

Festschrift Dinner Remarks
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Michael Davis

I should start by thanking two friends who are most responsible for this evening: Denise¹, who first imagined a *Festschrift* and then guided it to completion, and Michael², who took it upon himself to organize this gathering. I never expected either, and so they are all the more gratifying. It must have been 1989 when Denise first walked into my office as a potential student. She was working part-time—was it at American Express? They offered her a permanent job. Everyone who hires Denise eventually offers her a permanent job. She is a remarkable combination of utter competence and utter openness, remarkable because her *sophia* does not interfere with her *philia*. Michael and I have a certain conversational rhythm; we tease each other. This is the flip side of the fact that we find it possible to talk about absolutely anything, from basketball to being, to make light of the serious and see what is serious in what is silly. And then Richard³, whom I have known longer than anyone else in the room; we have been close friends for over fifty years. During that time, much to our wonder, we have repeatedly discovered that, while going about it in quite different ways, we seem always to end up thinking about the same things—as though, without our realizing it, our thought had been placed somehow on a shared developmental schedule. And Ronna⁴—my original plan, when I wrote my book on Aristotle’s *Poetics*, *The Poetry of Philosophy*, was to write two more. One would be on the *Politics*, and would be called *The Politics of Philosophy*—I did that; the other would be on

¹ Denise Schaeffer, Director of Strategic Initiatives and Professor of Political Science, College of the Holy Cross.

² Michael Zuckert, Nancy R. Dreux Professor of Political Science, Emeritus, Notre Dame University.

³ Richard Velkley, Celia Scott Weatherhead Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, Tulane University.

⁴ Ronna Burger is Professor of Philosophy, Catherine & Henry J. Gaisman Chair and Director of Judeo-Christian Studies, Sizeler Professor of Jewish Studies, and Director of the Religious Studies Minor, Tulane University.

the *Ethics* and would be called *The Morality of Philosophy*. So, books on the beautiful, the just, and the good in their relation to the true. I never wrote the last because, well, with the appearance of *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates*, how much was left to say about the *Ethics*? Ronna and I have for a long time shared thoughts, and students, and, perhaps most of all, the gift of an extraordinary teacher. And Jacob.⁵ Writing has for me always been a strange business. Other than myself, who is my audience? I first really got to know Jacob after reading his stunningly thoughtful review of *The Poetry of Philosophy*. So, I did have a very fine audience. It is no accident, I'm sure, that like me, Jacob is a little "off": he is inclined to put things together in what might be thought odd combinations—for me, ancient tragedy and modern science; for him, Plato and the Talmud. I'm not at all sure we would even be here tonight without Catherine.⁶ She and I have very different styles of thinking. Allan Bloom more than once chided me for jumping too quickly to the heavens; Catherine is more methodical, less inclined to be allusive. And yet, as the conclusion to her *Plato's Philosopher's* shows, for both of us, the most important human question is perhaps the nature of philosophy as, on the one hand, necessarily incomplete and, on the other hand, deeply satisfying. Catherine, I think, saw beyond the surface and recognized the depth of our kinship earlier than I. She has been extraordinarily generous over the years. *The Poetry of Philosophy* makes the extravagant claim that *On Poetics*, the classic account of poetry, and tragedy in particular, is really about the very structure of human action. At the time that I wrote it, I wasn't sure how to, or whether I could, get it published. Without being asked, Catherine, and Mary Nichols⁷, arranged a lunch meeting for the three of us with Jonathan Sisk, the editor of Rowman and Littlefield. Both Mary and Catherine

⁵ Jacob Howland, McFarlin Professor of Philosophy, University of Tulsa.

⁶ Catherine Zuckert, Nancy R. Dreux Professor of Political Science, Emeritus, Notre Dame University.

⁷ Mary Nichols, Professor Emerita, Department of Political Science, Baylor University.

had books with Rowman. I still don't know exactly how it happened, but by the end of the lunch, it was pretty clear that Sisk would publish my book. This was not the last time Catherine would quietly intervene on my behalf. Nor Mary, who made it possible for me to teach graduate students (many of you here) for almost ten years at Fordham—no small sign of trust from someone cares so deeply for her students. Marina⁸ is as close a philosophical colleague as I have had—a friend with whom conversation moved seamlessly between talking about Plato and Hegel to talking about the strengths and weaknesses of the countless students we shared and the institution where we taught. Marina brought a certain integrity and wholeness to my life at Sarah Lawrence, made the pieces fit together into one on-going conversation. And Gwen⁹, first, as fine a student as I have taught, and now, a friend. We began fifteen years ago reading Platonic dialogues together and have not looked back. We've taught, written, and gossiped together. That is, we've thought together. I mention only those of you I was told in advance would speak, but I really want to say how grateful I am to all of you. Thinking is a strangely solitary activity that it is nevertheless impossible to do alone.

All of this thinking about thinking got me thinking about my past growing up in a family of lapsed Communists in upstate New York. I thought about coming home late in the fall of my freshman year in college and announcing to my father that I had decided to study law. The money, I told him with the self-assurance perhaps available only to an eighteen year-old, was very good. I still remember the look of disappointment on his face. Even before that, I remember overhearing the conversation between him and my oldest sister when she decided to drop out of college after her first year—him urging her to think of all the higher things that she

⁸ Marina Vitkin, former professor of philosophy, Sarah Lawrence College.

