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The Academic Mind of Woodrow Wilson

BY LAURENCE R. VEYSEY

For two and a half decades before his political career began, Woodrow Wilson was an educator. In this period Wilson's was an academic mind. He lived and moved in the peculiar world of the first generation of the American university—a world in which genteel standards rubbed in curious fashion against practices borrowed from that handily accessible model, the business enterprise. It was an age in which academic leaders might covet, at one and the same time, reputations for serious thought and executive force.

The Wilson who was part of this academic environment may appear before us more vividly if we deliberately forget his later career and view him as he usually saw himself until the closing years of his presidency at Princeton: as an aspirant for educational eminence, first as a scholarly author, then as one who would transform a nineteenth-century college into a twentieth-century university. During much of this period in his life, Wilson undoubtedly judged himself against the standard of Charles W. Eliot, Daniel Coit Gilman, and Nicholas Murray Butler.¹ When we share this standard, viewing him as one among a number of educational statesmen shaping the direction of the American university at the turn of the century, we are enabled to glimpse Wilson in a focus that has not been fully explored. It has been fruitfully suggested by Arthur S. Link that the academic Wilson reveals much about President Wilson, but this approach has been concerned with an assessment of his personality as an executive. The comparison may better be judged in connection with an analysis of Woodrow Wilson's academic aims, theories, and attitudes, seen in the context of what other professors and university presidents were saying at the same time.

¹ In 1906, halfway through his Princeton presidency, Wilson first revealed a temporary interest in, and awareness of, his possible candidacy for the presidency of the United States. See George Harvey to Wilson, December 17, 1906. Unless otherwise specified, all unpublished materials cited are in the Woodrow Wilson Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress), where they are arranged in two chronological files, one for speeches and one for correspondence.

In particular, one is tempted to search for elements in Wilson's educational thinking which may be labeled "conservative" on the one hand or "progressive" on the other. In this search, one is initially confounded by strikingly contradictory evidence. On the "progressive" side, it is undeniable that Wilson strove to transform Princeton, almost overnight, from a small, complacent college in which students giggled at the use of the "funny" word "Spinoza" by one of their professors, into a university.² In this university undergraduates would be taught to respect the life of the mind by regular, personal contacts with carefully selected young men on the faculty ("preceptors") and by the inspiration of a graduate school so located that one must stumble to avoid it. The sheer audacity of Wilson's plea for twelve million dollars in new endowment, at a time when Princeton's total resources seem still to have been measured in six figures, gave him the aura of a radical. To balance this picture of boldness, however, there is the intriguing comment of Charles W. Eliot on the eve of Wilson's elevation to the presidency of the university. Eliot, twenty-four years older than Wilson and some thirty-three years ahead of him in the possession of major academic office, referred quizzically to Wilson's being a "little archaic in educational theories."³ A judgment as to Wilson's possible archaism requires as much caution and careful attempt at definition as does an evaluation of his seemingly radical program. Eliot, after all, spoke from within another partisan embattlement in the somewhat rarefied terrain of academic theory (even if he was to vote enthusiastically for Wilson in 1912). Wilson the educator needs first of all to be placed with reference to the landscape of academic aims as it existed at the turn of the century.

The appearance of the American university during the decades following the Civil War has sometimes been viewed as marking a conflict between reactionary clergymen and zealously forward-looking reformers. An extended look at the thinking being done about the American university within its walls from 1865 to 1910 reveals no clear-cut division into "traditional" and "progressive" factions, although the orthodoxy of the sixties and seventies can easily be discerned.⁴ Yet, in abandoning a two-sided picture one must be-

² Hardin Craig, *Woodrow Wilson at Princeton* (Norman, 1960), 34-35.

³ Charles W. Eliot to Daniel Coit Gilman, January 17, 1901, Daniel Coit Gilman Papers (Johns Hopkins University).

⁴ See Laurence R. Veysey, "The Emergence of the American University, 1865-1910" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1961), especially pp. 182-83, 321.

ware a leap to the opposite assumption that there were no firm lines of abstract debate among educators in this period. What would later be termed a pragmatic response to the question of what kind of university to create was itself only one partisan rallying cry. Argument over the nature of the university was not so ill-defined as to court the charge of irrelevance.

Academic men, in fact, tended to take four quite well-marked positions concerning their own role and purpose during this period, and Woodrow Wilson's thought, as well as Eliot's comment upon it, revealed the scars of protracted skirmishes among the advocates of all four standpoints.⁵ To label and define these several positions in the space of a few sentences is inevitably to oversimplify them, particularly as their mutual relations were intricate and many continuities existed among two or more of them. Yet the bare statement of these positions is a necessary prologue to an understanding of Wilson's educational views.

First, there were educational leaders who basically identified themselves with the college as it had existed in the mid-nineteenth century. They defended a regime whose watchwords were "the disciplining of the mental faculties" (by means of a prescribed curriculum centered in Greek, Latin, and mathematics) and the maintenance of religious piety. These were men of an older generation; most of them were dead by 1900, and it had been clear ever since the mid-1880's that their ideas were doomed to be overturned. These men—of whom Wilson's predecessors at Princeton, James McCosh and Francis L. Patton, had been leading representatives—were the true academic conservatives.⁶

A second position was advanced, beginning in the late 1860's, by a prominent group of reformers who sought to build an American university based upon precepts of usefulness to the non-academic

⁵ By placing emphasis upon these four intellectual camps within the academic world of 1900, I do not mean to imply either that all academic spokesmen of the time can easily be classified in terms of these categories or that these rather abstract partisanship were solely responsible for shaping the development of the university as an institution. It is true, however, that most books, articles, and speeches by academic men on the subject of academic aims reveal attitudes which give definition to these four positions; further, Wilson's goals for Princeton reflected abstract academic thinking to a degree unusual among American university leaders.

