

Festrede

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I'm very flattered to have been asked to give this Semester's Festrede for the graduating students in Anglistik. It's a Department with which I've had a very amicable and fruitful relationship.

This is the *very first* Festrede that I've ever given and because of that I know that I should find it stressful. I should be nervous. But in fact I'm not. The tradition at these ceremonies is that the visiting speaker will draw on their own life and experience and use it to offer students advice about their future, and I take great comfort from the sure knowledge that young people at such events don't pay the slightest attention to the advice handed out. And why should they? They know the attitude of the speaker on these occasions, nicely summed up by a famous and much quoted British writer: *I always pass on good advice. It is the only thing to do with it. It is never of any use to myself.* So I'm reassured to think that for the next fifteen or twenty minutes I could probably just read out the soccer scores, or the weather forecast, for all the influence I'm likely to have.

Despite this I'm naively determined to do my duty and to this end I tried to find some advice that you might actually want to hear. And what I want to tell you is that if you exploit the advantages your years in Heidelberg have given, you'll find that your studies will have prepared you, not only for a good job and social status, but for what is far more important, that is for fun and pleasure. Believe me, it's true.

In laying out my case I begin with an authority who may seem surprising: he was the most popular poet in England in the first half of the last century: A.E. Housman. Now Housman is an odd figure to associate with fun and pleasure. He was not a pleasant or a happy person, he was, in fact rather miserable and nasty old man. You will know him as a poet but you won't necessarily know that he was also a distinguished Classical scholar, someone famous for his Latin texts and perhaps even more famous for his academic insults or putdowns. So, when reviewing the edition of a Latin author by the German scholar Eric Ströber, he observed that Ströber could be relied upon to come up with the wrong reading in the manuscripts as surely as a compass needle can be relied upon to end up pointing north. When a certain British Classical scholar wrote a book that Housman disapproved of and thought should never have been written, he commented that: nature, not content with denying to Professor So and So the faculty of thought, has unfortunately endowed him with the faculty of writing. After his death it was discovered that Housman had actually written out a collection of clever insults to have on hand when the occasion demanded, But despite all this Housman did have something very insightful to say in the introductory speech to his first Vorlesung as Professor at University College London. He

wrote what was at the time a remarkable document, which should still be read today, in which he argued that all knowledge, whatever its source, whether literary or scientific, is desirable for its own sake, and that there was a particular beauty about knowledge that was not turned to a practical purpose, that was valuable only in itself. And I suggest to you that where you have been given an advantage over others is that your years at Heidelberg have equipped you to explore the wonderful implications of Houseman's thesis.

As I mentioned, Festrednerin traditionally draw on their own experiences, I have a cousin who lives a quiet life in a small village in Norfolk, that flat part of eastern England, and she had thought I lived such an exciting life alternating between Oxford and Heidelberg, She recently asked me how I actually spent my time in Heidelberg. I mentioned that I'd been looking at a really interesting medieval Latin MS with a colleague here in Anglistik, but I'd had to stop because I needed to work of the Index/ Register of a book, that I'd gone to some lectures in Alte Geschichte and to a Ringvolesung in Anglistik, but for relaxation I'd found a great programme on German TV, the answer to the BBC Antiques Roadshow, Kunst und Krempel. She was horrified, far from my living an exciting life, my existence seemed to her quieter than in her Norfolk village. She asked me, quite seriously I think, why I was spending my time in libraries in Heidelberg. Since I was retired why didn't I run off to some exotic location like Brazil, maybe even open a bar there. Well she couldn't have misunderstood my situation more. In the first place, here in Heidelberg I live on the Untere Strasse. Need I say more? On any Saturday night I can observe more exotica just by looking from my kitchen window than I would see in a whole year in a bar in Brazil.

