Addresses to the German Nation

Foreword

The following addresses were delivered as a series of lectures in Berlin during the winter of 1807–8 and are a continuation of my *Characteristics of the Present Age*, which I presented during the winter of 1804–5 in the same location (and which were printed by this publisher in 1806). What had to be said to the public in and through them is expressed clearly enough in the work itself, and it therefore had no need of a foreword. Since, however, in the meantime a number of blank pages have resulted by the manner in which these addresses were put together, I have filled this space with material that has in part already been passed by the censor and published elsewhere. Of this material I was reminded by the circumstances that led to these blank pages arising in the first place, for it would seem to have general application in this instance also. I refer the reader in particular to the conclusion of the Twelfth Address, which touches on this same subject.

Berlin, April 1808
Fichte

From a Treatise on Machiavelli as writer, with extracts from his works

I. From the conclusion of that treatise

We can think of two species of men against whom we should like to safeguard ourselves if we could. First, those who assume, just because they are unable in their thoughts to get beyond what is printed in the latest newspaper, that no one else can either; that accordingly everything which is said or written has some relation to this newspaper and should serve as a commentary thereon. I ask these men to consider that none may say: 'Look, such and such is meant here!' who has not judged for himself beforehand whether such and such an individual was really and truly thus and so could be meant here; that therefore none can accuse of satire a writer who remains universal, who as a rule embraces all ages and disregards each particular one, without first himself becoming the original and independent author of this satire and thereby betraying in an exceedingly foolish manner his own most intimate thoughts.

Then there are those who have no dread of anything, save of the words for things, and this dread is boundless. You may trample them underfoot and all the world may watch as you do so; in this they see neither outrage nor evil. But should one strike up a conversation about this trampling underfoot, then to them it were an intolerable nuisance and only then would the evil begin – especially as no man of reason and goodwill would strike up such a conversation out of malicious pleasure, but solely to discover the means whereby the episode may be avoided in the future. The same holds true with respect to future evils; they desire to remain undisturbed in their sweet dreams and therefore shut their eyes to what may come. Since thereby others who keep their eyes open are not prevented from seeing what is looming, and might be tempted to say what they see and call it by its name, they think that the surest remedy against this danger is to restrict the saying and naming of those who see; as if now, in inverse order to reality, not seeing something resulted from not saying it and the non-existence of a thing resulted from not seeing it. Thus does the sleepwalker stride along the brink of the abyss: do not call out to him with mercy in your heart, for he is safe while in this state; should he stir, however, he will fall. If only the dreams of such men partook of the gift, the prerogatives and the security of sleepwalking, so that there were a means of saving them without calling out and waking

them! Likewise, it is said, does the ostrich shut its eyes before the approaching hunter, as if the now-invisible danger were no longer there at all. He were no enemy of the ostrich who cried out: 'Open your eyes, see the hunter coming! Run that way to escape him!'

II. Extensive freedom of expression and the press in Machiavelli's age

In sequel to the previous section, and because one reader or another is perhaps wondering how what I have just reported could have been said by Machiavelli,[1] it might be worth the trouble, at the beginning of the nineteenth century and from the vantage-point of those countries that boast of the highest freedom of thought, to cast a glance at the freedom of expression and the press that prevailed at the beginning of the sixteenth century in Italy and in the papal seat of Rome. Of the thousands of examples I shall adduce but one. Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories* was written at the instigation of Pope Clement VII and dedicated to him.[2] In it we find already in Book I the following passage: 'Previous to this time no mention is made of the nephews or families of any pontiff, but future history is full of them; nor is there now anything left for them to attempt, except the effort to make the papal throne hereditary.'[3]

For these *Florentine Histories*, together with *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, the same Clement granted a privilege *honesto Antonii* (as the printer was called) *desiderio annuere volens*,[4] which forbade all Christians from reprinting the work on pain of excommunication and subjects of the Papal States, withal, on pain of confiscation of the illegal copies and a fine of twenty-five ducats.

This may of course be explained. The popes and the eminences of the Church themselves regarded their whole being solely as a deception for the lowest rabble and, if possible, for the Ultramontanes; they were

[1] The previous section discussed Machiavelli's 'heathenism' and alleged hostility to Christianity.
[2] The work was commissioned by Leo X (Giovanni de Medici) through the intervention of his cousin Giulio de Medici, then a cardinal, who became Clement VII in 1523.
[3] From Book I, chapter V.
[4] 'wishing to accede to the honourable desire of Antonius'; Antonio de Blado (1490–1567), the Pope's own printer, published an edition of the *Florentine Histories* in 1531.

liberal[5] enough to permit every Italian man of culture and refinement to think, speak and write about these things in the same way as they spoke amongst themselves. They had no wish to deceive the cultivated man, and the mob could not read. It is just as easy to explain why other measures later became necessary. The Reformers taught the German people to read, they appealed to such writers as had written under the eyes of the popes; the example of literacy was contagious and spread to other countries; now the writers became a formidable power and for that very reason had to be placed under more stringent supervision.