⁹ Gwenda-lin Grewal, Blegen Research Fellow in Greek and Roman Studies, Vassar College.

would lose the chance to experience and her responding that she never really understood what he meant when he spoke like that. I was born into a world where being practical wasn't practiced—where not finding things strange and puzzling was found strange and puzzling. This wasn't a matter of doctrine and couldn't be academic since no one in the house had any experience of the academy. It was a gift—a matter of luck.

In my junior year at Cornell, shortly after Velkley, I met Susan. We were waiting tables in the campus restaurant—the Elmhurst Room. We talked a little, but not very much. I was intimidated by how attractive she was. I wanted to ask her out, but didn't because I thought it would be awkward working with her if—really, I thought “when”—she turned me down. But then I was offered work in the Philosophy Department as a T.A. in a logic course. So, I quit the Elmhurst Room and immediately asked Susan out. She later told me two not quite compatible stories about why she said yes. On the one hand, she said she had just gotten out of a rather unpleasant relationship that soured her on men generally. Still, she didn't want to stay home on date nights, and so she decided that since she had no good reason to prefer one man to another, she would simply say yes to anyone who asked. I was the first beneficiary of this policy of indifference. On the other hand, she said she knew I had quit because I had been offered a Graduate Assistantship, which meant I must be a graduate student. Whether “graduate student” signified status, or maturity, or someone interesting, I'm not sure, but it, or perhaps it was only indifference, got me a first date, after which things got serious fairly quickly. It's a little hard for me to admit how superficial I was. For a while I was just blown away by the fact that someone this pretty wanted to be with me. Susan, on the other hand, couldn't be superficial because my surface was never all that impressive; she was used to being with people far prettier, more polished, and more popular than I—people for whom the money would have been very good.

She simply had to have other reasons. So, just as I had happened to be born to parents for whom conventional success would have been a disappointment, again, I got lucky. It took us about a year to decide to marry. Like everyone else, we had to settle a few issues first—you know, the usual sort of thing, whether philosophy or poetry was superior, and whether there was any such thing as the unconscious. Under the influence (I thought) of Allan Bloom, I stood for the utter superiority of philosophy to poetry. Under the influence (I thought) of Ludwig Wittgenstein, I stood for the utter non-existence of the unconscious. On each issue, Susan was on the other side. At the time, I was quite confident that I had the best of both arguments. Now, you may recall that the reason for this gathering tonight is a Festschrift entitled *Writing the Poetic Soul of Philosophy*. The title (Denise's invention, I think) means to describe what I have devoted my adult life trying to understand—the complicated and necessary connection between poetry and philosophy and the unconscious structure of soul that grounds it. I have been lucky enough to end up spending my life with someone who, because she was serious, and so inclined to look beneath the surface, did not take my youthful overconfidence too seriously. Susan somehow knew that, however unconsciously, my soul was really attracted to her for more than her beauty. For reasons of which I was at the start not altogether aware, she was good for me. So, I got lucky again. My second family echoed my first, and wondering about ordinary things was somehow what was expected. Growing up in this atmosphere, our children, like the oligarchic offspring of the timocratic man of *Republic 8*, might have rebelled and become normal. Fortunately, while certainly feisty, unlike my sister, neither of our daughters was overly tempted by conventional life. Luck again.

Let me return to where I began. I never expected any of this. I don't mean that I don't deserve it. I suppose it would be modest to say that—still, it would be false modesty, and

something of an insult to all of you who have gathered together this evening because you, at least, think I do deserve it. I mean rather that I didn't plan on it. As a surprise, it can be an occasion of close to pure delight. Anticipation would have tainted that delight, bringing with it vanity, envy, resentment. In this way, it reminds me of something it took me quite a while to learn about the life of philosophy. Just before Velkley and Susan, there was Allan Bloom and his elegantly seductive celebration of philosophy as the highest life. Young and ambitious, I was shopping for what was highest because I was so sure already that I was a person of the highest kind. Philosophy seemed to me knight errantry without the athleticism (or the immediate threat of death). Later I learned to think of this as the problem of Alcibiades—who loved, not wisdom, but the love of wisdom, and that, not because he couldn't do anything else, but because it was “highest.” But this desire to be best, to live the highest life, requires some self-forgetting. To do what you really want, you cannot really know what you want to do. True enough, there is something incomplete in the description of philosophy understood as the practice of dying and being dead. We are selfish beings, and we couldn't really take satisfaction in our lives unless we were (let's be honest; it is very, very nice to have a dinner in one's honor). On the other hand, this “we” is peculiar—“we are,” as Nietzsche says, “unknown to ourselves, we knowing ones, we ourselves to ourselves.” Because the selves we seek to celebrate are necessarily partially opaque to us, our lives, like Platonic dialogues, unfold on the basis of unexpected breaks and unexpected joins. We live subject to luck, for, as Wallace Stevens tells us, “happens to like is one of the ways things happen to fall.” Like being, the accidental—luck—shows its power in seeming to ground itself. This evening is a happy reminder of how unusually lucky I have been—of my good fortune in my family, in my teachers, in my students, in my colleagues, in my friends. Thank you all.