

THE
JACQUES
BARZUN
AWARD
LECTURE

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PERNICIOUS AMNESIA: COMBATING THE EPIDEMIC

Response to the Conferral of the Inaugural Jacques Barzun Award

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**The Jacques Barzun Award
for
Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Education**

The American Academy for Liberal Education is proud to establish the Jacques Barzun Award, honoring outstanding contributions to liberal education.

Named in honor of one of the Academy's founders, and its honorary chairman, Jacques Barzun, the award recognizes and celebrates qualities of scholarship and leadership in liberal education so perfectly embodied by Dr. Barzun himself. A distinguished scholar, teacher, author, and university administrator (he served for twelve years as Dean of Faculties and Provost of Columbia University), Jacques Barzun is internationally known as one of our most thoughtful commentators on the cultural history of the modern period. Among his most recent books are *Critical Questions* (a collection of his essays from 1940-1980), *A Stroll With William James*, and *A Word or Two Before You Go*. He has reflected on contemporary education in *Begin Here: The Forgotten Conditions of Teaching and Learning*, *Teacher in America*, and *The American University, How it Runs, Where it is Going*.

Even a full recounting of Jacques Barzun's forty or so books and translations, or of his many honors (he is a member of the American Philosophical Society, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts) would fail to do full justice to the extent of Barzun's influence on liberal education in this country. Just as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* claims that the best way to grasp the meaning of the virtue called prudence is to observe the actions of a prudent man (we would today include women, of course), so many today would say that to define liberal education, or even more broadly, to define a cultured human being, it is enough to mention the name of Jacques Barzun. To keep alive the spirit of inquiry and learning that has become associated with his life's work, the Academy has created the Jacques Barzun Award for Lifelong Contributions to Liberal Learning.

In instituting this award, the AALE takes pride in paying fitting tribute to a great scholar, teacher, and American civic leader, and in honoring Jacques Barzun's own extraordinary achievement in advancing the cause of liberal education.

Jaroslav Pelikan

The recipient of the first Barzun Award is Professor Jaroslav Pelikan of Yale University. An internationally distinguished historian, Dr. Pelikan was educated at Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis, and The University of Chicago, where he received his Ph.D. in 1946. Professor Pelikan has been the recipient of many other awards, including the Jefferson Award of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Presidential Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Professor Pelikan is perhaps best known for his five volume *The Christian Tradition, A History of the Development of Doctrine* (1971-1989). Among his more recent publications are *The Idea of the University – A Reexamination*, *Faust the Theologian*, and *What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem? “Timaeus” and Genesis.*”

Dr. Pelikan’s teaching and writing have focused on Christian church history, the history of Judaism, and the state of Jewish-Christian relations, as well as on the history of theology and dogma, and on the comparative history of religions. In this, the first Barzun Award Lecture, Pelikan follows a classic Platonic theme, describing cultural forgetfulness as the “epidemic disease” afflicting nations and peoples. Recounting the development of his own scholarly interests in historical questions, he characterizes the task of the historian in response – and portrays his own professional life as – an “amnesiologist” – one who, through careful historical reconstructions and Platonic recollection, combats our human tendency to historical forgetfulness and so recovers and preserves historical truth.

It is probably unavoidable for a response of this kind to become an intellectual autobiography in miniature, though preferably with implications that go beyond the individual. Much as I dislike the proliferation of what has come to be called “confessional narrative” in political rhetoric and on the media talk shows, therefore, I shall have to resort tonight, far more than is my wont, to what a late colleague used to call “the first person perpendicular,” in some cases indulging in the occupational vice of the veteran scholar by quoting from myself. So let this be my first use of the first person perpendicular: I thank the American Academy for Liberal Education and all of you for selecting me to receive this inaugural Jacques Barzun Award, which is made all the more meaningful by my profound and longstanding debt to my favorite Berlioz scholar and intellectual *agent provocateur*, Dr. Jacques Barzun; and I am grateful for the presence of so many old friends and cherished colleagues, for whom my admiration is exceeded only by my affection.