⁶ Patton, far younger than McCosh or than Noah Porter at Yale, was theologically more conservative than either; in 1893 he increased the amount of Greek required for entrance at Princeton when the trend everywhere else was to eliminate Greek altogether. For reasons not relevant here, Patton did veer markedly toward a more permissive educational outlook in the last years of his presidency of Princeton.

society, practicality of training, and equality among all subjects of study (including prominently the applied sciences). These academics advocated some version of an elective curriculum, were often concerned with the notion of training for "citizenship," and liked increasingly to talk—although with much variety of meaning—about "democracy" as a desirable attribute of higher education. The proponents of the useful believed that preparation for a particular skilled vocation was a legitimate, indeed central, function of the undergraduate program; sometimes they looked forward to abolishing the traditional college altogether. Advocates of utility were apt to rally under one of two leaders: Charles W. Eliot, who became president of Harvard in 1869, or Andrew D. White, who superintended the opening of Cornell University a year earlier.⁷ Neither these leaders nor most of the other university men who joined them looked to the German institution of learning as their pre-eminent source of inspiration.

A rather different group of academic reformers—often young professors with German Ph.D.'s—appeared on the scene during the 1870's and 1880's. These men defined educational purpose with the single word "research." The spirit they sought to spread was abstractly scientific; it focused upon original investigation, conducted for its own sake. The Johns Hopkins University, despite the genial eclecticism of Daniel Coit Gilman, was understood to symbolize this third version of an academic ideal; so, in an even purer fashion, was Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, under G. Stanley Hall. The graduate schools which grew to prominence in response to the challenge of Johns Hopkins, notably at Harvard, Columbia, and Chicago, also largely reflected this outlook.

Finally, there was a fourth notable academic outlook at the end of the nineteenth century, and it was here that Woodrow Wilson stood. This last group of educators were advocates of what they liked to call "liberal culture." Inspired more by England than by Germany, more by the Germany of Hegel and Goethe than by that of Helmholtz and Virchow, the academic partisans of culture insisted upon the unity of human experience. This led them to reject the elective system of college studies as fragmented, haphazard, and

⁷ Important differences between Eliot's version of a "serviceable" university, with its undertone of continued gentility, and White's version, which would be more widely imitated in the Middle and Far West, cannot be discussed here. It might only be noted that, so far as the actual planning of the curriculum was concerned, Eliot was more "radical" than White.

divisive, and to resist specialization in either of its two guises: as practical training for a livelihood or as the abstract investigation of compartments of knowledge. Rather they wished to give all college students a similar broad training centered in literature, philosophy, and—in Wilson's case and that of A. Lawrence Lowell—the older and “safer” of the social sciences, particularly political science. (The term “humanities” to comprise these disciplines was only occasionally used.) Advocates of liberal culture, like those of practical utility, were much concerned with the relation between the university and the American social and political scene, but they came to their own far less permissive conclusion as to the way the curriculum should reflect this relation. They wanted to infuse certain standards, including those of morality as well as taste, downward and outward toward the masses. This they would do by educating leaders to a common pattern. They wanted to produce gentlemen with a concern for the well-being of the commonwealth. Only in some instances, and always with important qualifications, did they believe in democracy. These advocates of culture occupied enclaves near what by 1900 had become the peripheries of American academic life; they were apt to be men of letters, contesting against philologists for control of English departments, or philosophers of Kantian or Hegelian leanings. Then, too, many of the presidents of the by-passed small colleges subscribed more or less loosely to the same educational platform.

Of the baker's dozen of leading American universities at the turn of the century,⁸ only two—Yale and Princeton—offered a dominant atmosphere that was congenial to the advocate of liberal culture. Only there did opposition to the elective system of studies, to things practical and things German (in the scientific sense), remain pervasive.⁹ Indeed, Yale and Princeton comprised an informal conservative axis. Only now were they emerging from the mid-nineteenth-century academic universe of mental discipline and religious piety. Within them it was still a mark of “progressive” orientation to

⁸ If one defines the first rank in rather generous terms, the founding members of the Association of American Universities in 1900 may be said to have comprised it.

⁹ It is true that in the last years of Patton's presidency of Princeton electives had been allowed to dominate the upper two years of the curriculum; one of Wilson's first acts as president was to reverse this condition. Around 1907 Yale was to give much ground, formally at least, in the fight against undergraduate specialization. See William Starr Myers (ed.), *Woodrow Wilson: Some Princeton Memories* (Princeton, 1946), 62-63; Craig, *Wilson at Princeton*, 67-68; George W. Pierson, *Yale College: An Educational History, 1871-1921* (New Haven, 1952), 215-16, 219.

uphold the modern languages rather than the ancient, the inspirational lecture rather than the rote recitation. Older members of the Yale faculty had bitterly opposed William Lyon Phelps before he obtained a named professorship at Yale in 1902. Phelps's victory, in the same year that Wilson became president of Princeton, signified that times were changing even in this peculiar section of the academic landscape. But it is important to realize that the "progressive" forces at Yale and Princeton represented an outlook which someone like Charles W. Eliot was bound to consider as in itself "archaic." Neither Eliot nor Andrew D. White would have said in the late 1860's what Wilson declared in 1902, that "the true American university seems to me to get its best characteristic, its surest guarantee of sane and catholic learning, from the presence at its very heart of a college of liberal arts."¹⁰ And it was understood that Francis L. Patton supported Wilson as his successor because, among other reasons, the theologian believed that while Wilson would "look good" to the outside world he was at heart "safe" in a moral and religious sense.¹¹

Whether one could be an educational "progressive" in 1902 while opposing the elective system, vocational training, and scientific research cannot readily be answered. Within their respective faculties in the late 1890's both Phelps and Wilson took on the air of "young Turks." The modern languages, history, philosophy, and political science were still new disciplines, less than twenty years old in any well-developed sense. Also pressing forward were sociology, domestic science, and pedagogy, none of which particularly won Wilson's admiration.¹² In the Princeton setting, Wilson's educational philosophy was forward-looking; in terms of the academic community as a whole, it was suspect—for its Anglophilic tendencies, its exclusive connotations, and its seeming continuity with the outmoded era of the small college. It did not matter that Wilson's indifference toward Greek would have appalled most college heads

¹⁰ Woodrow Wilson, "Princeton for the Nation's Service," *Science* (Cambridge, Mass.), XVI (1902), 728. This was Wilson's inaugural address, and it should not be confused with another speech of nearly the same title published several years earlier (see note 15).

¹¹ Ray Stannard Baker, *Woodrow Wilson: Life and Letters* (8 vols., Garden City, N.Y., 1927-1939), II, 8.