Even these times are past, and today, particularly in Protestant states, many branches of literature, for example the philosophical establishment of general principles of every kind, are surely only subject to the censor because tradition so dictates. Since the situation is such that those who know nothing to say save what everyone already knows inside out are allowed in every fashion to use as much paper as they desire; but that if something truly new is to be said the censor, who cannot grasp this at once, and thinking it might contain a hidden poison, prefers to suppress it in order to err on the side of caution; so perhaps many a writer in Protestant countries is not to be blamed if, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, he wished for himself a proper and modest share in that freedom of the press which the popes universally and unhesitatingly conceded at the beginning of the sixteenth.

From the preface to several unpublished *Dialogues on Patriotism and its Opposite*

Now, within these limitations demanded by justice and propriety, they could, I should think, indeed permit us to say without fear what they themselves do not shrink from actually doing; for obviously the deed itself, which even without our mentioning it will doubtless arouse attention, causes far greater trouble than what we say about it afterwards. And although there is nothing at all to prevent those who have responsibility for the press by reason of their office from belonging as private persons to one of the two main parties of the intellectual world currently in dispute, they can perceive the interest of their party only were they to step forth themselves as writers; but as public persons they have no party whatsoever

[5] The word Fichte uses is *liberal*, the same word that he pours scorn on in the First and Fourth Addresses.

and to reason, which at any rate seeks permission to speak far less often than does unreason, they must grant the same, just as they allow the latter daily to go about its business as it pleases. By no means, however, are they authorised to deny some sound or other from being heard because it strikes *their* ears as strange and paradoxical.

Berlin, July 1806

FIRST ADDRESS

Preliminary remarks and overview

The addresses that I now begin I have announced as a continuation of the lectures which I delivered here, in this same venue, three winters ago and which have been published under the title *Characteristics of the Present Age*. In those lectures I showed that our age lies in the third principal epoch of world history, which epoch has mere sensuous self-interest as the impulse of all its vital stirrings and motions; that this age also understands and comprehends itself completely by recognising this impulse as the only possible one; and that through this clear insight into its nature it is deeply grounded and unshakeably fixed in this its vital essence.

With us, more than with any other age in the history of the world, time is taking giant strides. Within the three years that have passed since my interpretation of the current epoch, it has at some point run its course and come to an end. At some point[6] selfishness has annihilated itself by its complete development, because it has thereby lost its self and the independence of that self; and, since it would not willingly posit any other end but itself, another, alien purpose has been imposed upon it by an external power.[7] Whoever has once undertaken to interpret his age must ensure that his interpretation keep pace with its progress also, should it enjoy such progress. And therefore it is my duty to acknowledge, before the same audience, that what I described as present is now past and has ceased to be the present.

[6] *Irgendwo* – changed to this vaguer formulation on the insistence of the censors.
[7] In other words, French hegemony since Napoleon's victories at Ulm, Austerlitz and Jena-Auerstedt.

Whatever has lost its self-sufficiency has simultaneously lost its capacity to intervene in the stream of time and freely to determine the content thereof. If it persist in this state, its age, and itself with the age, are dispatched by the alien power that commands its fate; henceforth it no longer has any time of its own, but reckons its years according to the events and epochs of foreign peoples and empires. From this state, in which its former world lies wholly beyond the reach of its self-active intervention and in the present one only the glory of obedience is left, it could raise itself only on the condition that a new world dawn for it, with whose creation would begin, and further development fill, a new epoch of its own. Yet, since it is subject to an alien power, this new world would have to be so constituted that it remained unnoticed by that power and in no way aroused its jealousy; indeed, that this power would be moved by its own interest to put no obstacle in the path of the formation of such a world. Now, if there is to be a world thus constituted as the means of creating a new self and a new age, for a race that has lost its former self, its former age and its former world, then it would fall to a thorough interpretation of such a possible age to account for the world thus constituted.

Now for my part I affirm that there is such a world, and it is the purpose of these addresses to prove to you its existence and its true properties, to bring before your eyes a vivid picture of this world, and to indicate the means of creating it. In this way, therefore, shall these addresses be a continuation of the lectures I previously delivered on what was then the present age, for they shall disclose the new age that can and should immediately follow the destruction of the realm of selfishness by an alien power.