Sometimes, when I am addressed as “*Doctor Pelikan*” (which is, as you know, rather uncommon in today's universities), someone will ask me just what kind of doctor I am. I used to answer that I was an obstetrician, because I spent so many years delivering children — to school, dentist's appointments, piano lessons, ballet classes. But now I usually reply by creating a new medical specialty (and indeed, by coining a new word) and identifying myself as an “amnesiologist” in the department of epidemiology of the school of public health, because I have spent a scholarly lifetime trying to combat an epidemic of pernicious amnesia. And because it is for that scholarly lifetime that you are so graciously honoring me tonight, I thought it might be fitting if I were to identify three strains of the amnesia virus for which my historical scholarship has been intended to be a cure, and sometimes even a preventive. (Each of you is entitled to suggest several additional strains of the amnesia virus that you have encountered in your

laboratory: Just keep the cards and letters coming!)

I

Initially, upon completing both my Ph.D. and my theological degree in 1946 when I was twenty-two, I took that headstart and that combination of degrees as a categorical imperative first of all to remind Christians and churches, whatever their denominational and confessional identity, of their forgotten past. Much of that past was, and still is, locked in languages that even many educated Americans cannot read — which, I'm afraid, includes most languages! Therefore I saw my polyglot upbringing and schooling as a further moral obligation to interpret — a word that means both “to translate” and “to make sense of” — the Christian tradition to its unknowing heirs. As the published bibliographies of my writings show, that “translating” started out with texts of the sixteenth-century Reformation, the most massive collection of these being the American Edition of *Luther's Works*, twenty-two volumes of which I edited and in many cases also translated; accompanying this editorial work was a series of monographs on Reformation subjects. But in the process of trying to cure the amnesia of twentieth-century Christians about their sixteenth-century past, I was also increasingly compelled to address the amnesia of the sixteenth century about its own past. The typographical conventions of the first generations of printers after Gutenberg did not require quotation marks; but the editorial conventions of the twentieth century did — with footnotes to identify the source of the quotation, often indicated in the original text by “*quidam* [somebody]” or “*ille* [that well-known poet or philosopher]” or “*sunt qui dicunt* [there are those who say].” Well, who were they?

One of the reasons that even the modern critical editions of these texts did not identify the sources is that historians, also historians of the Church and its theology, have tended to identify themselves by one historical period of specialization--the Greek or the Latin church fathers, the

medieval scholastics, the Reformers, the theologians of the nineteenth century. Therefore, to take an example from my edition, when Luther said that the birth of Christ from the Virgin was evidence not of Christ's transcendence but of His self-humiliation, because (speaking to Christ) "Thou didst not despise the Virgin's womb [*non horruisti Virginis uterum*]," that was seen by Reformation scholars as a profound and original insight: profound yes, but original no, because those words were in fact a verbatim quotation from the early Latin hymn, "Te Deum laudamus," which was ascribed by legend to Saints Ambrose and Augustine on the occasion of the latter's baptism by the former and which *Frater Martinus*, as an Augustinian friar, had sung every day in the cloister. Conversely, one of the reasons I was able to treat this strain of the amnesia virus was that my primary vocation and ambition from the beginning was the study not of the history of the period of the Reformation as such, but of a topic narrower in subject matter but longer in time, the history of Christian thought from the beginning to the present, for which my "role model" (just to prove that I can use the jargon of pop psychology!) was Adolf von Harnack, who was the greatest church historian of the twentieth century and maybe of all time. His most influential book, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (History of Dogma), was published in three massive volumes and completed in 1889. It went through five editions before he died in 1930.