Now I'm going to illustrate my application of Houseman's principle from an experience in the Untere Strasse, so perhaps I can digress briefly to explain why I should want to live there. In reality this doesn't have much to do with Houseman but I enjoy telling the story so I'm gong to indulge myself for a couple of minutes. Why would I live on the Untere Strasse? Well, oddly enough, I would begin with the question of why do people want to become Professors. There is of course the obvious answer, which I might give with a variant of Lord Acton's famous Sprichwort: all power corrupts... and absolute power is even nicer. But there's another side. You spent several years trying to make a good impression on your Professors. You have to realize that they're equally desperate to impress you. Now I had ended up on the Untere Strasse by accident. I'd been offered a room there by a friend in the Seminar für Alte Gechichte, where I happened to be teaching a course at the time, I knew absolutely nothing about the Untere Strasse's reputation, and went to see the room during the day, and thought what a nice, pretty, quiet street, with tourists and children and elderly ladies, so bürgerlich, so gemütlich. After my very first night there I discovered the truth and was in some mild despair, but one Saturday evening as I was literally pushing my way through the drunken crowds on the way to my Wohnung I suddenly came across a bunch of my students from my Alte Geschichte course, standing on the street outside a bar holding drinks. They were utterly astonished to see me, thinking that this was my place of entertainment. "Professor Barrett, was machen sie hier?" And I, with complete Gelassenheit, replied "Oh, hier wohne ich." When I went to my class the following Monday I entered a room of excited whispers and I could feel that the atmosphere had changed. I had finally impressed them, I did know something about Roman history but this mattered little compared to the belief created that I had a previously undiscovered dark side. I then saw the advantage of living on the Untere

Strasse and I've always tried to find a place there.

But this, I admit, has little or nothing to do with my topic. So to return to it: there was another way in which my cousin was wrong, and much more fundamentally so. It was that she didn't realize that for all the excitement you can find in your exotic bar in Brazil, there is nothing that comes close to the thrill of intellectual discovery. Now I'm not talking necessarily here of discovering the structure of DNA or the identity of the dark lady in Shakespeare's sonnets, as amazing as these achievements might feel. I'm talking of the more mundane everyday discoveries in this great universe of knowledge that Houseman dangled before us. When at the beginning of this Semester I first looked from the window of my current Wohnung on the Untere Strasse, I observed two things. Opposite me, just to my right, is an Absinthe Shop. Just in front of me, there is a plaque, a Gedenktafel, marking the fact that Friedrich Hebbel, the dramatist and poet, lived in that house. Now I've no interest in the Absinthe shop, but that evening I followed the ritual I've established for many, many, years, and I set out to discover (from my computer now, of course, in earlier years it would have been from a worn edition of the encyclopaedia Britannica) what I could about Friedrich Hebbel. I confess that apart from a vague notion of the name I knew nothing about him. Well, my reading took me into the world of poetry, of drama, of German and Austrian intellectual history, of political and, even more fascinating, personal intrigues. Learning this for the first time was indescribably exhilarating. And this is what I meant when I said that your studies in Heidelberg have trained you too for the potential of lifelong joy and pleasure. The world is full of Friedrich Hebbels waiting to be discovered and for all intents and purposes the treasure house of knowledge is infinite.

Now you may feel that what I'm saying is so obvious it hardly needs to be said, and maybe it is. But the danger is that when we finish the formal part of our education we can be tempted to feel that the process of learning has come to an end (except perhaps in our professions). It hasn't, in an ideal world it has really only begun. We often comment on how sad it is that we lose our innocence when we grow up. I'd argue that it's an even greater tragedy if we lose our sense of curiosity.

It is common today for us to seek out role models who represent a way of life that we aspire to: inevitably the same figures reappear *again and again*, Nelson Mandela, Willy Brandt, Paris Hilton. I find no fault with these choices, but mine are invariably people who remained intellectually curious. I would cite Elizabeth the First, for one single gesture. When news was brought to her that a massive Spanish fleet had set out under Philip II in 1588 to invade England, the Great Armada, she told her court: I fear a mistake in my Latin more than I fear the ships of Spain. And quite right: Kings of Spain and their fleets come and go, but Latin grammar is eternal. Now the Greeks argued that you can only rightly judge people by the way they die, and there is much to be said for that, so let me cite two of my role models who earn their places by their deaths. Pliny the Elder, a Roman who wrote an extraordinary encyclopaedia with wonderful accounts of gladiators made to fight single-handedly against elephants, or queen Arsinoe II of Egypt riding on an ostrich (ein Strauss) or the wacky emperor Caligula's alchemical experiments to produce gold from sulphur. Pliny wouldn't waste a moment that he could devote to learning something new. When he sunbathed, and yes, people sunbathed two thousand years ago, he had a servant read a book to him, and when he took a bath he had another servant who did the same. When Vesuvius erupted in 79 nach Christus

