

*Henrik Steffens held these talks in 1808/1809 in the time of Napoleon's occupation. The Emperor had just lifted his ban on university teaching. This was, amazingly enough, the formative time of Berlin University, an enterprise that would involve Steffens, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Savigny and others.*

*The lectures here were addressed to the students, not the administration or the prevailing governmental authorities. That in itself was quite a statement in these times.*

*To Steffens, a university wasn't supposed to be merely a trade school, but a place that opened you up, allowed you to blossom as an individual and helped you to learn to embrace the things of this world. We bring here in English, his first talk on the theme of what a university might be. --TCR*

# *The Idea of the University*

by Henrik Steffens (1809)

## Introduction

These lectures were held at the commencement of the winter semester 1808/1809. Illness and various duties have, until now, prevented me from putting them into their current form. As my lectures are always extemporaneous, the reader will not find an exact reproduction of them but rather the succession of the ideas they contained. An esteemed person from abroad has spoken about the qualities of German Universities, as they must appear to a foreigner. One of the foremost minds of this nation has elaborated on the theme, deepening our understanding of it as it applies to this country<sup>1</sup>. It seems to me by no means superfluous to give the students themselves information about academic learning. That lectures of this kind should be stimulating as well as instructive seems essential to me.

## First Talk

It is our intention, through the present lectures, to elaborate the higher meaning and significance of academic learning. This seems especially important in these times. It is, however appropriate for us to evaluate things in a way that lets us discover whether the claims we make and the remedies we suggest are not merely the foolish fantasies of a few individuals, but something of real importance to people in general. For every investigation that has to do with the development of history and the ordinary circumstances of life, has to point to our time, as the future blossoming of the same, in a manner that is not one-sided or merely conventional in its observation of things. May we be permitted, for these reasons, to give, as an introduction to this lecture, a short description of our time?

There are people- also young people- who are satisfied with the version of the world as it is handed down to them; a world impressed by an alien disposition, directed by an alien will. This expresses itself through small scarcely noticeable oscillations. It cannot be denied that such people can be useful, even educated, and suitable to a certain circle of people. It is by no means our intention to debunk such people, or to establish some foolish hierarchy, thereby indulging the spirits of vanity.

But I am speaking alone to those for whom the world is a wondrous riddle, whose solution is entrusted to one's own soul, no one else's. I speak to those who, fully devoted to this task, can never be divorced from their own nature, minds originally free, who seek a confirmation of their findings only within themselves. The institute whose idea we wish to develop exists solely for such people.

The time we have been born into, or according to whose principle we were raised, is characterised by (as is generally admitted both now and in the past) a slovenly dependence on what has been handed down from the past. It is a time somewhat infatuated by the vain pursuit of newness regarding the details [of this life]. It is a time that is also characterised by a placid drowsiness, although one is nevertheless compelled to admit that a new time can be said to have begun. In one place it shows itself as a kernel, in another place it shows itself as something welling forth in constant ferment.

If we try to trace the origins of the present time, whose last sleepy oscillation evidenced itself in the period preceding our own, we find its source to be in a remarkable epoch, that of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries. For also then a fresh new time was beginning. Great minds were shattering the chains by which a former age had bound them. If freely-conducted research is able to agree on many points, can assume a common course, as by secret assent, if apparently disparate concerns of minds at great distances from one another can be directed by an unseen hand toward a common goal, then we can begin to sense how the spirit of history can be awake to things. Quiet diligence, un presupposing in her spiritual and intellectual strivings, tucked away in research that seems, when considered individually, to speak to only a few like-minded spirits, enters, in such felicitous times, into secret league with others. This unexpected bond slowly strengthens until it reaches into all of life. It then takes hold of the great mass, determining the course of history with a higher, unfathomable power. Thus the quiet mind, calmly working, secures its eternal right, whereas the base man takes notice of such power as it fleetingly appears, what is true in life being concealed from him by the spiritual guides of history, perceptible alone to kindred spirits.

The art of printing was able, magician-like, to disseminate people's thoughts; and a great conversation of the most marvellous kind connected the remotest minds and encouraged the participation of all. Through the discoveries of the intrepid [Christopher] *Columbus* and the subsequent maritime expeditions around the earth, our planet became enclosed within itself. In [describing] the movements of the heavenly bodies, Copernicus was able to dispel illusions as to how the earth was supposed to appear. Until then, man had been more rooted in the earth. In that his mind was now able to encompass the earth, he could win [an understanding of] its etheric life. Life until then had been subsumed in the phenomena of mere appearance: after these [phenomena] had, at a certain point, been penetrated, [life] was able to enter into a higher world of spiritual laws.