¹² In 1902 Wilson declared: "I don't know what sociology is (laughter); moreover, I am convinced that there isn't a man living who does (laughter and applause); whenever a man is studying anything queer he calls it sociology (laughter)." Woodrow Wilson, *The Relation of University Education to Commerce* (Chicago, 1902), 23.

of 1875; it did not matter that he preached civilization far more often than he did Calvinistic theology. By 1902 academic reform in the direction of the humanities had already become the relatively minor note that it was destined thenceforth to be. Wilson's program for Princeton, however imaginative and well-publicized, was no more characteristic of the direction of American academic life as a whole (which was toward a gradual fusion of the dominant strains of utility and research) than would be the programs of Alexander Meiklejohn or Robert Maynard Hutchins.

Woodrow Wilson's positions on particular issues bring his fundamental alignment more sharply into focus. Concerning a number of the leading educational questions of the day, he held firm opinions. His responses to these questions, involving attitudes toward practicality, science, the nature of the curriculum, and the university as a community, define his basic position as an advocate of liberal culture. With regard to other, equally important topics of debate—in particular, the proper role of intellect and the relation between the university and the surrounding society—Wilson has left a more ambiguous record of his beliefs.

If anything stands out from the mass of Wilson's educational pronouncements, it is his opposition to vocational utility in an undergraduate context. Opportunity to study almost any conceivable practical subject was a cardinal item in the faith of those who were seeking to "democratize" American higher education. Wilson believed that it was the special mission of Princeton to resist precisely these pressures. College, he mused, ought not primarily to be "a place of immediate preparation for the practical tasks of business." Rather, it should be a place "for *detached* thought." "Thought nowadays," he added, "suffers from a too narrow attachment to particular interests." What he would "emphasize" about the higher education was its "withdrawal from the main motives of the world's material endeavor." Princeton was "not a place of special but of general education, not a place where a lad finds his profession, but a place *where he finds himself*." Unceasingly Wilson made it clear that he opposed "a narrow, particularistic, technical training." Not only did he reject what he called "commercialism," but he disliked specialized skill even in its more socially acceptable form of professional competence. Thus he pleaded for what he called "the *spirit of reformers* without the professional temper of reformers." And he re-

jected the notion "of a university where anybody can come to learn anything (as Ezra Cornell wished)." Vocational training for undergraduates, he asserted, was "thoroughly un-American."¹³

Wilson usually conceived of training in abstract science as something distinct from training in technical skill. Until he became president of Princeton, however, his opposition to this loftier version of science was also unequivocal. Writing to his fiancée from Johns Hopkins, where he was supposedly imbibing the spirit of the German seminar, he announced his objection to history defined as research into "accurate details" and his admiration for it as the attempt to enter into the "spirit and atmosphere" of past ages. In the mid-1890's Wilson became noted for resisting the whole scientific thrust in higher education. "Keep out the microbes of the scientific conception of books and the past," he warned in 1895. The "supreme method" of graduate study, he argued in 1902, was not minute research but rather "divination." Although intending a compliment, he referred to the "horrid industry" required by Frederick Jackson Turner's indulgence in a "minute examination of particulars." Writing in the *Forum* in 1894, Wilson found science incompatible with "the human spirit." The scientific method of investigation was "one, but only one, method of finding out the truth; and . . . a method for finding only one kind of truth."¹⁴ Again, two years later, he spoke out against

the atmosphere which has stolen from laboratories into lecture rooms and into the general air of the world at large. Science—our science—is new. It is a child of the nineteenth century. It . . . owes little debt of obligation to

¹³ Notes for "The College Man and Society," December 29, 1897; "Alumni Dinner, Orange, 10 Nov. 1904"; "What Princeton Stands For and Should Stand For," April 11, 1903; "Mayflower Descendants," November 21, 1902; and "Reception to Dr. Patton, Philadelphia, 10 December 1895"; typescript of address, "The Statesmanship of Letters," November 5, 1903; Woodrow Wilson, *College and State: Educational, Literary, and Political Papers (1875-1913)* (2 vols., New York, 1925), II, 149. See also notes for "Relation of the University to Life," March 7, 1903, and for "Needs of the Age in Education," May 2 and May 15, 1903. Wilson's italics are retained except as noted. It is true that on one occasion, when he talked about electrical engineering, which Princeton offered, Wilson wobbled, defending the study on the ground that "we cannot afford that the industry of this country should go without the touch of the Princeton spirit." Wilson, *Speech of President Woodrow Wilson of Princeton University at the Princeton Dinner Given at the Waldorf-Astoria, December 9, 1902* (New York, 1902), p. 7. This concession, however, was most unusual.

¹⁴ Wilson to Ellen Axson, November 13, 1884, quoted in Baker, *Wilson: Life and Letters*, I, 254; notes for "Washington, D.C., 12th February, 1895"; notes for "The Objects of Graduate Study," November 7, 1902 (italics removed); typescript of speech to American Historical Association, 1896, p. 1; Wilson, "University Training and Citizenship," *Forum* (New York), XVIII (September, 1894), 113-14.

any past age. . . . Worst of all, we believe in the present and in the future more than in the past, and deem the newest theory of society the likeliest. This is the disservice scientific study has done us; it has given us agnosticism in the realm of philosophy, scientific anarchism in the field of politics. It has made the legislator confident that he can create, and the philosopher sure that God cannot.¹⁵

Wilson would subordinate "the facts" to what he called "the subtle and also invisible forces that lurk in the events and in the minds of men." After 1902, as president of Princeton, he was likely to give "pure" science a more tolerant nod, so long as it avoided too much specialization. But there is no indication that the basically anti-scientific groove in his thinking was ever eradicated. Germanic positivism, especially as it affected the university, was to be abhorred. Charles Darwin might never have penned a line, so far as Wilson's mental universe was concerned.¹⁶ In this respect Wilson retained the mood of a loyal Presbyterian; in certain others, as will be seen, he did not.

