History of Intellectual Culture

http://www.ucalgary.ca/hic • ISSN 1492-7810
2010/11 • Vol. 9, No. 1

The Moral and Religious Ideals of Students at Vassar College and Wellesley College, 1865-1900

Ángel de Jesús Cortés

Abstract

This article examines the moral and religious ideals of students at Vassar College and Wellesley College during the period 1865 to 1900. Students of this persuasion recorded their musings on ideals such as beauty, purity, and sincerity in literary publications, class notes, student papers, and reminiscences. Although Idealists' lofty preoccupations do not deny the larger social forces transforming collegiate culture, it does suggest the presence of an intellectually serious undergraduate whose interests were decidedly normative.

Introduction

College students of the late nineteenth century (1865-1900) are often remembered for the pranks or games they played or the riots they instigated.[1] Although some scholars have tried to distinguish between different types of students, and admitted that a small species of "grinds" took their studies seriously,[2] the impression persists that the majority of students considered college as "a necessary evil, a price to be paid for admission to the greatest show on earth, campus life."[3] The origins of this recollection stretch back to at least the early twentieth century, when Henry S. Canby described the undergraduate mind as "a slab of course-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, and in many instances we fail to get the expected gloss."[4] Half a century later, Laurence R. Veysey set this image in stone when he characterized students as "marked by a strong resistance to abstract thinking and to the work in the classroom in general."[5] As the citation from Thelin suggests, our thinking about students' disposition toward the life of the mind has not substantially changed.

---

[1] See Henry S. Canby, *College Sons and Fathers* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1915); Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women's Colleges: From Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1920s* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984); Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteen Century to the Present* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987); and John R. Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

[2] Horowitz, *Campus Life*, 1-97; Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 94-114.

[3] Thelin, *A History*, 163.

[4] Canby, *College Sons*, 223.

[5] Veysey, *Emergence*, 272.

What follows is an effort to complicate this perennial portrait by revealing the content of what one particular segment of students cared about. By focusing on the intellectual life of one group of students, this paper intends to start a conversation that will provide a more rounded or complete recollection of collegians. First, key terms must be defined. Students at the center of this study are called "Idealists."[6] These students defined themselves by a special interest in the humanities, usually expressed in fields such as art, literature, and philosophy. Idealists 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."[7] 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),[8] it did nevertheless shape the musings that students produced on enduring questions in the humanities.

This raises the question of what constitutes the humanities. Here, a modern (c.1900) understanding of the term is meant to cover a range of cultural studies such as art, literature, and, to a much lesser extent, philosophy.[9] Within these fields, Idealist intellectual life was markedly (though not exclusively) shaped by ethical and or religious principles.[10] From approximately 1865 to 1900, these students admired art based in part on what it revealed about God; evaluated novelists on the basis of how well they drew out ethical implications; and insisted on a philosophical outlook that grounded its claims on a form of ethical absolutism. The objective in this article is to illuminate the penumbra of student thought, not in a way that would provide comprehensive knowledge, but rather as an initial exploration into an area that has remained *tierra incognita*.

The institutional sites selected to examine this student Idealism are two leading women's colleges, Vassar and Wellesley. Their student sources are especially rich, and the founding visions of these schools included a strong moral and religious imprint that probably shaped the thinking and writing of students. Hence, Vassar and Wellesley's Idealism became some of their students' Idealism. The process of passing on the defining elements of this outlook is best seen in emerging fields such as art, literature, and philosophy. These humanistic fields were burdened, like no other disciplines in the curriculum, with the responsibility of equipping women with the intellectual training and moral sensibilities that would distinguish their liberal education. Women's colleges are also very profitable to study because they carry in institutional form some of the expectations as to women's piety that had marked earlier epochs.[11]

---

[6] Students' tendency to self-identify as "Idealists," or otherwise describe their perspective as "Idealism," can be seen in the following sources: Seeley G. Mudd Library (SGML), Benjamin Lewis Hirshfield, "The Idealist in Literature," *The Nassau Literary Magazine* 50 (October 1894): 143-47; Bancroft Library, "The Ideal Novel," *The Occident* 7 (October 17, 1884): 85-86; Wellesley College Archives (WCA), "Prof. Münsterberg's Lecture," *College News* 8 (December 2, 1908); and SGML, G.F. Greene, "The Ideal Novelist," *The Nassau Literary Review* 36 (September 1880): 47-53.

[7] Edward Strong Worcester, "Morality in Fiction," *The Nassau Literary Magazine* 51 (October 1895): 130.

[8] Mary A. Stankiewicz, "Beauty in Design and Pictures: Idealism and Aesthetic Education," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 21 (1987): 63-76.

[9] My definition of the humanities derives from Jon H. Roberts and James Turner, *The Sacred and Secular University* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 75. See also James Turner, "Secularization and Sacralization: Speculations on Some Religious Origins of the Secular Humanities Curriculum, 1850-1900," in *The Secularization of the Academy*, eds. George M. Marsden and Bradley J. Longfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 74-106.

[10] Student Idealists had an eclectic outlook composed of fragments of Transcendentalism, Romanticism, and Protestant Christianity.

[11] Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), 83-102; Rosalind Rosenberg, "The Academic Prism: The New View of American Women," in *Women of America: A History*, eds. Carol Ruth Berkin and Mary Beth Norton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1979), 318-38; Mary P. Ryan,

Vassar College

Son of James and Anne Vassar who were brewers from Poughkeepsie, New York, Matthew Vassar (1792-1866) got his start in the ale business long before founding and endowing Vassar Female College in 1861. Concrete steps in this direction can be seen in 1814, when the young Vassar decided to enter into a business partnership with his friend Thomas Purser, establishing M. Thomas & Co. When Purser pulled out of the venture two years later due to an illness, Vassar tapped into his broad network of family and friends to continue the business for another thirty years.