Harnack and my grandfather, Jan Pelikan (who studied theology at the University of Erlangen, where Adolf Harnack's father, Theodosius, was professor), were of the same generation. The important thing for me was that the next generation, my father's generation, did not write a corresponding monumental history of dogma. The upheaval of the Nazi period and two World Wars meant that when they came of age, they continued repeating Harnack. Already while I was in my teens, I began to think that maybe in my generation, it was for me to undertake the job of writing a new history of Christian doctrine that would be shaped by what had

happened in the interim, among other things ecumenical issues, and therefore would not be as militantly Protestant or as tonedeaf to Eastern Orthodoxy as Harnack's had been. The first volume appeared in 1971, and the final volume in 1989, exactly one hundred years after Harnack's final volume. (When the first of the five volumes was issued, Rabbi Abraham Heschel called me with the reminder "Remember, Jaroslav, Moses wrote five volumes, too-but he had help!")

As the most perceptive reviewers of volume 2 of *The Christian Tradition*, with the title *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)*, have noted, I have — while striving not to play favorites among these five intellectual children of mine (any more than I did among the three children of my family) — resonated most deeply of all when I was interpreting the Eastern Orthodox tradition, first in its Greek and then in its Slavic embodiments. By comparison, I think it is fair to say that there was no major part of the Church to whose history Adolf von Harnack had so insensitive an antenna as Eastern Orthodoxy. "Nothing is sadder to see," he said of it in one of his harshest judgments, "than this transformation of the Christian religion from a worship in spirit and in truth [John 4:23] to a worship of symbols, formulas, and idols. ... It was to destroy this kind of religion that Jesus Christ permitted himself to be nailed to the cross." Because of my own profound affinities with it as a Slav, but, I would insist, no less because of the intrinsic importance of the Christian East as the source for so much of Christian philosophy, theology, spirituality, and art, one of the most distressing symptoms of amnesia that I have tried to counteract was an almost universal and almost total ignorance of the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Therefore I found it very gratifying when my late lamented friend, Father John Meyendorff of Saint Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary and the Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, paid me the high honor not only of calling that second volume of my opus "very

perceptive and challenging,” but even of identifying it as “*the* most comprehensive history of ideas in the Christian East,” listing it alongside the work of my beloved mentor, Father Georges Florovsky.

II

In the course of employing these five volumes to remind Christians of their Christian past, however, I was increasingly obliged to diagnose a second amnesia epidemic, the shocking ignorance of Christians about their debt to the pre-Christian treasures both of the Greek and Latin Classics and of the Jewish tradition. On the Classical side, my diagnosis was to reach its consummation in my Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen in 1992-1993, entitled *Christianity and Classical Culture*, and in the periodic sentence with which I opened them: “It remains one of the most momentous linguistic convergences in the entire history of the human mind and spirit that the New Testament happens to have been written in Greek--not in the Hebrew of Moses and the prophets, nor in the Aramaic of Jesus and his disciples, nor yet in the Latin of the imperium Romanum; but in the Greek of Socrates and Plato, or at any rate in a reasonably accurate facsimile thereof, disguised and even disfigured though this was in the Koine by the intervening centuries of Hellenistic usage.”

Although I do not have a conventional college degree, having studied at an American version of the German *Gymnasium* from which I went directly to my seminary and graduate studies, I had actually (using the conventional language of colleges) “majored” in Classics. The Greek and Latin past of Christian technical terms and fundamental theological concepts is indispensable to their understanding and interpretation. But it is, alas, increasingly the case that seminary students, ordained clergy, and sometimes even theological professors come to those terms and concepts unencumbered by any firsthand knowledge of that Classical past. The “small

Latin, and less Greek” that Ben Jonson attributed to “My Beloved, the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare” has been replaced for many by no Latin at all, and by a Greek, if any, that begins only with the New Testament. (You will recall the quip in *Beyond Good and Evil* of Nietzsche, who was professor of Greek at Basel, that “it is strange that God learned Greek when He desired to turn author — and even stranger that He did not learn it better!”) In a series of lectures delivered in Ann Arbor and in Rome, scheduled to be published next month under the title *What Has Athens to do with Jerusalem?*, I have examined what I call the “counterpoint” between Plato’s *Timaeus* and *The Book of Genesis*, especially in the Greek version of the Septuagint: the vocabulary and the philosophy of *Timaeus* shaped the reading and the very translation of the Septuagint *Genesis* in Hellenistic Judaism and then in early Christianity (more hidden quotation marks!), providing the Christian doctrine of creation with an essentially Platonic teleology that had not been explicitly present in the *Genesis* account.