The university, in Wilson's mind, was to stand apart from all particular concerns and, "building upon some coign of vantage, command them all." This aloofness required discrimination. Not all subjects of study were equally beneficial. It was a mark of Wilson's depth of conviction, as well as of his relish for dogmatic triumph over opponents, that on this matter of the equality of the disciplines, so highly controversial in academic circles, he boasted that he questioned the sanity of men who took the other side and on these explicit grounds refused to debate with them. The good studies, Wilson repeatedly affirmed, were "pure literature," "pure philosophy," "pure science," history, and politics. Among these, he was apt to emphasize the worth of the first and last. Despite a justified timidity in the area of aesthetic judgment, Wilson liked to think of himself as a "man of letters."¹⁷ His concern for politics is so well known

¹⁵ Woodrow Wilson, "Princeton in the Nation's Service," *Forum*, XXII (December, 1896), 464.

¹⁶ Manuscript speech, "The Truth of the Matter," 1895, p. 7; typescript of "The Statesmanship of Letters," November 5, 1903; Wilson's diary, January 25, 1904; Princeton University, *Annual Report*, 1902, p. [2]; Myers (ed.), *Wilson: Some Princeton Memories*, 55; Wilson, "The Spirit of Learning," in Clark S. Northup, William C. Lane, and John C. Schwab (eds.), *Representative Phi Beta Kappa Orations* (Boston, 1915), 469-70. For an unfriendly reference by Wilson to the theory of evolution, see typescript, "Abstract of Address at the Alumni Lunch, Princeton University, June 14th, 1910," pp. 2-3, in the Woodrow Wilson Collection (Princeton University Library).

¹⁷ Wilson, "Princeton for the Nation's Service," *Science*, XVI, 725; typescript speech,

that it is important to recall his respect for culture in a literary sense. "I have found more in the poets that lay bare the minds of nations and the great forces of history," he said, "than is to be found in the systematic writers upon affairs; and the historian is often more instructive when he draws near to poetic feeling in his exposition of events than when he narrates with cool dispassionate tone and careful system. The novelist is often the best expounder of morals."¹⁸ Wilson further believed "that the catholic study of the world's literature as a record of spirit is the right preparation for leadership in the world's affairs."¹⁹ In this mood he was close to the position of such advocates of culture as Charles Eliot Norton and Barrett Wendell. Literature would provide the background necessary for training a class of "gentlemen" who would move actively to purify the national life. Wilson's prescription of a college curriculum that would serve in place of the vagaries of the elective system devolved from such attitudes as these, tempered somewhat by the exigencies of the institution he commanded.²⁰

The certainties of Woodrow Wilson's educational faith included, finally, an organic view of the academic congregation. "The ideal college," he said, "should be a community, a place of close, natural, intimate association." This community should be closely knit: "The spirit of learning can be conveyed only by contagion, and contagion occurs only by personal contact." Here the traditional ties in Wilson's thinking stand forth most sharply. The strongest link between mid-nineteenth-century college leadership and the proponent of liberal culture in the American university of 1900 lay in the insistence of both upon college as a residential experience. Residence under college auspices would tame and refine individual spirits. It would, in Wilson's words, provide "the discipline of an ordered life." In contrast, at that time neither Harvard under Eliot, nor Johns Hopkins, nor the western state university cared where its students lived. Paternalism was anathema to those who believed that a university should primarily foster diverse individual talent, whether

"Education and the Schools," January 9, 1909, pp. 8-9; notes for "The Artistic Development of America," October 31, 1905, and for several speeches, 1904-1907; typescript "Autobiography," 1897; Wilson's diary, January 17, 1897.

¹⁸ Typescript speech, "The Statesmanship of Letters," November 5, 1903.

¹⁹ Wilson, "Princeton in the Nation's Service," *Forum*, XXII, 459; cf. Woodrow Wilson, "A Literary Politician," *Atlantic Monthly* (Boston), LXXVI (November, 1895), 679-80.

²⁰ Wilson, "University Training and Citizenship," *Forum*, XVIII, 114-15. See also "Notes: Revision of Academic Course of Study," 1902.

from democratic and vocational or from Germanic and intellectual points of view.²¹ Wilson, on the other hand, may well have been more concerned with where the students ate, conversed, and slept than with the formal details of their curriculum. Wilson sought an organic homogeneity embracing the entire university. Heterogeneous, individualistic Harvard was to him an example of what ought not to be. Democracy—by 1909 Wilson was using this word more freely than he once did—was “not individual but systematic.” It was “not merely making individual choices without regard to family or estate, but abiding and relishing contacts which test and disclose.”²² Students must live in close touch with the faculty; that was what the preceptorial system was about. The gulf which separated student life from academic life must be bridged.²³

Wilson's strong concern for the college as community may have stemmed from his general dislike of sharply displayed edges. Concreteness, particularity, and specialization all made of thought something less than a spiritual whole. In social terms, too, Wilson believed that particular “interests,” such as labor, mining, and agriculture, were illegitimate. The “true American attitude,” he declared in 1908, was that “of trying to combine interests, of trying to ignore particular interests, if it be necessary to do so in order to combine them.” In this context, Wilson's well-known campaign against the eating clubs at Princeton may be seen as primarily an attempt to further the organic unity of the university by smashing the “interests.”²⁴ The clubs threatened campus unity; they produced sharp edges. Internal conflict of almost any sort was assiduously

²¹ To be sure, many administrators who believed in democracy and practicality (one thinks particularly of David Starr Jordan) found themselves much torn on the issue of supervision of student morals, and no major American university abandoned all symptoms of concern in this area during this period. But there was a strong tide against paternalism in the 1880's and 1890's, revealing itself in the brief abolition of all attendance regulations at Harvard.

²² Wilson, *College and State*, II, 152, 154; notes for “Harvard Lunch, 26 June, 1907”; for “The Ideals and Objects of the University,” May 1 and 5, 1909; and untitled notes dated February 17, 1906.

²³ For evidence of Wilson's profound concern with this problem, see his “What Is a College For?” *Scribner's Magazine* (New York), XLVI (November, 1909), 574, and “The Preceptorial System at Princeton,” *Educational Review* (New York), XXXIX (April, 1910), 389-90.