By the mid-1840s, Vassar, now a successful brewer, was ready for a vacation. He invited close friend Cyrus Swan to accompany him on a tour of Britain and the continent of Europe. While touring London, Vassar was impressed with a hospital erected by Thomas Guy, a distant relative and shrewd businessman. This experience likely planted the seeds of philanthropy in the brewer, for he visited the hospital several times while he was in the English capital, familiarizing himself with its history and current operation. According to Vassar's biographer Benson J. Lossing, Matthew Vassar "brought home with him much information, in the form of drawings and notes, for his guidance in his own plan of benevolence."[12] Even as Vassar was planning his benevolent undertaking, he was uncertain the direction that his largess should take: should he use it to establish an asylum for the physically afflicted, a school for the poor, or a school for girls?

Upon returning to the United States, Vassar's thoughts circled increasingly around the idea of founding an educational institution devoted to women, likely due to his contact with and admiration for his niece Lydia Booth who ran a small school for women in Poughkeepsie called the "Cottage Hill Seminary." When Booth died in 1855, Milo P. Jewett, a friend of Vassar's, purchased the school. However Jewett, who had previously served as head of the Judson Female Institute in Alabama, quickly outgrew his new acquisition. Jewett appears to have wanted something larger and more grand than a women's seminary, and thus over the course of the next five years he convinced Vassar to give up the dream of founding a hospital and embrace instead the vision of a fully endowed women's college. For Jewett, such an undertaking would signify a "monument more lasting than the pyramids."[13]

Inspired by the example of his niece and encouraged by Jewett, Vassar now set to work on his institution. The first objective was to garner a school charter from the New York legislature, which he subsequently received on 18 January 1861. The following June, the excavation had begun, with Vassar digging up the first ceremonial spade-full of earth. To pay for this project, he presented the trustees with a gift of $400,000 in securities. Jewett, meanwhile, was sent to Europe with the task of learning as much as he could from a wide array of educational and cultural institutions. Among them were La Maison Impériale Napoleon (a school devoted to the instruction of the daughters of the French legion), the royal and imperial libraries and galleries of Berlin and Vienna, Glasgow University, the British Museum, the London College for Ladies, and the Thomas Guy Hospital (probably on recommendation from the founder).

Jewett recorded his impressions from his European travels in a report submitted to the trustees in 1863.[14] Based on his European excursion, Jewett recommended a curriculum consisting of a series of

---

"A Woman's Awakening: Evangelical Religion and the Families of Utica, New York 1800-1840," *American Quarterly* 30 (1978): 602-23. For a modern synthesis, see Marilyn J. Westerkamp, *Women and Religion in Early America, 1600-1850* (New York: Routledge University Press, 1999).

[12] Benson J. Lossing, *Vassar College and its Founder* (New York: C.A. Alvord, 1867), 43.

[13] Quoted in James Monroe Taylor and Elizabeth Hazelton Haight, *Vassar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1915), 38.

[14] Vassar College Libraries (VCL), Archives and Special Collections Library, Milo P. Jewett, *Vassar College: The President's Visit to Europe* (New York: C.A. Alvord, 1863).

collegiate schools in which a student could study (among other things) languages, history, mathematics, and, upon completion, receive a diploma. Jewett's flexible curriculum would be marked by a broad elective system, include no textbooks, and have no written exams.[15] Jewett was counting on receiving unanimous support for his curriculum; when the trustees decided to take more time to think it over, Jewett imprudently wrote a letter to a trustee, lampooning Matthew Vassar as "childish" and "fickle." To make matters worse, Jewett made five other copies of the letter and distributed them among his friends (some of whom sat on the board of trustees). Matthew Vassar was naturally hurt upon reading the letter and, according to James Taylor and Elizabeth Haight, he thenceforth "declined to have any further dealings with Jewett and asked his resignation."[16]

After Jewett's departure, Matthew Vassar had to find a new president. He found one in John Howard Raymond, a member of the original board of trustees and highly regarded by all. Raymond's first and most pressing task was to create a course of study that "while adapted to the special wants of the sex, should be of as high a grade relatively, and should accomplish essentially the same ends, as the American college for men — in other words, to devise a system of *liberal education for women*."[17] Crucially, Raymond rejected Jewett's elective system, arguing that the average student could not be trusted to construct their own curriculum; the college had to take responsibility and create a prescribed course of study (at least to the middle of the sophomore year). Such a conviction did not issue from Raymond's wish to control students' education, let alone their minds, but rather from a desire to "furnish the youthful mind [so that it can] form its own opinions, and understand and explain the grounds on which those opinions rest."[18]

After an initial experiment with a "scientific" and a "classical" course of study, the Vassar curriculum reached an important formulation. The 1874-75 academic year witnessed students taking Latin both semesters of their freshmen year, French or German (both semesters), English composition (both semesters), mathematics (first semester), physiology and hygiene (first semester), natural history (second semester), and lectures on Oriental history (second semester). As sophomores, students took Latin (both semesters), mathematics (both semesters), composition (both semesters), English literature (first semester), lectures on Greek and Roman history (first semester), German or French (second semester), natural history (second semester), chemistry (second semester), and lectures on popular astronomy (second semester). After two years of a prescribed curriculum, students were then able to select the bulk of the remaining classes.[19] By 1875, Vassar had constructed a curriculum that was, for all intents and purposes, identical to its aspirational peers such as Harvard, Princeton, and Yale. (Although Vassar still did not offer Greek, while some of its competitors did.)

