

THE PLACE OF THE IDEA, THE IDEA OF THE PLACE

A MEDITATION ON THE FACULTY ROOM AT NASSAU HALL

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Trying to say something relevant, something original about an institution so permanently lodged in the history of higher learning and the history of the nation is a singular honor for me, but it is also a daunting assignment more easily undertaken by a policy maker than an artist. While wondering how to shape these remarks I looked through works of other writers, poets, novelists, historians, and turned at one point to William Wordsworth hoping to find suitably elegiac lines. I hoped those of us who merge our love of Princeton University with allegiance to its mission would be receptive to a meditation on *genius loci*—the “spirit of the place”—Wordsworth’s eloquent use of the conceit that certain (natural) sites held *genii* which “spoke” to the contemplative passerby. Ruminating on that notion I was reminded that part of the significance of Wordsworth’s inscription of places as sources of revelation lies in what Geoffrey Hartman calls “the continuum of the wisdom of the dead and the energy of the living.”¹ In other words, the spirit of the place is animated by a reverence for the past that is forever mitigated by the present. Therefore to meditate attentively on the Faculty Room is to summon the essence of both—the wisdom of the dead and the energy of the living. For it is the Faculty Room that illustrates this continuum best. The portraits lining the walls reveal its history, and the uses to which the room is put (faculty meetings, tours, trustee meetings, ceremonies) manifest its current vitality. It is the Faculty Room that furnishes me with an opportunity to think of Princeton as not one, but two orders of continuum: the personal and the public. Princeton, for those who have experienced it, is a place of private memory that colors and organizes their everyday life, and a place of collective public memory which has helped to shape the nation’s life.



Figure 1. Faculty Room, southeast corner.

In the first instance Princeton is a subjective experience of the place itself. It is remembering the trees down Witherspoon Street reaching across the pavement and the shops and the pedestrians to touch each other. Beneath their heads, the street lights are shy and so, if one happens to be there in spring twilight, falling petals descend on the pedestrians and the road like snowflakes in December.

In the second instance Princeton is a place fixed in public memory as part of the history of the nation. Take, for example, another street. Once it was the King's Highway; then it was named after William III, Prince of Orange, of the House of Orange-Nassau; now it is a modern avenue of commerce. Yet once, even longer ago, it was the trail of indigenous Americans, the Lenni-Lenape.

In private memory this place is its halls, its library, its chapel all worn to satin by the encounters and collaborations among and between strangers from other neighborhoods and strangers from other lands. It is friendships secured or lost on greens, in classrooms, offices, eating clubs, residences. It is stimulating rivalries negotiated in laboratories, lecture halls, sports arenas. It is lively discourse debated among faculty in the Room named for its scholars. Every doorway, tree, and turn is haunted by peals of laughter, murmurs of loyalty and doubt, tears of pleasure, sorrow, triumph.

Yet woven into these instances of private memory are others that are the property of public memory: the FitzRandolph Gate locked for years and unlocked for many more; ivy constantly trimmed to reveal and commemorate the ravages of a Revolutionary war; the policy duels of presidents, statesmen, captains of mighty industries.

Portraits in the Faculty Room are those history has chosen to remember. And although the room does not (cannot) accommodate portraits of countless others who facilitated the careers and achievements of the enshrined, and does not represent the contributions of the many who followed in their wake, make no mistake, this place is redolent with the breath of the emotional life lived here and the intellectual life made manifest here where "the wisdom of the dead and the energy of the living" join to become a tradition that informs the present and will shape the future.

When in 1862 President Lincoln told Congress that the "dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present," he was referring to a Civil War waged to suture the wide cut, the open wound, of an already sundered Union. And when he followed that observation with "We cannot escape history," the connotation of the term, history, summoned the future.²

Lincoln was alluding to history's future judgment on how and whether the nation could separate dogma from its own past and regard history as events in progress. The founders of Princeton who preceded Lincoln's remarks by 116 years knew well, better perhaps than the founders of any American institution of high learning of the time, the necessity of being open to the unforeseeable. For as Woodrow Wilson said over a hundred years ago, these founders "had no more vision of what was to come upon the country than their fellow colonists."³ But it was clear that they were determined to enter history—not as into a sepulcher but as into a torrent of contemporary affairs. They were determined to make a place where views different from the authoritarian synod, views considered radical, apostate at the time, would prepare young men for whatever might be asked of them in the service of their God, their conscience, and their province.