²⁴ Typescript speech, “University Club, Chicago, March 12, 1908,” p. 10. It is true that Wilson once upheld individualism as an argument against the clubs. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22. Far more typical was his assault on them because “they have given us our present social strifes, perplexities, and divisions.” Typescript “Memorandum Concerning Residential Quads,” [June, 1907], p. 2. See also his own use of the term “homogeneity” in this context in a letter to F. Murphy, Jr., June 20, 1907.

avoided at Wilson's Princeton (unless it be a temporary battle to establish, once and for all, the arrangements which would banish further conflict in the future). Again the contrast with Eliot's Harvard is instructive. Princeton, shunning divisiveness, accepted a tacit ethnic corollary to its policy for fostering student homogeneity; Harvard deliberately admitted Negroes. This difference of attitude also marked expectations as to diversity among the faculty. Eliot boasted, and with justification, of the academic freedom that then obtained at Harvard. While Wilson by no means actively repressed ordinary expressions of opinion, the whole notion of academic freedom seems not to have interested him in his frequent attempts to define the ideal university. In a period when such freedom was debated as a major issue (so that leading conservative figures wrote articles defining their position on it), Wilson can never be found to have used the term, even in an incidental connection. Placing loyalty to the community above the open display of discord, Wilson was to find himself the target of a revolutionary movement directed against him, while Harvard changed executives (and academic philosophies) peacefully in 1909. In examining the range of his educational opinions, it appears fair to conclude, at the very least, that Wilson revealed far more concern for communitarian wholeness than he did for the individualism which is sometimes associated with his "New Freedom."

In advancing an organic conception of the university, Wilson used one educational term so frequently that it cannot be ignored. This was the word "discipline," which, it will be remembered, was central to the conservative argument about the nature of higher education in the mid-nineteenth century. On the lips of a clergyman-president in 1865, "mental discipline" referred to the sharpening of the young mind by persistent exercise in the intricacies of Greek and Latin grammar and mathematics. For Wilson, whose idea of a curriculum was much more inspirational, the phrase could not have held such precise allusions. Yet there had been continuity in its use. Professor Alexander T. Ormond, writing a semi-official explanation of Princeton in 1897, declared that "the aims of the college are a broad and liberal culture, mental discipline, the training of [mental] faculty."²⁵ In 1904 Wilson praised the attempt to get "something like the old definiteness and discipline out of the modern mul-

²⁵ Alexander T. Ormond, "University Ideals at Princeton," in National Education Association, *Proceedings*, 1897, p. 353.

titude of studies.”²⁶ And in 1907 he went so far as to say: “We have talked a great deal in our day about enlightenment and about orientation; but we have stopped talking about *discipline*. The chief object of education is discipline.”²⁷ The proponent of a liberal education here revealed that by opposing specialization he did not mean to condone the dilettante. After all, the preceptorial system was supposed to get students to work far harder than before. This was the end toward which the arrangements of a closely welded community must be manipulated. It was this side of Wilson’s thinking that gave him the status of a hero among many educational conservatives, including beleaguered teachers of the classics.²⁸

Emphasis upon mental discipline might imply that intellect was somehow central to the mission of the college. But the concept of intellect was more controversial than this, and in examining its role in Wilson’s educational thinking we leave the area of certainty. His ambiguity about intellect is easily understandable in terms of the academic perspectives of his age. Conservative academicians of the mid-nineteenth century had continually expressed fear that the intellect might develop grotesquely at the expense of a balanced, pre-eminently moral outlook.²⁹ Indeed, intellect had such questionable implications that the research-oriented Germanists of the 1880’s scarcely ever used it in their own behalf. By the 1890’s the word appeared more frequently in a favorable or neutral sense in American writings on higher education. Advocates of liberal culture, among others, began to use the term on occasion in their addresses, although a full embrace between the concept of intellect and that of a liberal education was to appear only after 1910.³⁰

Even during this period of its increasing acceptance as a term, however, intellect still possessed an implied sharp edge. Voltaire and Darwin, after all, had used their intellects, with results that divided rather than united civilized mankind. Intellect, even in the

²⁶ Princeton University, *Annual Report*, 1904, p. 12. See also Wilson, “What Is a College For?” *Scribner’s Magazine*, XLVI, 571.

²⁷ Woodrow Wilson, “School and College,” in Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools of the Middle States and Maryland, *Proceedings*, 1907, pp. 81-82. See also Alexander Meiklejohn to Wilson, [March 25, 1909], in conjunction with Meiklejohn’s article, “Is Mental Training a Myth?” *Educational Review*, XXXVII (February, 1909), 139.

²⁸ See E. G. Sihler to Wilson, October 23, 1904, and P. L. Blakely to Wilson, December 14, 1907.

²⁹ See, for example, Noah Porter, *The Human Intellect* (New York, 1886), 46. This work was first published in 1868.

³⁰ See Veysey, “The Emergence of the American University,” 750-52, and note 147.

more generously melioristic climate at the turn of the twentieth century, might conjure criticism rather than affirmation; it might portend the destructive use of the particular to cast doubt upon the noble generality. True, intellect had also produced the satisfactorily inclusive universalism of Kant and Hegel, but in Presbyterian circles such use of the mind had lacked enthusiastic advocacy.

In view of this delicate situation, Wilson carried his trust of intellect to an impressive length, though not indeed so far as such other proponents of liberal culture as John Erskine, Alexander Meiklejohn, and William T. Foster were beginning to do in this decade. But these men were not then presidents of universities, nor did they have to work in the moral and religious milieu of Princeton. While still a professor, Wilson had urged that the student be placed "in possession of the materials for a systematic criticism of life," but he immediately explained that science could not form the basis of such a criticism. More remarkably for one of his religious background, he announced his unreserved enthusiasm for the Hegelian philosopher, Josiah Royce.³¹ By 1908 Wilson was able to scribble in preparing his opening address to freshmen: "The objects of a university *intellectual*. All else incidental and by way of corollary."³²

For Wilson to make this last statement, even in a rash moment, it had become necessary for him to tame the concept of intellect, to redirect it, as it were, into safer, more affirmative paths. Distrusting rationalism, he sought to harmonize intellect with the intuitive side of life.³³ "Our hearts and our intellects are not in fact distinct," he said in 1905. "Our emotions sweeten our thinking, our hearts give character to our minds." Thus, while knowledge usually remained an unfavorable word in his vocabulary, Wilson could view the preceptorial system as "a means, not so much of instruction, as of intellectual development" and as a method of "intellectual contagion." He could declare that "the ideal at the heart of the American university is intellectual training, the awakening of the whole man." And he could wage war on the eating clubs on avowedly intellectual

³¹ Wilson to Ellen Axson, February 5, 1884, quoted in Baker, *Wilson: Life and Letters*, I, 196-97.