Raymond's main objective of providing students with an education that was second to none faced some serious obstacles. One such challenge involved the generally poor educational training that women received before coming to Vassar. Entrance records during the early years show that between two-thirds and three-fourths of Vassar students had been poorly trained.[20] Hence the college instituted a preparatory department to help "special" students catch-up to their better-trained peers. The plan worked: from 1866-

[15] VCL, Elizabeth Adams Daniels, "Milo P. Jewett and the Flexible Curriculum," *Vassar Quarterly* 67 (1971): 11-13.

[16] Taylor and Haight, *Vassar*, 44.

[17] VCL, John H. Raymond, *Vassar College: A Sketch of its Foundations, Aims, and Resources, and of the Development of its Scheme of Instruction to the Present Time* (New York: S.W. Green, 1873), 16. See also VCL, John H. Raymond, "The Demand of the Age for a Liberal Education for Women, and How it Should be Met," in *The Liberal Education of Women*, ed. James Orton (New York: A.S. Barnes and Co., 1873), 27-57.

[18] Quoted in Taylor and Haight, *Vassar*, 73.

[19] Mabel Louise Robinson, *The Curriculum of the Woman's College* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1918), 8-17. A revealing document in this connection is VCL, Vassariana, 376.8 D34, Hermione L. Dealey, "A Comparative Study of the Curricula of Wellesley, Smith, and Vassar Colleges," 1915.

[20] Taylor and Haight, *Vassar*, 64ff.

72, the number of students entering as specials declined from 189 to 41.[21] Commitment to the "high character of the college" plus a growing sensitivity to how Vassar was being perceived in the community led the school to admit progressively fewer special students over time. In 1888, after many years of remedial work, Vassar closed the preparatory department.

Just as early Vassar bore the mark of Raymond's high intellectual standards, it also received the impress of his moral and religious sensibilities. Writing in the *Prospectus* at the opening of the college in 1865, Raymond explained that Vassar wished to be a "'School of Christ' — a place where His word and doctrine shall be taught in purity and power, and where His renewing and sanctifying Spirit shall continually dwell."[22] Even though Raymond believed that Vassar's religious identity would be secured via informal avenues — daily chapel attendance and Sabbath observance — he did make provision for formal in-class religious instruction. His own course on "Moral Philosophy" and "Evidences of Christianity" was proof of that. A closer look at the content of the curriculum substantiates this claim: the original *Vassar Catalogue* of 1865-66 lists Francis Wayland's classic *The Elements of Moral Science* under the rubric Metaphysics and History, a subsection of required textbooks. Therein earnest students encountered chapters on "What is Moral Action?"; "Is There a Conscience?"; "Law of Veracity"; "The Holy Scriptures"; and "Love of God, or Piety," among others. Raymond's imprint remained with the college long after he passed from the scene (Raymond died in 1878): in the academic year 1902-03, Vassar established a chair in biblical literature, and six semester courses were offered in the Bible (all electives).[23]

We know that Raymond's official pronouncements and curricular emphasis on religion and ethics resonated with some students because they discussed these matters extensively, connecting them to their artistic study. For example, a student in the *Vassar Transcript* argued that art is "the offspring of religion, and it is only in the delineation of the spiritual, and in giving shape and expression to religious views and aspirations, that she [art] attains her highest perfection."[24] Having reached perfection, religious art was believed to create moral sympathies. This writer claimed that "painting and sculpture, so far as their evident purpose is to incite in us an admiration for the beautiful, become, by their very nature, mighty agents of virtue."[25] A.V.K. (Vassar Class of 1880) echoed this sentiment: "In the study of aesthetics, certain powers are developed, and certain feelings called into play which seem especially conducive to moral elevation, and the sympathies in particular are quickened."[26] Why should art be so integral to religion? One anonymous student had an answer: "The reason that [art's] beauty stirs our higher natures so powerfully is because of the impression it makes upon us of something perfect, harmonious, raised high above the disorder and discord within us; it arouses in us longings, vague though they may be, for something higher and better."[27] Clearly, Vassar students regarded religious art as illuminating the divine, a process that underscored their moral inclination and refined their sensibilities.

Vassar students' ethical preoccupations in art can also be seen in their meditations on English novels. In writing about the novelist George Eliot in the July 1877 edition of the *Vassar Miscellany*, H.R.R. explained that "her philosophy is purely ethical; but a book is not injured because it has a moral flavor. On the contrary, the ethical element places within reach of the novelist a new power." Students like H.R.R. saw the inclusion of moral truths in the analysis of English novels as enhancing the writer's

[21] By 1872, 411 students were attending Vassar.

[22] VCL, Trustees, 378.7 I7, John H. Raymond, *Vassar Female College: Prospectus, 1865*, 14.

[23] Robinson, *Curriculum*, 16.

[24] VCL, "Moral Influence of Painting and Sculpture," *The Transcript* 1 (1867): 8.

[25] Ibid. Corroborating this view is VCL, Laura C. Sheldon, "The Religious Influence of Art," *The Vassar Miscellany* 15 (June 1886): 329-33.

[26] VCL, A.V.K., "Elaborate Aesthetic Culture, A Help to the Activity of Moral Nature," *The Vassar Miscellany* 9 (February 1880): 224.