Princeton was the place of the independent idea; the place where conscience was prized above orthodoxy; the place of the dissenting idea. Not dissent for its own sake, dissent as style, as fashion, as self-aggrandizement, but dissent over what was fundamental, complex, and urgent to the health of the citizenry—the thrust of an individual's spiritual and intellectual life, the belief that inner experience counted for more than the accepted doctrines of the church. In the 1740s that was indeed a risky proposition. Some believed it an arrogant one, and they may have been right. But if so, it was the arrogance of a sublime idea, not a pedantic one; of a generous idea, not a self-satisfying one.

It is hard now to imagine how fresh were the terms in which those men spoke of spiritual life, of their God; how intense the political debates they held, the metaphysical arguments they advanced; the enemies they must have infuriated, the envy they surely roused. To put forward, without established support, a position so unpopular among educators must have seemed reckless indeed. Yet it was that very independence that helped make Princeton "a national place before there was a nation."⁴

Dissidence and honest disagreement—the marks of lively, new democratic discourse—lurk in the portraits on display in the Faculty Room. *Aaron Burr Sr.* and his predecessor, *Jonathan Dickinson*, now hang side by side (fig. 1; *Burr* at lower left, *Dickinson* to the right), but it was Burr who moved the college from Newark to the village of Princeton, a choice that re-enforced its independence, its insistence upon making its own way. Although, or perhaps because, the place was far from meddling distraction, it was an environment ideally suited to forging the affairs of a new nation. The serene and determined faces of *Jonathan Edwards*



Figure 2. *Jonathan Edwards* (1703–1758), President (1758); 1860. Henry Augustus Loop (1831–1895). After Joseph Badger (1708–1765), ca. 1750. Oil on canvas. Gift of great-grandsons of Jonathan Edwards.



Figure 3. *John Witherspoon* (1723–1794), President (1768–94). Artist unknown; after Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827). Oil on canvas. Gift of friends of the University.

(fig. 2) and *John Witherspoon* (fig. 3) both veil and convey the fierce dissent from orthodoxy that took place in this place. How can we not take pride in knowing that within these walls the first meeting of the state legislature of New Jersey was held, as well as the ceremonial functions of the Continental Congress of 1783? This site bears witness to the stamina, the prescience of the originating idea taking root in hospitable soil.

As a writer and a scholar, I have a personal interest in the translation of tradition, of history, into a livable present and a civilized future. I have personal interests in methods by which histories are disrupted, how intervention can extinguish cultural memory or drive it underground to avoid eclipse. Thus the more than 250-year trajectory of this “experiment” in higher education has great significance for me. I am intrigued by the ways in which an independent idea plays out over time; how it is preserved or altered; and how the place of its birth is both conserved and made new. There are in this country parallel histories of the same

nativity, with the same agenda of freedom and dissent, with other landscapes struggling for preservation and for rebirth.

Universities play a powerful mnemonic role. Their fields are dotted with figures, plaques of bronze, stone, and marble, and with botanical life to keep memory alive. But they are not memorabilia or mausoleums. What may suggest stasis in the gender and racial monopoly on display in the Faculty Room will eventually be eclipsed by the inevitable inclusion of President Shirley Tilghman's presence as well as future luminaries not exclusively white or male. It seems clear that the Faculty Room is not a tomb. It is a womb. So while Princeton remains legitimately enthralled with the place of the idea, it must continue to be equally faithful to the idea of the place.

The idea of the place is visionary, is change; it throbs with life, leans toward the edge. The idea of the place is to burrow into the heart of a theory, of a concept; to cast one's gaze toward the limitlessness of the universe; not merely to anticipate the future but, in certain instances, to drive it. The idea of the place despises those forces in academic institutions so fearful of independent thought and alarmed by challenge that they prefer to court irrelevance; institutions so atremble at the tides of change that they are content to rest on past laurels rather than shoulder the hard responsibilities of transformation.