It was granted the divine *Kepler* to have some presentiment of the spiritual laws of the eternal natural world. Something so extravagantly entrusted to the age could not fail to bear fruit. Spirit was roused in every dimension of life, until it reached the Middlepoint of all inquiry, the spirit of spiritual

striving<sup>2</sup>. Wondrously aroused, religion was to set the masses in motion. The sacrificial victim of this invigorating impulse John Huss, as well as religion's fearless hero, Martin Luther, was to represent the culmination of this glorious time.

Each of us is aware of the great fermenting movements, among which Europe was to find herself placed, and which would come to a halt with the Thirty Years War. What had so felicitously begun was, sadly enough, not to ripen in the ensuing period. In former times, the Middlepoint of all knowing tended toward an appreciation of the corporeal. And as the heavenly bodies (planets. eds) revolved about the earth, the Divine [was also seen] as revolving about the same apparition. Opposing this spurious course of events, the times, though not the great spirits who would give the times its particular stamp, fell into the opposite extreme. God, as infinite, was banished from life. In the same way the earth was to be acknowledged as only superficially connected to the Universe. All higher symbols of life disappeared, leaving behind an empty residue of meaningless attributes. The more this was so, the more was the Divine to take flight. The defence of the sacred was no longer what would move a nation in arms against another nation, but rather the conceits of political opportunism. Our nation, from whose centre so many glorious things have sprung, was to sink most deeply.

The intimate, sacred sounds of the language whose wondrous depths *Luther* had once plumbed, now fell silent. A despicable policy of lies and deceit was crafted into a system of subtle artificiality, whose power even today is not fully understood. Malleable in its nature, it would insinuate itself into the midst of daily life, into society and government, choking in the seed the vigorous spirit of individual character, ensnaring us in a web of hollow convenience. It was primarily a neighbouring nation whose very existence would be rooted in this false course. Her language, entirely subservient to this course, would have the affect of corrupting our own, as her way of life would succeed in corrupting our thoughts. The citizen became something separate from the state, the learned person from the Middlepoint of all knowledge, devoid of spiritual inspiration. A timid equanimity was to be the frayed ribbon that would loosely bind the population.

Every age, when ripening, has its earthly time of blossoming, fashioning itself into its own unique art form. The felicitous blossoming of the ancient Greeks and Roman times reinvigorated the whole of history. And the blossoming time

of Catholicism can be found in timeless images of poetry and art that still seem new. We know the florescence of recent times put forth shoots above barren ground, and was more remarkable for the completion of its own internal processes than for its higher importance. I refer, of course, to the period of Louis XIV and to the period that followed, that of the French encyclopaedists.

The course embarked upon, so alien to our nation, was borrowed from France in a clumsy imitation of it. Our language plumed itself with the pretensions of French words. Anything that should appear as brilliant or distinguished in science or in daily life, demanded this foreign dress. We must have seemed inferior in our own eyes to these foreigners. How could they, in turn, have respected those who so ineptly sought to imitate them? Thus it was that the original minds of the new times were transformed into bumbling lackeys. And a great king<sup>3</sup> of the sunken nation would emerge as an enthusiast for this alien form of education, disdaining at the same time the domestic form. Not in these terrifying times. Germany had previously been brought under the yoke of others, and the current catastrophe merely represents the culmination of the spiritual lackeyism of former times.

Luckily for us, the above trend can be said to have been forced upon us; the miracle of our own character had been repressed. But it was not fully capable of being suppressed.

Let us trace this alien course of development as it has come to expression in daily life and in learning:

In this former time, which people actually resisted, the Divine itself became enchained by the strictures of appearance. Pressed into narrow confines, the Divine appeared in the guise of a figure that was gloomy and dark. Having lost the bright lustre of the eternal Idea and resembling only that which was of a merely personal character, she degenerated into gloomy superstition. This quality characterized both learning and daily life in those times. In combating this superstition, man succumbed to an equally futile extreme. Ousted from life, and from learning as well, the Divine assumed an apparently trivial relationship to both. Nature's divine caretaker saw herself dispossessed, reduced to a hollow concept, estranged from the fullness of things.