[27] VCL, "Aestheticism in Worship," *The Vassar Miscellany* 15 (January 1886): 150.

creative originality. Hence she reasoned that "by adding the good to the beautiful, surely the scope of genius is not diminished."[28]

So long as this religio-moral element in English works was not overdone or exaggerated, students appear to have liked their novels with a tinge of didacticism. Even the moral teachings connected to the religious views of the author did not disturb them. N.P.M. had this to say about Eliot: "Her own religion is represented, if not in words and deeds of religious hero and heroine, at least in general sentiment, in pervading spirit."[29] And what did Eliot's characters teach? "Each of these characters [Dinah, Bulstrode, Mr. Irwin, and Janet] is a sermon for humanity," the student affirmed, "a sermon that moves and touches us as only a sympathetic friend could. It says 'Be noble.'"[30]

Not all students thought that ethical concerns and the artistic elements of a good novel could be fruitfully reconciled. C.P.S. observed that "philosopher novelists" tended to write plots so driven by an argument or a moral lesson that little was left for the student to do but accept or reject the case set before them. Hence this student complained that "no temptation is offered to our curiosity to seek further. In the disquisition 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 exploration."[31] Undeterred by critics, many students developed an appreciation for novels that were laced with religious truth.

Vassar students' preoccupation with moral and religious content is probably related to the pedagogical tactics employed by some of their professors. English instructors Jennette Perry and Mabel Loomis asked their Sophomore Literature students: "What was the intellectual and moral condition of England in the fifteenth century?"[32] It should not surprise, therefore, to see that some students internalized the moral sentiment underlying such educational exercises. For some of these students, the internalization was so deep that it gave rise to a kind of philosophical absolutism. Vassar philosophy professor H. Heath Bawden observed that "with some [students], 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 morality and religion."[33] Bawden might have had a certain C.F.W. in mind, who wrote that "we all believe in the realty of absolute being, absolute truth, and absolute moral law. Justice, love, purity, these are the primary attributes of soul, we can not conceive [of] them as changeable."[34]

Although students such as N.P.M. and C.F.W. did not have the support of all their peers, their ideals were widely recognized by students because they shared a common religious heritage,

---

[28] VCL, H.R.R., "Is the Philosophizing Tendency of the Present English Works of Imagination Injurious to Them as Works of Art?" *The Vassar Miscellany* 6 (January 1877): 68.

[29] VCL, N.P.M., "Four Religious Characters of George Eliot's Novels," *The Vassar Miscellany* 14 (May 1885): 1380. Idealists at other institutions had similar interests: SGML, R.H. Beattie, "The Ethics of George Eliot," *The Nassau Literary Magazine* 40 (January 1885): 328-33; Harvard University Archives (HUA), Robert Morss Lovett, "George Eliot's Ethics," *The Harvard Monthly* 10 (June 1890): 142-51. The influence of faculty is suggestive: see VCL, Margaret Sherwood, "The Ethical Teachings of George Eliot," *The Vassar Miscellany* 14 (March 1885): 1289-94.

[30] N.P.M., "Four Religious Characters," 1381.

[31] VCL, 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): 61.

[32] VCL, English Exam, File 134, Jennette Perry and Mabel Loomis, "Sophomore Literature" (4 June 1891). Perry and Loomis gave expression to a much larger trend: According to Julie Reuben, many English professors utilized their craft to impart moral instruction. See Julie A. Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 219ff.

[33] H. Heath Bawden, *The Principles of Pragmatism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1910), 230.

[34] VCL, C.F.W., "Is There An Absolute Right?" *The Vassar Miscellany* 4 (July 1875): 425.

Congregationalism.[35] Moreover, these students had the support of influential figures like President Raymond, who saw it as his responsibility to establish a Vassar education upon a sure, religious (though nonsectarian) foundation.

Wellesley College

Henry Fowle Durant (1822-81), son of William Smith and Harriet Fowle Smith (his name at birth was Henry Welles Smith), imbibed his interest in women's education from the private tutoring he received as a child from Lois Ripley, a Massachusetts educator whom none other than Ralph Waldo Emerson called "one of the best Greek scholars in the country."[36] Blessed by a strong early education, the young Durant went to Harvard (graduating in 1841) then joined the Suffolk bar in 1847. According to Wellesley historian Florence Converse, the lawyer Durant "could coax, intimidate, terrify; and his questions cut like knives."[37]

Durant's powers of persuasion could also be used for more tender ends: on 28 May 1854, he married his cousin Pauline Adeline Fowle. Over the next three years, the Durants had two children, Henry ("Harry") Fowle Durant Jr., and Pauline Cazenove Durant (who passed away before her second month). Like many other middle-class Protestants of their time, Henry threw himself into his chosen profession while Pauline devoted herself to Christian philanthropy.

In the courtroom, Durant showed his virtuosity by winning verdict after verdict, although his tactics were sometimes regarded as "tricks unbecoming the dignity of a lawyer." Immune to criticism, Durant continued to excel at law, garnering an admiring comparison with the "ablest of British and Irish barristers."[38] But Durant's successful professional career was about to be permanently derailed: on 3 July 1863, Harry contracted diphtheria and died, leaving the Durants childless. Durant turned to religion to assuage his grief. Coming under the influence of the evangelist Dwight L. Moody, Durant began to re-evaluate his profession. Indeed, the more he considered the law's sordid characteristics, the more it appeared incompatible with his newfound evangelical faith. Thus, the financially secure Durant walked away from his legal career thereby ending his sixteen years of service at the Suffolk bar.