³² Wilson, "University Training and Citizenship," *Forum*, XVIII, 113; notes for "Opening of the University, 162nd Year," September 24, 1908.

³³ See Wilson, *The Relation of University Education to Commerce*, 26-27; William Jewett Tucker, *My Generation: An Autobiographical Interpretation* (Boston, 1919), 226.

grounds, even though he also protested that “the new plan [for residential quadrangles] would certainly not be meant to exclude the natural association of congenial men.”³⁴ What Wilson had done was to divorce the notion of intellect from that of scholarship.³⁵ Retaining the vocabulary of intuition, he said that universities needed “to cultivate intellectual imagination.”³⁶

Wilson’s most important discussion of the relationship between intellect and other academic goals came in his Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard in 1909. He then declared that the object of higher education “is not scholarship (except for the few . . .), but the intellectual and spiritual life. . . . By the intellectual and spiritual life I mean the life which enables the mind to comprehend and make proper use of the modern world and all its opportunities. The object of a liberal training is not learning, but discipline and the enlightenment of the mind.”³⁷ The key word of this passage is “enlightenment.” It is apparent that Wilson did not mean this word in its eighteenth-century sense. It is especially important to insist that he did not mean it in a religious sense, as the generation of James McCosh had understood religion. Despite Wilson’s reference to “spiritual life,” despite his deep Presbyterian convictions, the whole of his academic rhetoric is noteworthy for the infrequency with which the word Christ appears. Wilson was not so “archaic” as to cling to the specific expressions of Christian piety that had all but vanished from educational speeches in the years after 1880. Rather, his talk of “enlightenment”—even his use of the vague phrase “spiritual life”—signified his drift away from the confining epistemology of James McCosh. In his promotion of the nobly indefinite, Wilson announced his position as a modern of the non-scientific moderns. It was not a well-defined theological system that Wilson connected with university ideals, but rather, as he said a few sen-

³⁴ Typescript of baccalaureate address, June 11, 1905, pp. 6, 7; *ibid.*, June 12, 1904, p. 10; Wilson, “Address,” in Johns Hopkins University, *Celebration of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the University and Inauguration of Ira Remsen, LL.D., as President of the University* (Baltimore, 1902), p. 38; Wilson, “The Preceptorial System at Princeton,” *Educational Review*, XXXIX, 386, 387; Wilson, *College and State*, II, 148. On the clubs, see Wilson to A. C. Smith, July 15, 1907, to L. I. Reichner, July 20, 1907, and to W. B. Reed, Jr., September 6, 1907; and typescript speech, “University Club, Chicago, March 12, 1908,” p. 22.

³⁵ Note his distinction between these terms in scrap of notes for “Harvard Φ B K, 1 July 1909.”

³⁶ Wilson, *The Relation of University Education to Commerce*, 16.

³⁷ Wilson, “The Spirit of Learning,” in Northup *et al.* (eds.), *Phi Beta Kappa Orations*, 472.

tences further on in the same address, a certain “temper” of mind, an “attitude towards life and . . . [a] fair way of thinking.” The mind of the ideal college graduate, he continued, should be “a practised instrument of appreciation.” Practice meant discipline; “appreciation” invoked the inspiration of culture. That criticism might not override appreciation, the educator should impart “not so much learning as the spirit of learning.” What Wilson embraced was an imprecise sense of uplift, partly of the mind, partly of the soul.

Despite his carefully qualified acceptance of intellect, Wilson sometimes winced at what the word more commonly meant. He could see it as a threat to moral action. And Wilson, especially when addressing students, could be as homiletic in his appeals as were the presidents of Bowdoin and Amherst.³⁸ In his inaugural speech of 1902, Wilson saw morality and intellect as two separate attributes and explicitly urged that morality was “in the last analysis, the fundamental argument for liberal culture.” As a result of these varying statements, it is not hard to understand why at least one of his contemporaries was frankly confused by Wilson’s attitude toward intellect in the university.³⁹ Yet it is possible to conclude that Wilson emphasized an intellectual goal for undergraduate education more strongly than was customary among presidents of major universities in his day, though at the same time he insisted that intellect had little to do with science, logic, or reason.

Similar in its apparent lack of clarity was Wilson’s attitude toward a subject of greater general concern: the proper role of a university in the society at large. As a believer in liberal culture, he held that a college or university should remain distinct from the material interests of the outside world, rather than faithfully mirroring them. Yet, as an ardent nationalist, he was also strongly interested in education for public service (occasionally he used the more egalitarian word “citizenship”). He devoted much rhetorical energy to a delicate balancing of these two concerns.

In some of his high-pitched moods Wilson dreamed an essentially monastic dream concerning the collegiate experience. The college should show the youth “some quiet place . . . withdrawn from the

³⁸ See notes for “The Principle of Rectitude,” November 15, 1900; typescripts of baccalaureate addresses, June 12, 1904, pp. 8, 10, and June 11, 1905, p. 10.

³⁹ Wilson, “Princeton for the Nation’s Service,” *Science*, XVI, 730; N. R. Best to Wilson, July 24, 1909. On other occasions, Wilson moved close to an identification of intellect with the subordinate entity of the believers in mental discipline. Thus Princeton should foster “a combination of hard-headedness and intellectual definiteness with a spirit of idealism.” Notes for “Princeton’s Future,” *Orange Alumni*, November 9, 1905.

interests of the world," where he would learn "that the chief end of man is to keep his soul untouched from corrupt influences."⁴⁰ What Wilson called "the perfect place of learning in my thought" was "itself a little world; but not perplexed, living with a singleness of aim not known without; the home of sagacious men, hard-headed and with a will to know, debaters of the world's questions every day and used to the rough ways of democracy; and yet a place removed—calm Science seated there, recluse, ascetic, like a nun, not knowing that the world passes, not caring, if the truth but come in answer to her prayer; and Literature, walking within her open doors, in quiet chambers, with men of olden time, storied walls about her, and calm voices infinitely sweet." Wilson's "perfect place of learning" resembled the world "in having all men's life at heart," but it was unlike the world "in its self-possession, its thorough way of talk, its care to know more than the moment brings to light." In contrast to its surroundings, the university was "slow to take excitement" and "its air [was] pure and wholesome with a breath of faith."⁴¹

In his attraction to the seclusive vision of the nunnery, Wilson stood alone among major university presidents of the Progressive Era. And even he drew back from a full embrace of such unworldliness. Asceticism, whether of the Oriental or of the plain New England variety, markedly attracted his attention but met with his ultimate rejection.⁴² Though removed from the world, the university should contain "windows open straight upon the street, where many stand and talk, intent upon the world of men and business." Wilson could also assert that "the air of affairs should be admitted" to the classroom. "We dare not keep aloof," he declared, "and closet ourselves while a nation comes to its maturity."⁴³ It was the striking temptation to do just this that lends these passages a quality unusual among academic rhetoric at the turn of the century.