Where the *Idea* is sovereign, everything lives for both itself and for the greater whole. The Divine streams into us, as it does in nature, from every living point. When viewed in a living way, form, the delimiter of things, not only confines, but affirms as well, emerging as it does from the inner plenitude of existence. He who is able to determine his own measure, to know it in a living way, has the measure of all things. He who knows no moderation, exceeding his own standards of what is beautiful, brings chaos into the world. The person who withdraws into himself, learning through inner cultivation to know himself, moves gracefully along his own path, leading a life both his own and for others. A transparent ether connects him to all things. The self-same sun awakens him, enlivening him and all of life. The same gravitation<sup>4</sup> draws both him and everything else. He leads a planetary life. Stepping beyond the path of his own existence, he invokes the ancient chaos. All motions get crossed up destroying one another. The unifying ether dims, the creating light breaks forth into an all-consuming fire, and the balancing nature of gravitation, changes into destructive force and counterforce.

Where else could this chaotic confusion more clearly emerge than at the Middlepoint of all existence, where it would only be superficially grasped? As that which is most holy would be seen solely in a context of compelling circumstances, life itself would not be seen as it truly is, but as an alien form of existence. When the bond was broken, things fell apart and a deeper understanding of their secret innermost relationships to one another disappeared. Where life and its things are understood as isolated relations, it isn't long before one relationship in particular is given arbitrary predominance over others. Thus useless discussions about this or that become the rule of the day. The tolerance of contradictory points of view was the secret confession of hollowness in everyone. To what extent an inner connection to a living natural world had diminished can be seen in the field of natural philosophy<sup>5</sup>today. Also in daily life, the constituent parts seceded from the whole. Things dissolved, disconnected from life, into generalized concepts. They, in turn, assumed a personified status, fixed within the purview of certain classes or positions in society. *Honour* became the providence of the privileged class. The greatest problems of life were given over to the educated class. *Charity* was delegated to Poor Houses. *Child Rearing* was entrusted to pedagogues. Thus that which forms the very basis of life, which should have permeated each and every one, was to assume a wholly external, essentially hostile, form.

The limp indolence of fragmented elements brought about a lazy repose that gained mastery over everyone's feelings. While armies took up arms against one another, [their] nations scarcely participated, if at all, in the fray. A drugged monotony lulled the brightest spirits to sleep. What had once been historically great, resourceful or splendid, hung loosely in mid-air in the form of spooky sagas meant to possess us, half as fable, half as madness. Or it assumed the garb of theatre or narrative as a way of convulsing soporific nerves. Few of us ever imagined we might be witness to earth-shaking events. Indeed few of us wished it to be so. Even the passions did not dare to venture beyond the demarcation line of the acceptable. Great crimes were as rare as great virtues. Thus the wondrous in history was hushed. Her halo dimmed, went out, and no one believed in her anymore.

Please do not reproach me for my harsh assessment of the time preceding our own. That time has already received judgement from the times we live in and has perished amidst an abundance of over-intellectuality. Nor should you fault me for seeming to try to deprive youthful spirits of most of what their parents and teachers have handed down to them in the way of a crutch for their [children's] existence. History has been merciless in her destruction of every crutch. And what does not belong to the general public of the time—and my talk is not directed to them—belongs to itself. Pure and simple. For despite the contentions of various families and peoples, the tangled fabric of error has actually served to pave a way toward the truth. What had been sensed intuitively by a few minds, others were tentatively expressing, has become expressed. The wonders of vanishing times press on. Nature's profoundest secrets reveal themselves among the hands of contradictory researchers. Profound spirits (minds) were entering into a secret league, and truth, clearly perceived by some of them, was destructively forcing its way with others into the loose fabric of empty cognition.

You say we should gradually lead these young sensibilities from error to the highest truths, whereas everything, in the sudden grasp of wild fermentation, leaves us with no firm standpoint. Every aspect of life is shaken to the core. Sovereign States, we once belonged to, have met their downfall. Forms of life we assumed were indestructible, are suddenly gone. Fidelity to Sovereign and Fatherland wobbles precariously. The cleverest of carefully laid plans are suddenly, from one moment to the next, unrecognizable. In every sphere of knowledge error combats truth, while storms and high seas give us no respite

whereby we might grasp the steadfast and true. We are, all of us, involved in this colossal struggle of life and of spirits (minds). Should we attempt to conceal from you that this is actually the case? In the investigation of nature, medicine, and the law, even in religion, that which is coming into being wrestles with that which is of the past. That which is merely handed down, which you otherwise experience with half-hearted indolence and which you will take with you as the emblem of your higher education, won't help you anymore. Or perhaps you think the dead letters of the learned could remain ineradicable while all forms of life radically transform themselves?