While Pauline dealt with her grief by joining the Boston Young Women's Christian Association, Henry Durant briefly considered founding an orphanage. Gradually, the idea of a women's seminary eclipsed the orphanage and seized Durant's imagination.[39] In 1867, he joined Mount Holyoke's Board of Trustees. The following year Henry and Pauline Durant granted Mount Holyoke ten thousand dollars to help build a library, but Henry Durant imagined himself opening a new women's seminary, not just helping a pre-existing one. Thus, he began the process of acquiring a charter from the Massachusetts legislature. On 17 March 1870, Wellesley Female Seminary received its charter (its name would be changed to Wellesley College in 1873). Durant began to give Wellesley definite shape with his selection of a board of trustees; he allowed for men and women to serve on the board but insisted that only women make up the faculty. Unlike Vassar, where John Raymond and the board of trustees designed the

[35] The most complete study of student religion at Vassar is still Stephen M. Clement, "Aspects of Student Religion at Vassar College, 1861-1914" (Ed.D. diss., Harvard University, 1977).

[36] Quoted in Florence Converse, *The Story of Wellesley* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1919), 19. See also Alice P. Hackett, *Wellesley: Part of the American Story* (New York: EP Dutton, 1949).

[37] Quoted in Converse, *Story of Wellesley*, 10.

[38] Ibid., 11.

[39] According to Durant's biographer, Florence M. Kingsley, the idea of founding a women's seminary stretches back to the tutelage Durant received from Lois Ripley. Florence Morse Kingsley, T*he Life of Henry Fowle Durant: Founder of Wellesley College* (New York: The Century Co., 1924), 42.

curriculum, Wellesley's early general course of study was wholly the product of the president.[40] It featured Greek, Latin, mental and moral philosophy, as well as French and German, modern English literature, and a clutch of scientific studies, including zoology, geology, and physics.[41]

Wellesley opened its doors on 8 September 1875, with this progressive curriculum in place. Three hundred and fourteen women made up the first class. Of these, only thirty were of collegiate grade; the bulk of the class was not adequately trained for college. Such a large number of ill-equipped students required more preparatory work. While Wellesley accommodated these students with remedial assignments, it progressively tightened its entrance requirements and weeded out ill-prepared students. By 1881, with its regular course of study well established, it closed its preparatory department.

The basic structure of Durant's curriculum remained in place until the academic year 1892-93, when Wellesley officials decided to "lighten the work of the freshmen year and to expand the freedom of choice for all students."[42] Upperclass students had fewer required classes as well: they still had to study such fields as philosophy (now in the third year) and English composition (second and third years), but not literature and history. Similar to Vassar, Wellesley's curricular reforms privileged electives over required courses.

Durant's curriculum met the intellectual standards of a thoroughgoing college education but he was also concerned with providing his students the moral and religious guidance he believed they needed. This was recorded in the school's statutes:

> [Wellesley] College was founded for the glory of God and the service of the Lord Jesus Christ, in and by the education and culture of women. In order to the attainment of these ends, it is required that every Trustee, Teacher, and Officer, shall be a member of an Evangelical Church, and that the study of the Holy Scriptures shall be pursued by every student throughout the entire College course under the direction of the Faculty.[43]

In addition were daily chapel services, Bible study classes taught by the whole faculty, two periods of daily religious devotions, and a creedal test for all professors.

As has been true for many institutions of higher learning, Wellesley found that preserving religious statutes was more difficult than pronouncing them. First, Durant appointed Ada Howard as president (1875-81) and tasked her with the enforcement of his religio-moral vision. Although some students found Howard a "perfect Mid-Victorian gentlewoman," the consensus among students and faculty was that she was domineering and a rule-monger.[44] Moreover, she did not possess those intellectual gifts for which Wellesley was supposed to stand. Thus, by the late 1870s, Durant had entered into discussions with University of Michigan President James B. Angell, who recommended a young vibrant historian named Alice Freeman as the next Wellesley president. (Freeman was also considered because her alma mater, the University of Michigan, had already supplied Wellesley with a number of fine instructors, including Mary Marston and Angie Chapin, both friends of Freeman.)

After rejecting several offers to teach at Wellesley, Freeman accepted a position in the History Department in 1879. In this capacity, she taught a heavy load of courses, supervised students' domestic

---

[40] See Virginia Onderdonk, "The Curriculum," in *Wellesley College, 1875-1975: A Century of Women*, ed. Jean Glasscock (Wellesley: Wellesley College Press, 1975), 122-48.

[41] Robinson, *Curriculum*, 17-32.

[42] Onderdonk, "Curriculum," 137.

[43] Quoted in Converse, *Story of Wellesley*, 122.

[44] Patricia Palmieri, *In Adamless Eden: The Community of Women Faculty at Wellesley* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 14.

work, and attended regular section meetings.[45] Although Freeman could be counted on to carry out most tasks in the Durant program, she possessed an independent streak that bucked at fulfilling certain expectations. One of these concerned the religious counseling of students. Durant expected all his professors to advise students on matters regarding their personal faith; Freeman insisted on knowing her charges first before discussing such delicate questions.[46] While Freeman and Durant got along well enough, prospects for future tension faded as the founder's health began to decline. On 3 October 1881, Durant succumbed to Bright's disease. His death enabled Freeman to shape Wellesley into a progressive and more secular college, turning her into the most "distinguished woman educator in the United States."[47]

As president, Freeman proved to be as sensitive to students' personal beliefs as she was to the sensibilities of professors. For example, when several faculty approached Freeman and urged her to abolish the religious oath for instructors, she consented. With the help of English professor Katharine Lee Bates, Freeman led a majority of board members to vote the historic measure down. She was also instrumental in transforming Wellesley's Bible study into a Department of Biblical Studies. With Freeman's encouragement, professors like Angie Chapin could teach New Testament Greek instead of presiding over a devotional study of the Bible. Such secularizing reforms meant no personal animus toward religion.[48] Freeman simply believed that such measures were necessary in order to align Wellesley with other schools of high caliber.