Before I begin this business, however, I must ask you to assume the following points, to keep them always in mind, and to agree with me upon them, wherever and to whatever extent this is necessary.

1. I speak for Germans only, of Germans simply, without acknowledging, indeed leaving aside and rejecting, all the divisive distinctions that unhappy events have wrought for centuries in this one nation. You, worshipful gentlemen, may be to my outward eye the first and immediate representatives who bring home to me the cherished national characteristics and the visible burning point in which the flame of my discourse kindles; but my spirit gathers about itself the educated portion of the entire German nation, from all the lands over which it is spread, considers and heeds the situation and circumstances common to us all,

and wishes that a part of the vital force with which these addresses perhaps seize you remains also in its mute transcript that alone will come before the eyes of those absent here today, infuses it, and everywhere inflames German souls to decision and action. Of Germans only and for Germans simply, I said. We shall show at the proper time that every other term of unity or national bond either never possessed truth and meaning; or, if they did, that these points of agreement were annihilated by our present situation, have been torn from us and can never return; and that it is solely by means of the common trait of Germanness that we can avert the downfall of our nation threatened by its confluence with foreign peoples and once more win back a self that is self-supporting and incapable of any form of dependency. As we gain insight into this last claim, its apparent conflict with other duties and with interests held sacred, which perhaps some at present fear, will at the same time disappear completely.

Therefore, since I only speak of Germans in general, I shall declare that many things concern us that do not apply in the first place to those assembled here, just as I shall also declare as the concern of all Germans other things that in the first place apply only to us. In the spirit whose emanation these addresses are, I behold the concrescent unity in which no member thinks the fate of another foreign to his own, a unity that shall and must arise if we are not to perish altogether – I behold this unity as already existing, perfected and present.

2. I assume such German listeners as who do not, with all their being, give themselves over utterly to the feeling of pain at the loss they have suffered, and take complacence in this pain, and wallow in their inconsolable grief, and through this feeling think to compromise with the call that summons them to action; but such as who have already raised themselves even above this righteous pain to clear reflection and contemplation, or at least are capable of doing so. I know that pain; I have felt it as much as the next man; I respect it. That stupor which is satisfied when it finds meat and drink and suffers no physical pain, and for which honour, freedom, self-sufficiency are empty words, is incapable of feeling it: but even this pain is only there to spur us on to reflection, decision and action; failing in this ultimate aim, it robs us of reflection and all our other remaining powers, and thus completes our misery; while, moreover, as witness to our indolence and cowardice, it furnishes the visible proof that we deserve our misery. But by no means do I intend to lift you from this pain with the empty promise of help

from without and by indicating all manner of possible events and changes that the passage of time might bring: for, if this way of thinking, which prefers to stroll in the precarious world of possibilities instead of fastening on the necessary, and would rather owe its deliverance to blind chance than to its own efforts, did not already testify to the most atrocious frivolity and the deepest self-contempt, as indeed it does, then all consolations and indications of this sort have anyway absolutely no bearing on our predicament. It can be rigorously proved, and we shall do so at the proper time, that no man and no God and none of the events which reside in the realm of the possible can help us; but that we alone must help ourselves, if we are to be helped at all. Rather, I shall seek to lift you from the pain through clear insight into our situation, into our strength that still remains, into the means of our deliverance. Therefore I shall indeed expect a certain degree of reflection, a certain self-activity, and a little sacrifice, and therefore count on listeners of whom this much can be expected. Incidentally, the objects of this expectation are as a whole not onerous and do not presuppose a greater measure of strength than that which, as I believe, one can impute to our age; but as for danger, there is none at all.

3. In meaning to bring forth clear insight into the Germans as such, into their present situation, I assume listeners who are inclined to see with their own eyes things of this nature, but not at all such as find it more comfortable, in considering these subjects, to allow to be foisted upon them an alien and outlandish instrument of vision, which is either intentionally adjusted to deceive or is naturally, owing to its different point of view and lesser degree of sharpness, never suited to a German eye. Further, I assume that, when these listeners observe with their own eyes, they have the courage to look honestly at what is there and to admit honestly what they see; that they have either already defeated or are yet capable of defeating that widespread inclination to deceive oneself about one's own affairs and to withhold a less pleasing image of these than is compatible with the truth. That inclination is a cowardly flight from one's own thoughts, a childish attitude of mind which seems to believe that, if only one does not see one's misery or at least refuses to admit to oneself that one does, this misery is thereby also abolished in reality, just as it is abolished in one's thoughts. By contrast, it is a sign of manly courage to fix one's gaze upon the evil, to require it to hold its ground, to penetrate it calmly, coldly, and freely, and to resolve it into its component parts. Only through clear insight does one also become