists’ fear of natural science might have been, but acute contemporaries attest to the fact that students were thinking through scientists’ claims and grappling with their conclusions. In art, student idealists worried that scientific analyses of beauty would render such historic concepts otiose. In literature, collegians argued that philological approaches to literary texts would distract readers from the more important spiritual content of a book and moral intent of the author. In philosophy, these students regarded Pragmatism as dangerously wedded to natural science and thus potentially a threat to idealism. In all of these areas, idealists responded to the curricular and intellectual encroachment of science by either sacralizing the perduring ideals of “the Good, the True, and the Beautiful,” or simply defending them from their putative enemy. Either way, students had proven that, at least for some, the intellectual life was indeed “an idol of the tribe.

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