Granted that the windows of the scholastic retreat were to be flung open, would the "air of affairs" thus introduced blend smoothly with the "pure and wholesome" air of the place itself—an atmosphere Wilson had scented in an adjoining paragraph of the same oration? In his inaugural address he came closest to reconciling

⁴⁰ Wilson, *College and State*, I, 496.

⁴¹ Wilson, "Princeton in the Nation's Service," *Forum*, XXII, 466.

⁴² See typescript baccalaureate addresses of June 12, 1904, pp. 14-15, and June 11, 1905, pp. 3-5.

⁴³ Wilson, "Princeton in the Nation's Service," *Forum*, XXII, 465-66.

his thoughts on this question. "It is true," he said, "that in order to learn men must for a little while withdraw from action, must seek some quiet place of remove from the bustle of affairs, where their thoughts may run clear and tranquil, and the heats of business be for the time put off; but that cloistered refuge is no place to dream in. It is a place for the first conspectus of the mind, for a thoughtful poring upon the map of life; and the boundaries which should emerge to the mind's eye are not more the intellectual than the moral boundaries of thought and action."⁴⁴ The university was to be no monastery for intellect (or for faith); rather, it was to train men to be active leaders. Although etiquette forbade him to say it directly, Wilson apparently envisioned the production of a class of public servants in the spirit of Oxford. It is in this sense that his non-utilitarian prescription for a curriculum meshes with his assertion that, with respect to the students, he would "quicken their social understanding, instruct their consciences," and thus in planning for Princeton would also be "planning for the country."⁴⁵

Wilson's idea of the relevance of education to public service—a strong theme in his writings despite his dalliance with a more thoroughgoing monasticism—was itself unusually aristocratic in the academic milieu of the early twentieth century. The notion of professional expertise, as embodied in the so-called Wisconsin Idea, was here negated. Nor did Wilson believe in the yet more radical notion, advanced in certain circles since 1892, of actual popular control over the shape of the university. Indeed, during the 1890's he rejected several offers to become president of state universities because he did not wish to have to beg funds from and "deal with" legislators in a political atmosphere. In 1903 he characterized the difference between private and state institutions as that between "individuality" in the first case and "imitation" in the second.⁴⁶ Wilson's attitude toward the public schools, even as late as 1909, bore further evidence of an aloofness on his part; it also revealed how slight he considered the connection between the ordinary American high

⁴⁴ Wilson, "Princeton for the Nation's Service," *Science*, XVI, 730.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 721, 729-30. "It is for the training of men who are to rise above the ranks. That is what a college is for." Wilson, "What Is a College For?" *Scribner's Magazine*, XLVI, 573.

⁴⁶ Baker, *Wilson: Life and Letters*, II, 21-22; notes for speech to alumni of the Northwest, April 24, 1903. In 1909 it was newly assumed that Wilson might not be indifferent to an offer from the University of Michigan, and by 1910 he was interested in the presidency of the University of Minnesota. Here in academic terms was another indication of his "leftward shift."

school and a university such as Princeton. It is the business of the schools, he said, "to make of most of the young people of this country skilled mechanics. I do not use the word 'mechanic' in any narrow sense. There are mechanics of the mind as well as mechanics of the hand. It is our business to give to the vast majority of the young people of this country a technical knowledge and a technical skill."⁴⁷ The full flavor of this pronouncement comes forth when one recalls Wilson's disdain for technical practicality in higher education. In 1899, in attempting to define liberal culture, he had indeed affirmed: "'Liberal' in the best sense means 'popular,' i.e. open-minded, catholic, broadly human, without class prepossessions or narrowness."⁴⁸ Yet it remains clear that, in such a crucial matter as admissions, Princeton under Wilson maintained an exclusiveness which was closer to the English spirit than to that of the midwestern state university. This is not to say that the Wilsonian effect upon admissions was insignificant. As a result of new entrance examinations, intellect came to be taken more seriously as a condition to be considered along with the means and position of the applicant, and the numbers actually grew smaller. There is no indication that Wilson was ever alarmed by this consequence, and this fact, again, must be understood in a context of eager quantitative proliferation at nearly every other American college and university. In other words, it was even more eccentric not to seek larger numbers in the university of 1905 than it would be in that of a half-century and more later.

It is in this perspective that Wilson's campaign against the eating clubs must be seen.⁴⁹ It is true that as early as 1906 he attacked the clubs in the explicit name of "democracy." But no firm conception of "democracy" determined Wilson's long-term response to this particular issue. In 1897, speaking to the Cottage Club, Wilson was prepared to assert: "The power of democracy is in individual groupings—and a club can both make and carry ideals and traditions." It is also certain that as late as 1905 Wilson viewed with complacent approval the formation of a new "senior society" at Princeton, apparently created somewhat under the spell of those at Yale and

⁴⁷ Typescript of speech, "Education and the Schools," January 9, 1909. For a more expanded statement of the same idea, see typescript of "The Statesmanship of Letters," November 5, 1903, pp. 3-4.

⁴⁸ Manuscript of speech, "The Teacher as Citizen," February 16, 1899.