By the end of Freeman's tenure in 1887, Wellesley had indeed moved a considerable distance from its early evangelical roots.[49] But this movement had not entailed the wholesale disappearance of religion from the campus.[50] Perhaps the strongest evidence for the persistence of religio-moral concerns at Wellesley can be seen in student writing, a source that has not been fully explored by historians. As with Vassar students, their Wellesley counterparts linked their didactic interests to the fields of art and literature. Writing in the *Wellesley Prelude* on 26 October 1889, student Marion Pelton Guild conveyed the priestly role of the artist and the sacramental view of art:

> 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.

[45] Ruth Bordin, *Alice Freeman Palmer: The Evolution of a New Woman* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

[46] Palmieri, *In Adamless Eden*, 26-27.

[47] Bordin, *Alice Freeman Palmer*, 113.

[48] Alice Freeman Palmer was a lifelong Presbyterian, active in teaching Sunday school and in the Student Christian Association. Converse, *Story of Wellesley*, 52ff.

[49] For a concise description, see Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 203-13. For an extensive treatment of institutional secularization, see George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[50] In fact, in some ways, religion seemed to be gaining a more pronounced, if extracurricular, presence on many campuses. See David P. Setran, *The College "Y": Student Religion in the Era of Secularization* (New York: Palgrave, 2007).

> 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.[51]

Such an exalted view of art was not restricted to Guild: one anonymous student wrote that "there is an untold treasure in real art and he who looks for it seriously gets a new vision of the world that ennobles, deepens, and purifies."[52]

Two essays that ran in the *College News* in late 1908 are indicative of students' elevated view of art. In the first piece (dated November 18), the student rejected a psychological analysis of art because she felt it reduced concepts like "Beauty" down to "sensations, more or less refined and more or less complex, which are pleasurable." Instead, the student argued for an objective view of Beauty because it was linked with other venerable concepts such as "Truth." To conceive of one ideal as a product of observers' needs seemed to her to threaten the reality of all related verities. In the second article (dated December 2), the student argued that acceptance of a psychological explanation of Beauty would introduce experiential chaos, whereas a visceral experience of Beauty would help us see "all transcendental idealism."[53]

Similar to their counterparts in art, students in English exhibited a preference for didacticism. 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."[54] Strong left no doubt about the ethical lesson she had learned:

> 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.[55]

Strong's classmate, Eliza H. Kendrick, was even more didactic in that she chose to write her senior essay not on a Shakespearean character, but rather on "Sincerity as an Element of Success."[56] Therein Kendrick argued that

---

[51] WCA, Marion Pelton Guild, "The Truth of Art," *The Wellesley Prelude* 1 (October 1889): 82. Guild's lofty view of art was echoed throughout the nation: see Mary Ann Stankiewicz, "Virtue and Good Manners: Toward a History of Art History Instruction," in *The Early Years of Art History in the United States*, eds. Craig Hugh Smyth and Peter Lukehart (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 83-93.

[52] WCA, "The New Art Criticism," *College News* 3 (2 March 1904).

[53] WCA, "Prof. Münsterberg's Lecture," *College News* 8 (18 November 1908; 2 December 1908).

[54] WCA, Course Papers 1884-85, Mary C. Strong, "The Development of the Vice of Ambition as Shown in the Character of Cardinal Wolsey."

[55] Ibid.

[56] WCA, Eliza H. Kendrick Papers, "Sincerity as an Element of Success," (29 October 1884). Kendrick's choice of a theme reflected the tendencies of many students around the nation: see G. Stanley Hall, "Philosophy in the United

> [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.[57]

Kendrick's disposition demonstrated a sophisticated moral calculus when she affirmed virtuous traits such as 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.'"[58]

Students such as Strong and Kendrick were probably reflecting the tuition of Wellesley professors.[59] Louise Manning Hodgkins, professor of English literature, asked her students "is the moral character of a poet to be considered in the estimation of his productions?"[60] To students in English Poetry, Hodgkins queried "What are the moral standards of the old ballads?"[61] Instructor Lucy Andrews asked first-year students in Ethics to "give exposition of duty as a condition for true life."[62] Mary Case, associate professor of Psychology and History of Philosophy at Wellesley, called upon her students to "show that the wrong act involves physical, prudential, and moral control."[63] Wellesley students were then asked "What should the person have done in order to perform the right instead of the wrong act?"[64] In fields such as philosophy, religio-moral content was announced in the very titles of courses: Professor Anne Morgan taught "The Regenerating Life of the Christ," and "Types of Ethical Theory."[65]

While it is unlikely that all Wellesley students appreciated such pedagogic didacticism, most of them, such as their Vassar counterparts, would have found such intonations familiar. Wellesley's early religious bent was, thanks to Henry Durant, emphatically evangelical.[66] His leadership, and that of Ada Howard and even Alice Freeman, would have ensured that Wellesley women were exposed to the religious mission of the college.

States," *Mind* 4 (1879): 89-105. For a comparison with one other institution, see David A. Jolliffe, "The Moral Subject in College Composition: A Conceptual Framework and the Case of Harvard, 1865-1900," *College English* 51 (1989): 163-73.

[57] Kendrick, "Sincerity as an Element of Success."

[58] Ibid.

