

Faculty Research Edition

of

The Savannah State College Bulletin

Published by

THE SAVANNAH STATE COLLEGE

Volume 15, No. 2 Savannah, Georgia December, 1961

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Contributors

Sylvia E. Bowen, Assistant Professor of Mathematics

Madeline H. Dixon, Catalogue Librarian and Assistant Professor

J. Randolph Fisher, Associate Professor of English

Dorothy C. Hamilton, Assistant Professor of Education

E. J. Josey, Librarian and Associate Professor

Walter A. Mercer, Associate Professor of Education

Louise Lautier Owens, Assistant Professor of English

Evanel R. Terrell, Associate Professor of Home Economics

Luetta B. Colvin Upshur, Assistant Professor of English

Velma V. Watters, Assistant Professor of Education

Forrest Oran Wiggins, Professor of Philosophy

The Savannah State College Bulletin is published in October, December, February, March, April, and May by Savannah State College. Entered as second-class matter, December 16, 1947, at the Post Office at Savannah, Georgia under the Act of August 24, 1912.

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Responsibility of the Scholar*

by

Forrest Oran Wiggins

*"Mourn not the dead . . .
But rather mourn the apathetic throng,
The cowed and meek,
Who see the world's great anguish aid its wrong
And dare not speak."*

These lines, written a little more than a century ago, when the nation was rent by the impending struggle between the proponents and opponents of the institution of human slavery, were used to describe the attitudes of a large segment of the North. The reformer cannot comprehend how others may lack zeal for the course he espouses. The writer of these lines, you note, divided those who did not share his zeal into three classes: the apathetic, the cowed, and the meek.

Today when the issue is not merely one of national, but global survival, this division is not less valid. As a nation, except for the few voices crying seemingly in the darkness, the vast majority of the citizenry manifest indifference or fear or an overwhelming interest in security. Today, at the beginning of a new quarter, is a propitious time to pause in order to examine the aims of education in the light of the foregoing. We who are most concerned with the educative process are all too prone, absorbed as we are in the mechanical details to the process, to lose sight of its objectives. Such an examination is a moral imperative; for, indeed, I believe that future historians will consider this, the age in which we live, as one of the most interesting and significant in the history of western civilization. Indeed, this is a period that is pregnant for the greatest good—or the greatest evil. Sober, objective scientific thinkers assure us that with the instrumentalities now at hand we can either raise mankind to heights before undreamed of or destroy it utterly.

We need, then, first to assess and to re-examine so that we may determine what the aims of higher education are and to point out the role and responsibility of the scholar. In regard to the first, I should like to state categorically that education has two aims: the training of intelligence and the instilling of ideals. Before, however, these aims can be realized, the teacher as a scholar must first prepare himself—prepare his own mind—so that he may critically examine what has hitherto passed as truth.

Thinking is an individual job, one that can be done only by the individual. To think is man's prerogative—and his deepest moral obligation. In fact, as an isolated individual, it is the only thing he *can do*. To engage in such a venture is fraught with peril, for once a man begins to think nobody knows where he will come out. This, then,

* A speech delivered at the All-College Assembly at Savannah State College, June 22, 1961.

is the danger of thought: it upsets previous conceptions; it imperils cherished beliefs; it challenges the accepted; it destroys the false.

To say that one's ideas are not his own is but a repeat to truism. Our ideas are a part of our intellectual heritage. However, to seek refuge and comfort from this fact is akin to cowardice. Without a constant re-examination of basic beliefs in science, in politics, in economics—in every phase of the intellectual life—no progress is possible.

Assuming that men will consent to think as persistently and doggedly as they are capable, they will surely want to know whether this is the kind of world in which they wish to live. Do they want a world where many die of malnutrition in one area, while, in another part, food is in excess? Do they want a world in which excessive wealth exists side by side with excessive poverty? Do they want a world where the more one works the less he eats, and the less he works the more he eats?

Assuming, again, they wished to think about their world, where could they turn for the tools for such a critical analysis? The natural sciences are objective, neutral and impartial. By this the scientist assures us that science makes no value judgments. It can tell us what *is*, not what *is worthwhile*. Nor can the social sciences, insofar as they are sciences modeled after the natural sciences, tell us anything about values.