⁴⁹ The best narrative of the events of Wilson's career at Princeton, including the battle against the clubs, is in Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: The Road to the White House* (Princeton, 1947), 39-91.

composed of but fifteen men selected annually. It did not strike him as objectionable that the members of this society were "men of recognized social influence." Within another year or two he veered to the view that "individual groupings" were no longer consonant with the ever-present goal of organic homogeneity. Wilson may thus have redefined an expendable word—"democracy"—to accord with his more deeply felt wishes, wishes that were centered in the concept of community. A club is one kind of community, and what lay at stake at Princeton was not the basic idea of clubbiness, but rather the unity and sense of direction of the members. In defending his new position in 1907, Wilson significantly asserted that "a quadrangle life . . . would be a reproduction of club life on a larger scale without the exclusion of the men now practically excluded from university life altogether." He further gave assurance that his plan to replace the eating clubs with dining halls would have "no tendency to make Princeton like Chicago or any other university," and that Princeton's distinctiveness would be "enhanced rather than lost."⁵⁰ In short, Princeton itself was to remain a club, albeit of a more intellectual orientation than formerly.

As it faced the world, Princeton must "offset" the "extraordinary force of . . . the Majority" by supplying "independence of thought." In this perhaps unthanked way, Princeton would serve the nation. In his inaugural address Wilson gave the following considered judgment as to the proper relation between the university and the surrounding society: "The college is not for the majority who carry forward the common labor of the world, nor even for those who work at . . . skilled handicrafts. . . . It is for the minority who plan, who conceive, who superintend, who mediate between group and group and must see the wide stage as a whole. Democratic nations must be served in this wise no less than those whose leaders are chosen by birth and privilege!"⁵¹ Nor did Wilson entirely reject the importance of birth itself. "In good breeding," he remarked a few years earlier, "there is always the fine savor of generations of gentlemen, a tradition of courtesy, the perfect knowledge of long practice." This was the Wilson who could also refer, in 1905, to "our proper intellectual pride and aristocracy."⁵²

⁵⁰ Manuscript, "Supplementary Report to the Board of Trustees, Dec. 13, 1906," p. 2; notes of talk to Cottage Club, June 11, 1897; Princeton University, *Annual Report*, 1905, p. 17; Wilson to H. H. Armstrong, September 3, 1907.

⁵¹ Wilson, "Princeton for the Nation's Service," *Science*, XVI, 724.

⁵² Notes for "The University and the Land We Live In: Princetonian Dinner, 22

There was another, perhaps more publicized, academic Woodrow Wilson: the crusader of the period immediately preceding the New Jersey governorship. In 1908, apparently for the first time, Wilson used the term “gentleman” in a less favorable context. The following year he saw a danger in the fact that so many rich men’s sons were attending college.⁵³ And in his baccalaureate address of 1910 he warned: “We [at Princeton] are not to think of ourselves as in any way essentially distinguished or superior or aristocratic because we have had the privilege of going this special way of preparation and enlightenment. . . . If there is any aristocracy of class . . . it lies ahead of us, not behind us, in what we shall do, not in what we have done.”⁵⁴ But it would be hazardous to depict Wilson’s academic mind on the basis of shifting statements uttered amid the growing awareness that his future need not necessarily lie in the academic arena, or at least in Princeton’s peculiar corner of that arena. Indeed, what is notable is Wilson’s protest, during this late period of changing perspective, that he was by no means abandoning the academic ideal of liberal culture. In April, 1910, maintaining that he was being misrepresented in the press, Wilson clung—if anything more firmly than ever—to the contrast between culture and “public service and material achievement.” Defining culture as “the intimate and sensitive appreciation of moral, intellectual, and aesthetic values,” he affirmed that “the production of men capable of these deeper insights is one of the things most to be desired in the life and influence of a university.” His quarrel, he insisted, was not over this principle, but “on the side of organization” only.⁵⁵

Wilson’s educational attitudes, both in their certainties (the rejection of practicality and science, the acceptance of an organically communitarian outlook) and in their ambiguities (toward intellect and toward the larger society), may reveal the face of a distinguished but numerically minor movement within American academic circles at the close of the nineteenth century. These attitudes explain

March, 1905”; Wilson, “Princeton in the Nation’s Service,” *Forum*, XXII, 461. In his selection of preceptors Wilson seems to have preferred the attribute of gentlemanliness to that of scholarship. Link, *Wilson: The Road to the White House*, 41.

⁵³ Typescript of speech, “The Life of the College,” October 16, 1908, in Woodrow Wilson Collection (Princeton University Library); Wilson, “What Is a College For?” *Scribner’s Magazine*, XLVI, 572.

⁵⁴ Typescript of baccalaureate address, June 13, 1910, pp. 1-2, in Wilson Collection (Princeton University Library).

⁵⁵ Woodrow Wilson, Letter to the editor, *Nation* (New York), XC (April 28, 1910), 428.

why Wilson could become a hero to A. Lawrence Lowell and other rebellious humanists at Harvard.⁵⁶ They do not clearly explain why Wilson, as early as 1906, gained political attention outside the world of the university. But it is unreasonable that they should. Argument about academic aims had little precise impact upon a public which was sending only four per cent of its sons to college. Wilson's sentences, embodying (for all their shunning of the concrete) so many fine distinctions of attitude, may well have filtered into the public mind as nothing more specific than self-assured, cultivated oratory which remained morally sound.

Perhaps this was enough. "Style" had always been one of Wilson's chief avowed concerns.⁵⁷ It may have been on this level that an academic believer in "liberal culture" could make contact with the vaguer yearning after culture that gripped large numbers of middle-class Americans during the Progressive Era.⁵⁸ Had that public cared to become intimately acquainted with Wilson's notion of progress, as expressed in an academic context before 1908, it might not have greeted even a somewhat changed and politically more flexible Wilson with so much enthusiasm in the years that followed. In this sense an undifferentiated stereotype—such as "fighting professor"—may sometimes offer a convenient refuge.

⁵⁶ A. Lawrence Lowell to Wilson, February 15, 1903, January 15, 1909, July 14, 1909, October 26, 1909, March 21 and 24, 1910. See also Barrett Wendell to James Ford Rhodes, July 3, 1909, quoted in M. A. DeWolfe Howe (ed.), *Barrett Wendell and His Letters* (Boston, 1924), 201.

⁵⁷ Baker, *Wilson: Life and Letters*, I, 184, 200-203.

⁵⁸ See Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence* (New York, 1959), 30-51.