and destroyed a number of towns, including Pompeii, the eruption was accompanied by a mass and chaotic exodus, everyone naturally wanted to get away. Everyone with one single exception, Pliny. He was so consumed with scientific curiosity that he actually sailed into one of the other towns that would also be destroyed, Herculaneum, to observe the volcanic activity, and it was there, while he was taking notes, that he died, overcome by volcanic gas. Some of you may know of another of my candidates, Thomas Cranmer, Henry VIII's archbishop of Canterbury and a champion of the independence of Henry's Church of England from Rome. You may have read of him or seen him in that irresistible piece of TV pornography masquerading as History, the Tudors, That was only four years ago, and already I find myself saying - they don't make TV the way they used to. Well you wouldn't have learned from the TV show that when Henry died, to be succeeded eventually by his Catholic daughter Mary I, Cranmer was burned at the stake in Oxford. In Oxford he had had a long disagreement with William Eley, Fellow of Brasenose College on some obscure point of theological dogma, and when poor old Cranmer was burning on the stake in 1556 Eley turned up and made his way forward to get as close to Cranmer as he could, and right to the end as the flames shot up they continued to argue, each one trying to get the last word. Now I have no views at all on the virtues or the deficiencies of Cranmer's theology or politics, but I do admire enormously his intellectual preoccupation in his last minutes on earth.

But, you might say, these are all trivial events and issues. When we contemplate the world we seem to be faced by horrendous problems, on a massive scale. But I often think of the comment of Sir William Harcourt in the last century, 'the experiences of a long life' he remarked 'have convinced me that nothing ever really happens.' This may seem the silliest thing you've ever heard, but just consider how supposedly serious issues become trivial by the passage of time. In my own academic work one of the great themes is that for centuries the Roman empire and the Parthians (very roughly the predecessors of the Persians) squabbled and even went to war over the status of the mountainous area of Armenia. For the Romans it was the overwhelming issue of their time, diverting their energies, their worries, their lives. Well, who worries about it now? Who's even aware of it, outside perhaps a handful of Classical scholars in libraries? In the 19th Century the Hungarian Parliament had passionate debates about the official status of the Croatian language in Hungarian public life? The small number of people aware of this now probably find it amusing. At the time it was in Hungary an overwhelming and deeply divisive preoccupation, splitting friends and families. The battle of Mohács in 1689 was one of the most historically significant events in the history of Europe, ensuring that Europe remained Christian. News of it reverberated through every home from Austria to Ireland. How many people now care about it or know anything about it? What about the War of Jenkin's Ear? It sounds like a joke, but in the 18th century it was a devastating war between two great powers that spread from Europe to North America.

These apparently great historical issues, in fact, have an inherently short-lived nature, no matter how great an impact they made at the time. And the same will be true of the great issues of our time. It is knowledge that's eternal, not events, and knowledge, as Housman argued, has a value independent of its subject matter. It's possession can be for you a source of simple, uncomplicated pleasure and joy. And where do you conventionally expect to find pleasure and joy? Most of you, I suppose, would cite such things as food, alcohol, love. These all have a down side. We all know the dangers of alcohol, of course,

and love, well, *aimer c'est souffrir*, as the French say, they're apparently the experts, to love is to suffer, food, well after the age of 40 or so, believe me, you'll have a bad conscience every time you take a bite. But the joy of the world of the mind is eternal, unconditional, it is virtually independent of all our other circumstances, no matter how wretched they might be. But.. it has to be nourished. and I hope that you, reinforced by your years at Heidelberg, are nourishing it. But for those of you who aren't, well, in order to kick start the process I'll end with a challenge, I've mentioned a few things today that may be unfamiliar to you, Archbishop Cranmer. Lord Harcourt, the War of Jenkins ear. Absolutely nothing wrong if you haven't heard of them. But when you go home tonight, sit at your computer, as I'll be doing, and look up at least one of them, and make it your resolution to do the same, to add one new piece of knowledge every day. In time, I can assure you, it will become part of your routine and the most enjoyable part of your day. And, it will more than satisfy any hidden urge you develop to escape your responsibilities and run away to Brazil. Or even to Mannheim.

Anthony Barrett, Jan 30, 2015, Heidelberg