

## FROM SOCRATES' *APOLOGY* TO HEIDEGGER'S *REKTORATSREDE*

When I was fifteen years old I saw the University of Chicago for the first time and somehow sensed that I had discovered my life. I had never before seen, or at least had not noticed, buildings that were evidently dedicated to a higher purpose, not to necessity or utility, not merely to shelter or manufacture or trade, but to something that might be an end in itself. The Middle West was not known for the splendor of its houses of worship or its monuments to political glory. There was little visible reminiscence of the spiritual heights with which to solicit the imagination or the admiration of young people. The longing for I knew not what suddenly found a response in the world outside.

It was, surely, the fake Gothic buildings. In the course of my education I have learned that they were fake, and that Gothic is not really my taste. But they pointed toward a road of learning that leads to the meeting place of the greats. There one finds examples of a sort not likely to be seen around one, without which one could neither recognize one's own capacities nor know how wonderful it is to belong to the species. This imitation of styles of faraway lands and ages showed an awareness of lack of, and a respect for, the substance expressed by those styles. These buildings were a bow to the contemplative life by a nation addicted more than any other to the active life. The pseudo-Gothic was much ridiculed, and nobody builds like that anymore. It is not authentic, not an expression of what we are, so it was said. To me it was and remains an expression of what we are. One wonders whether the culture critics had as good an instinct

about our spiritual needs as the vulgar rich who paid for the buildings. This nation's impulse is toward the future, and tradition seems more of a shackle to it than an inspiration. Reminiscences and warnings from the past are our only monitor as we careen along our path. Those despised millionaires who set up a university in the midst of a city that seems devoted only to the American goals paid tribute to what they had neglected, whether it was out of a sense of what they themselves had missed, or out of bad conscience about what their lives were exclusively devoted to, or to satisfy the vanity of having their names attached to the enterprise. (What feeds a man's vanity teaches as much about him as anything.) Education was an American thing, and not only technical education.

For me the promise of these buildings was fully kept. From the moment I became a student there, it seemed plausible to spend all my time thinking about what I am, a theme that was interesting to me but had never appeared a proper or possible subject of study. In high school I had seen many of the older boys and girls go off to the state university to become doctors, lawyers, social workers, teachers, the whole variety of professions respectable in the little world in which I lived. The university was part of growing up, but it was not looked forward to as a transforming experience—nor was it so in fact. No one believed that there were serious ends of which we had not heard, or that there was a way of studying our ends and determining their rank order. In short, philosophy was only a word, and literature a form of entertainment. Our high schools and the atmosphere around them put us in this frame of mind. But a great university presented another kind of atmosphere, announcing that there are questions that ought to be addressed by everyone but are not asked in ordinary life or expected to be answered there. It provided an atmosphere of free inquiry, and therefore excluded what is not conducive to or is inimical to such inquiry. It made a distinction between what is important and not important. It protected the tradition, not because tradition is tradition but because tradition provides models of discussion on a uniquely high level. It contained marvels and made possible friendships consisting in shared experiences of those marvels. Most of all there was the presence of some authentically great thinkers who gave living proof of the existence of the theoretical life and whose motives could not easily be reduced to any of the baser ones people delight in thinking universal. They had authority, not based on power, money or family, but

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on natural gifts that properly compel respect. The relations among them and between them and students were the revelation of a community in which there is a true common good. In a nation founded on reason, the university was the temple of the regime, dedicated to the purest use of reason and evoking the kind of reverence appropriate to an association of free and equal human beings.

The years have taught me that much of this existed only in my youthful and enthusiastic imagination, but not so much as one might suppose. The institutions were much more ambiguous than I could have suspected, and they have proved much frailer when caught in contrary winds than it seemed they would be. But I did see real thinkers who opened up new worlds for me. The substance of my being has been informed by the books I learned to care for. They accompany me every minute of every day of my life, making me see much more and be much more than I could have seen or been if fortune had not put me into a great university at one of its greatest moments. I have had teachers and students such as dreams are made on. And most of all I have friends with whom I can share thinking about what friendship is, with whom there is a touching of souls and in whom works that common good of which I have just spoken. All of this is, of course, mixed with the weaknesses and uglinesses that life necessarily contains. None of it cancels the low in man. But it informs even that low. None of my disappointments with the university—which is after all only a vehicle for contents in principle separable from it—has ever made me doubt that the life it gave me was anything other than the best one available to me. Never did I think that the university was properly ministerial to the society around it. Rather I thought and think that society is ministerial to the university, and I bless a society that tolerates and supports an eternal childhood for some, a childhood whose playfulness can in turn be a blessing to society. Falling in love with the idea of the university is not a folly, for only by means of it is one able to see what can be. Without it, all these wonderful results of the theoretical life collapse back into the primal slime from which they cannot re-emerge. The facile economic and psychological debunking of the theoretical life cannot do away with its irreducible beauties. But such debunking can obscure them, and has.