[59] A drastically different picture is presented by Helen Horowitz in *Alma Mater*, 56-68. She argues that despite the earnest effort made by institutions to shape their charges' moral lives, students developed a peer culture that was practically immune from moral suasion. Although this representation is accurate to some extent, it does not take into account student sources and thus does not represent the views of the most vocal (and tractable?) students. My attention to these neglected sources shows that some students did respond to the moral suasion of their elders, demonstrated in their public and private writings. Moreover, given the close faculty-student bonds that some historians have found at places such as Wellesley, there seems to be good reason to believe that for some students, being part of a peer culture did not make them completely unresponsive to their elders' influence. See Palmieri, *In Adamless Eden*, 181-95.

[60] WCA, Louise Manning Hodgkins Papers, Exams, "English Literature, Course I."

[61] WCA, Hodgkins Papers, Curricular Materials, Department of English Literature, "Course V-English Poetry," (January 1889).

[62] WCA, Lucy Andrews, "Freshman Examination in Ethics," (June 18, 1886).

[63] WCA, Mary Case, Philosophy Department, "Philosophy 6," (June 1897).

[64] Ibid.

[65] WCA, *Calendar of Wellesley College, 1892-93* (Boston: Frank Wood, 1893), 40. Such an explicit didactic approach to philosophy was endorsed by the president. See WCA, Henry Durant, *Notes of Mr. Durant's Sermon on "The Spirit of the College"* (Boston: Frank Wood, 1890).

[66] Converse, *Story of Wellesley*, 171-72. For a more complete portrait, see Kingsley, *The Life of Henry Fowle Durant*.

Interrogating Student Sources

The presence of religio-moral content in student sources at early Vassar and Wellesley raises several important questions. First, why has student writing of this nature been overlooked by scholars when discussing these institutions' curricula and student culture? Second, approximately how many students wrote in an Idealist key? Third, is the content of student writing different in any meaningful sense from the kinds of themes that students were drawn to earlier in the century? Fourth, to what, if any, extent is Idealism a unique characteristic of women's colleges?

If student writing on religious and or moral themes has been neglected in the literature of higher education for the period 1865 to 1900, it is because writing itself has received scant attention. True, students are almost always mentioned in large syntheses and have even been the subject of notable monographs but their role has been generally confined to the social and recreational sphere. Perhaps the most explicit rationale for this treatment has been provided by Helen Horowitz. Describing student literary sources as "tainted" by the social class of the authors, Horowitz concluded that "in the nineteenth century the sober students had no clear public voice."[67] Thus, the omission of religio-moral themes seems to have been swept away with the sources in which they appear. We know that Idealist students were not inventing a new idiom because historians have shown that colonial and antebellum collegiate education carried a moral and religious resonance expressed in student literary societies, debating clubs, and curricula.[68]

As to the numbers of students whose writing can be identified as Idealist, being statistically precise is not possible (though we do have enough information to form an educated guess). Of the 411 students at Vassar in the academic year 1873-74, for example, probably only a couple dozen could be described as intellectuals, even fewer as Idealist intellectuals. Nevertheless, as has been shown, these student thinkers had a presence on campus. Further, if one were to take this informed calculation and include all institutions that admitted women (keeping in mind that there were over 85,000 women collegians by 1900),[69] it is not hard to imagine hundreds of earnest students, and scores of Idealists. Many of these students likely clustered into humanistic fields like art, literature, and philosophy since these disciplines tended to absorb more instruction time than the natural sciences.[70] Idealists never defined the classes they belonged to, let alone the schools they attended, but they did constitute something more than an aberration.

While exact numbers may be hard to come by, the tone of intellectual seriousness among Vassar and Wellesley students of the first generation is indisputable.[71] According to Vassar President Raymond, these students "pleaded for adoption of the highest educational standard, avowed their readiness to submit themselves to the most rigid conditions, and exerted a powerful influence to diffuse right views among

[67] Horowitz, *Campus Life*, 68.

[68] David Potter, *Debating in the Colonial Chartered Colleges: An Historical Survey, 1642 to 1900* (New York: Teachers College, 1944); Thomas Harding, *College Literary Societies: Their Contribution to Higher Education in the United States, 1815-1876* (New York: Pageant Press, 1971); James McLachlan, "The Choice of Hercules: American Student Societies in the Early 19th Century," in *The University in Society*, ed. Lawrence Stone (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 2:449-94; Caroline Winterer, "The Humanist Revolution in America, 1820-1860: Classical Antiquity in the Colleges," *History of Higher Education Annual* 18 (1998): 111-29. Such an emphasis among students makes sense when one remembers the prevalence of evangelicalism on many campuses during the antebellum era. See Louise L. Stevenson, *Scholarly Means to Evangelical Ends: The New Haven Scholars and the Transformation of Higher Learning in America, 1830-1890* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

[69] Mabel Newcomer, *A Century of Higher Education for American Women* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1959), 46.

[70] Frederick C. Ferry, "Some Tables of Student Hours of Instruction," *Science* 38 (1913): 584-89.