Since science does not concern itself with axiology, it can never decide or help decide any human question on the basis of its desirability. It cannot, for example, prefer slavery to freedom or knowledge to ignorance. The political scientist is engaged in pure description; hence, he cannot say that democracy is preferable to fascism or communism. The physical scientist can describe the effects of radiation, but he cannot, as a physicist, say whether they are good or bad.

In brief, science can never give us more than facts. The acquisition of facts—as important and indispensable as this may be—is only half the task for a human being. The responsibility of the scholar is that of getting all the facts he can muster, but his is a larger and deeper responsibility.

If the term were not overused and misused, I should employ the term "love" to describe the attitude of the scholar. I prefer the term "moral sensitivity." Moral sensitivity means the infusion of the personality with moral idealism. It means a viewing of the facts, garnered by science, in relation to a moral whole and a moral end. Further, and consequently, moral sensitivity refers to the capacity of the scholar to see beyond the narrow confines of his petty soul, so that his view will encompass and enfold the whole of mankind as the only ultimately fit object for human thought. Moral sensitivity demands courage, courage not only *to hold* convictions but also as a necessary counterpart, an open-mindedness that includes the candor necessary to admit that his most cherished convictions—political, social, economic, scientific—may be wrong.

Since the college is the usual habitat of the scholar, we must now inquire into the role which the college plays in this our critical age.

Obviously education can no longer confine itself to inculcating the youth of today with the traditions of yesterday. This assumption of the role of education rested on the premise that society was relatively static, and that the future would repeat the past. This assumption is no longer valid, for all the facts go contrary to it. The youth of today face both a today and a tomorrow in which past relationships among classes within nations and among nations are undergoing profound changes.

The demand, therefore, is for a type of college and a type of education that give—as we have stated before—an objective account of the forces operative in the world coupled with the intellectual and emotional vigor with which to cope with them.

But instead of meeting their task, our colleges, under the domination of a commercial civilization, have deviated from their main true goal. Their ideal (not that of course in the lofty-sounding “objectives” stated in the front of most catalogues) is that of providing students with the techniques of taking a segment of their cultural heritage and selling it to the highest bidder.

To be sure the graduates of our college have rather adequately solved the problem of their own economic security. But such graduates are truncated, not whole men. They have purchased security at the price of wholeness and freedom. And being partial, fearful men they cannot comprehend the complete, unafraid man. What they cannot understand, they fear. They are fearful of the questions the complete man may ask—afraid that the questions are not only disquieting, but maybe dangerous to “our way of life.”

Their ideas are those promulgated by the dominant, minority economic interest of the nation who, in order to maintain and perpetuate their domination, control the ideology of the majority. This is no contemporary phenomenon. It is, rather, the pattern of all societies. This is not fear of intellectualism *per se*, but only of the brand that examines and challenges reigning myths.

Still the critic, the reformer and the crusader are always with us; and today, as always, they are considered enemies of the state. Like Socrates they ask, “Whither goest thou?” If today we ask, “For what do we spend our natural resources, our technical competence, and our manpower? Why do we spend the greater part of our national budget on war both past and future? Why do we have ill-health, disease, ignorance, slums, and poverty in the richest nation in the world?” And, like Socrates, those who ask such questions are marked as idle dreamers, idealists, and egg-heads. If mockery does not suffice, we still their voice by branding them.

But if the aim of the college is to produce complete men, i.e. moral men, then, the professor must profess the doctrine of freedom and wholeness. But the apathetic, the cowed, and the meek cannot instill the ideal of freedom in the minds of students. One cannot teach what he does not know, nor instill ideals in which he does not fervently

believe. Neither the cowed nor the meek can teach the methods of freedom.

One may readily understand the sentiment expressed by, "I can't afford to stick my neck out." But understanding is a far cry from approval. Those, too, who under a mask of scientific impartiality and objectivity, disclaim their interest in political action will find themselves the victims of politics. Attempting to attain security in this manner (witness the plight of the professor under fascism) results only in insecurity.

Yet the Christian tradition is a deep one and will not be stilled. Those who are the products of two thousand years of the Christian heritage have their moral sensitivity developed to such a high degree that they experience revulsion at the mere thought of a hungry child, disease-ravaged body, of millions killed in warfare. But moral sensitivity is not enough. As scholars, with receptive hearts and trained minds, you will not be content to weep in the dark—and alone. Your courageous intelligence demands that you seek *new* solutions for persistent problems, and that you travel *new* paths in thought and in action. Thus your voices, now muted, will join the triumphant, mighty chorus and sing the hymn of humanity.