The place of the idea represents the value of tradition, of independence; the idea of the place is its insightful grasp of the future. Negotiating those two ideas, conservation and change, is no small matter. It demands work and intelligence of the highest order. Conservation and change are not necessarily adversarial ideas, and even when they appear so, that irreconcilability is the clash that stirs inquiry and fosters knowledge. The Faculty Room, ringed with the visual presences of George Washington, James McCosh, and Woodrow Wilson, embodies their reconciliation—the place of the idea becomes the idea of the place. There are few territories left, other than universities, where both the wisdom of the dead coupled with the doubt of the living are vigorously encouraged, welcomed, become the very stuff of education, the pulse of teaching, the engine of research, the consequence of learning. No faculty member worth the profession has ever taken for granted as fixed truth or fiat all he or she has learned. The nature of our profession is to doubt, to expand, enhance, to review, to interrogate. But no faculty member is able to question in a vacuum, or is fired up to innovate, to create because she is interested in erasing the inheritance, the authority of her discipline. No student is expected to be satisfied with the acquisition of data, of information.

It is demanded of her or him to move beyond the plateau of what is known to what is knowable, toward more and other knowledge, knowledge that might one day contribute to the wisdom of the past. Tradition is not there to bedevil us. It is there for us. It is not there to arrest us; it is there to arouse us. That is the continuum; that is the reconcilability of tradition and the future.

Because this volume comes upon the heels of anniversaries marking 250 years of Princeton's, and, a decade later, Nassau Hall's existence, monumental milestones which bracket the dawn of a new millennium, it is appropriate to have millennial thoughts. What will Princeton be in 2246, at its quincentennial celebration? By then it will have seen 250 years of the third millennium. What new portraits will grace the Faculty Room? What form will the idea of the place have taken then? Will service to the nation be narrowed to holding public office and wielding private power? Will the entitled still be worried about entitlements? Will gates again be locked? Will the mission have stumbled because the constituency has changed? Will instruction be executed solely in solitude by the isolated handling of sophisticated new machines? Will departments and intellectuals have closed themselves off from the great and tumultuous issues of that future day? Will those hired to guide students to meet those challenges recoil from the difficulty and recreate instead the moribund world of their nostalgia? Will chests swell at the success of having preserved the place and the idea in amber? Will that generation of educators be telling students that not only was everything better before they were born, but that everything before their birth will always be better; that the best they can hope for their future is to clone a former generation's past?

Or will Princeton continue to do what it has done so brilliantly, so often in the past century and a half: revel in the fact that its taproot was fed by the waters of civil dissent, and has been nurtured by sound learning and respect for heterogeneous discourses on the dominant philosophical views of the world. The evidence of the first decade of the twenty-first century, based on the initiatives launched, the symposia held, the arts on display, is convincing. Princeton at its quincentennial will still follow its principal and noblest dictates and continue to wage war for the liberation of power, not just its transfer. It will continue to do what has made it legend and unique among the nation's great universities: remain steadfast in its insistence that a premiere liberal arts education requires students and faculty to face each other in what Woodrow Wilson described as "personal conference and intimate counsel."⁵ The evidence of these recent years and under current leadership is unassailable: no priorities will go unmet in

enabling this institution to make as constructive a difference in the larger community as it does in the lives of each and every student, regardless of that student's resources; in assuring the best physical environment for staff, faculty, and students; in assembling the best scholars and artists in the world; in enhancing its global influence.

On the other hand, if Princeton University had abandoned the principles upon which the College of New Jersey was founded, then whoever contemplates this historical institution at its quincentennial, will be musing on a "virtual" university—a package of attitudes and preferences emanating from souvenirs, images, and longing, where complacent leadership proved not only unsuitable for the education of the nation's children; it proved dangerous to them. "Those societies which cannot combine reverence to their symbols with freedom of revision, must ultimately decay either from anarchy, or from the slow atrophy of a life stifled by useless shadows."⁶ The essays in this volume are testimony to how well Princeton has understood Alfred North Whitehead's warning.

Princeton's subtlety lies in its tradition of independence. Princeton's poise rests on its ability to revise itself. Its strength is knowing what its founders knew, that service to the individual, to the government, to the world requires unwavering commitment to intellectual freedom, to virtues already being debased by apathy or mindless rage: integrity, honor, faith, selflessness, and courage.

In the years to come, between now and the nearly 250 years that will pass before the quincentennial that I am imagining, the world may become overwhelmed by fear and mediocrity, by xenophobia and mendacity. Then universities alone may very well be the last preserve of free thought, of independent inquiry, of simple caring for. Princeton's proud past is that it was the first of such havens. Its bright future is that it will always be. And the walls of the Faculty Room will continue to record for posterity its brilliant balance of conservation and change, tradition and progress.

This volume is a celebration of and re-dedication to: This place. This idea.