[71] Solomon, *Company of Educated Women*, 95ff.

their fellow-students."[72] Indicative of this seriousness is the student effort in 1873-74 to extend library hours.[73] At Wellesley, an alumna wrote that "outwardly bubbling though I appeared, I was in fact essentially serious . . . For instance, being required to read some Thomas Hardy and George Meredith and Henry James for my English major, that winter and the following summer vacation I gulped their works pretty nearly in toto.[74]

Students involved in literary societies at Wellesley discussed "Transcendentalism, Evolution, [the] Higher Education of Women, [and] Darwinism"[75] for fun. At Vassar, these students' counterparts formed literary groups such as Qui Vive, Tempus et Mores, and Philaletheis, among others. Perhaps the strongest proof of students' earnestness are student literary periodicals which, as we have seen, contained more than a sprinkling of ethical and literary themes (though very few essays on social or political subjects). After 1910, student periodicals gave increasing attention to progressive themes like feminism, socialism, and other social and political issues.[76]

Vassar and Wellesley students' early intellectual bent should not be overstated, as the forces responsible for transforming men's campus culture into a veritable circus (to use Woodrow Wilson's metaphor) were also at work at women's colleges, especially after 1900.[77] At Wellesley, the faculty "lamented that too many young women were attending college merely for what was termed 'the life' — socializing in exclusive societies or participating in extracurricular activities such as dramatics or glee club."[78] Katharine Lee Bates, who wrote about the growing levity in students in "The College Girl of the Period," explained that the first generation of women collegians "took [t]heir mind seriously," whereas girls of the new century are "well dressed, athletic, radiant," but "intellectually submissive."[79] Lillian Bayliss (Vassar Class of 1896) remembered her college years thus: "I got what I went to college for — which was to have fun."[80]

Just as the collegiate carnival was not unique to men's institutions, Idealism was not the privileged preserve of women's colleges.[81] Neither were female students uniquely susceptible to Idealism.[82] The intellectual challenge that natural science posed men and women collegians in the late nineteenth century produced a similar reaction among Idealists. Evidence for this is suggested in the common language that men and women students used to discuss the incursion of science into fields such as art, literature, and philosophy. For example, both men and women mused about how scientific categories were challenging the objective understanding of Beauty in art and how the incorporation of scientific modes of analysis was diminishing a didactic study of novels. Although the educational rhetoric emanating from college

[72] Quoted in Taylor and Haight, *Vassar*, 118.

[73] Ibid., 111.

[74] Solomon, *Company of Educated Women*, 95-96.

[75] Quoted in Palmieri, *In Adamless Eden*, 183.

[76] Taylor and Haight, *Vassar*, 103; Lynn D. Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 150ff.

[77] A succinct description of this phenomenon can be found in Horowitz, *Campus Life*, 98-117.

[78] Palmieri, *In Adamless Eden*, 200.

[79] Quoted in Palmieri, *In Adamless Eden*, 212.

[80] Quoted in Debra Herman, "College and After: The Vassar Experiment in Women's Education, 1861-1924" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1979), 154.

[81] For example, see George Herbert Palmer and Ralph Barton Perry, "Philosophy, 1870-1929," in *The Development of Harvard University since the Inauguration of President Eliot, 1869-1929,* ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), 9-19; Elmo A. Robinson, "One Hundred Years of Philosophy Teaching in California, 1857-1957," *Journal of History of Ideas* 20 (1959): 3-32.

[82] For an examination of Idealism among men and women students at Harvard, Princeton, the University of California, Vassar, Wellesley, and Smith, see Ángel de Jesús Cortés, "Student Idealists and the Specter of Natural Science, 1870-1910" (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 2008).

officials reveals a view of women as especially suited for "aesthetic culture," the reality is that the training of the senses (and the soul) through aesthetic appreciation was an important ingredient in the liberal education of both men and women.[83] Nevertheless, a case can be made for the leadership that women's colleges exhibited with regards to art: Vassar established a separate art school in 1877 and Wellesley was the first college to create a major in the history of art.[84]

Conclusion

An examination of student writing at Vassar and Wellesley reveals the presence of Idealism during the period 1865 to 1900, especially in fields such as art, literature, and philosophy. While this Idealism bore the imprint of certain presidents, professors, and each colleges' prescriptive literature, it contained an authentic voice (characterized by the study of Idealistic thought) that prevailed among a small though vocal group of students. Significantly, this voice was profoundly normative or shaped by ethical and or religious sentiments. Contrary to historians who have dismissed student writing as class-bound or self-interested, this article shows that students were actually quite preoccupied with rather abstract principles.

This foray into an aspect of student life that has received very little attention should prompt some reconsideration of an enduring stereotype of the students as awash in football, fraternities, and fêtes. The student culture at many college campuses was changing circa 1900, in that extracurricular activities and entertainment appeared to be carving out a larger space than had previously been true. However, Idealist writing suggests that some students were able to counter these distractions by generating an intellectual discourse demonstrating a reverential attitude towards religious art, a preference for didactic literature, and a philosophy that allows for moral absolutes. Given that historians have yet to fully explore student thought, it will take new eyes to see these Idealists, for, as one student put it: "Living in layers of alternate seriousness and noisy surface is one of the delights of college . . . The light-hearted intervals fool the outsiders, the professors and parents, the lookers-on."[85] Let us look beneath the surface then and recognize Idealists as that small tribe who, for a time, distinguished themselves in pursuit of "the Good, the True, and the Beautiful."[86]

[83] James Hoppin, "The Relations of Art to Education," *The New Englander* 97 (October 1866): 601-617; HUA, Charles Eliot Norton, "Address Read at the Opening of the Slater Memorial Museum," (22 November 1888).

[84] Onderdonk, "The Curriculum," 143. See also Smyth and Lukehart, *Early Years of Art History*, 57-63.

[85] Quoted in Solomon, *Company of Educated Women*, 96.

[86] Reference to this venerable troika was a common practice among Idealists. For a compelling example, see Smith College Archives (SCA), *Addresses at the Inauguration of Rev. Julius H. Seelye, to the Presidency of Amherst College* (Springfield: Clark W. Bryan and Co., 1877). For a more dispassionate philosophical analysis, see Henry R. Marshall, "The Good, the True, and the Beautiful," *Philosophical Review* 31 (1922): 449-70.