In the aforementioned times it was imperative in all things to refer to that Middlepoint which, elevated above the changes taking place in daily life and in how we know things, bore its truth within itself. Of course this Middlepoint also bears the characteristic stamp of a particular individual or nation. A nation that is vigilant in its search for the truth seeks, the same way a person does, to be true to one's self. Yet what living nation today holds more fast to the hope of discovering the Middlepoint of knowing (cognition) than the one which, more than any other, bore the religious Middlepoint within itself, throughout the vicissitudes of time and which, freshly awakened, was to create a new future for history, while appropriating every crazy direction in denial of its true self and yet without ever losing the peculiarity of its own individual character?

It is my intention to demonstrate, irrespective of what separates one mind from another, regardless of the paroles of schools, to show that the Idea of Universities is nothing other than emphasizing that which is the Centre of daily life and of knowing so that they be Schools of Wisdom. We are very much aware that these institutions are in a wobbly condition and that they often, also in our day, pay homage to the errors of these times. But we will not speak about the way they appear but of what they are according to an Idea.

Those of you who are here today to become Journeymen of Wisdom, test yourselves as to whether you sense within yourselves a deep-seeded challenge to find solutions to problems on your own. Investigate profoundly, as well, whether you are also the truth [true measure. eds] in everything. Consider that you will have to be bold in stepping across the ruins of your own mistakes, that the quantity of what is false and of no good is awesome, that *everything* requires strenuous effort, deep reflection, and every virtue



the man of research possesses. Consider too, that the hopes of the nation rest on the gentle unfolding of germinating minds. Do not allow false appearances and the allure of earthly possessions to lead you astray. Do not let yourselves be enticed by a course that is alien to you, no matter how great the gain may seem.

Do you perhaps imagine that to resolutely follow the ways of a particular nation might be fraught with danger?

You have only your own freedom to fear. Not some foreign power.

Any power that might rule over us would either be a barbaric one, which would make no sense to the characteristic way of learning of our nation, much like the Goths in destroying the glories of the ancient world, or it would imagine itself as having the only kind of education possible, as the Romans did when they sought to bring coarse nations under their yoke.

Neither of these is the right thing. Every educated nation must respect another nation's particular way of learning.

Thus the misfortunes of our time should challenge us to guard what is our own, more carefully than we normally do, that we better take care of them, more richly endow them.

Certainly external power, the instigator of revolutions, belongs to a nation foreign to us. Yet an inner power, quietly germinating, preparing a significant future, belongs to us. In your honourable struggle you may expect a splendid triumph. Success is by no means unassured. I speak with young people whose pluck and high-hopes are held in reserve.

Therefore do not lament a time whose incipient greatness we ourselves will enjoy bringing about.

translationcopyright@gordonwalmsley

---

<sup>1</sup> Who are these mystery men...Savigny?...Rousseau?

<sup>2</sup> *die Religiösität*. Clearly the word encompasses more to Steffens than "religiosity" would to us. It seems to mean *the spiritual impulse*. One senses a certain problematic in this period. It is as though the terms sometimes used are too *small* for the meaning they are meant to convey. Almost as though the inspiring concept needed terms that had not yet been invented and that Steffens and others were stuck with the terms of the day, when what they needed was a more embracing terminology. Novalis' use of *Phantasie* as the organ of the Imagination is a good example of this. Thus in fragment 555: *Vernunft und Phantasie ist Religion, Vernunft und Verstand ist Wissenschaft*. In modern parlance we might say: a

---

*balanced way of imagining things is the source of spritual striving. A balanced way of understanding things is the source of knowing about things.*

<sup>33</sup>Frederick the Great? A real francophile. The court at Potsdam and Charlottenborg was entirely French speaking, although within the sphere of Berlin.

<sup>4</sup> The concept *Schwere*, which can mean gravity in English but also ponderability, weight, is tricky to translate since it meant something different to the early nineteenth century than it does to us. And it meant something different to Steffens. I use, nevertheless, the word gravity in rendering the term. It seems to mean *the principle that binds things to one another*. See Schellings *Von Der Weltseele*:

“Diess Band, das alle Dinge bindet und in der Allheit Eins macht, der überall gegenwärtige, nirgends umschriebene Mittelpunkt, ist in der Natur als Schwere.”

<sup>5</sup> *Physik*