On the Jewish side, planning, researching, and writing my five-volume work in the fateful decades from the early 1940s to the late 1980s, I have, by diametrical contrast with my predecessors including Adolf von Harnack, seen the Christian engagement both with the Jewish theological tradition and with the Hebrew Scriptures (alias the Old Testament) as a never-ending theme, without which the history of Christian doctrine does not make sense, and I have therefore dealt with it throughout the work rather than disposing of it at the beginning, as has been the usual practice. For it is still astounding to be reminded that throughout most of Christian history, most theologians have expounded most Christian doctrines without any knowledge of the Hebrew language. Indeed, I have gone on in a later work to raise the question of the doctrinal and the moral consequences of the estrangement between Judaism and Christianity, and in a rhetorical question I have asked: “Would there have been such anti-Semitism, would there have been so

many pogroms, would there have been an Auschwitz, if every Christian church and every Christian home had focused its devotion on icons of Mary not only as Mother of God and Queen of Heaven but as the Jewish maiden and the new Miriam, and on icons of Christ not only as Pantocrator but as *Rabbi Jeshua bar-Joseph*, Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of David, in the context of the history of a suffering Israel and a suffering humanity?"

This attention to the amnesia — and downright denial — of Christians about their Jewish heritage was, I am sure, deeply charged with the spirit of those times, as the conscience of the West, including the Christian conscience, probed its own depths to try to comprehend the enormity of the events of the 1940s and to trace their sources, including their Christian sources. It was also, and probably therefore, deeply indebted to various of my Jewish contemporaries and colleagues, above all to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel of the Jewish Theological Seminary (of which I became an honorary doctor in 1991). In the many discussions I had with Abraham Heschel, and in the collaborative book that we were prevented from writing by his untimely death in 1972, well before the biblical threescore years and ten, the theme was the unrecognized intellectual exchange that has taken place in both directions between Judaism and Christianity as two children of Abraham, — as well as between both of them and the Greek and Latin traditions, as well as between both of them and Islam as the third child of Abraham — which only historical analysis can uncover. For example, the Messianic hope in Israel began 600 or 700 years before the birth of Jesus. When Christianity arose, it said to Jews, "You have waited a long time for a Messiah. Now he has come, and his name is Jesus." The Jews would ask where he was, and the Christians would reply that he was no longer here but that he would return and they were waiting for him. That is to say that by now Christians have been waiting for the Messiah three times as long as Jews in the time of Jesus had been waiting, and Christians do not do it very well. As a

result you get all kinds of millennial sects and apocalyptic movements (sure to spring up again as we approach the year 2000), all of them trying, in the Talmud's phrase, to "hasten the day of Messiah." But Christians have to learn from Jews how to wait, because Jews are much better at it than Christians. Conversely, the promise of the prophets of Israel that the nations of the world would come to Zion and learn the Torah has been fulfilled not by Jewish translations of the Torah — which pulled back after producing the Septuagint, so that when it came time for a translation into Latin, Judaism did not produce it — but chiefly by the work of Christian translators, beginning with the Peshitta into Syriac and above all the Vulgate into Latin and continuing with the coming of the Bible to all seven continents and to the islands of the sea.

III

Various analyses that have been carried out of the readership of *The Christian Tradition*, largely anecdotal and unscientific though they are as polls — but remember that the plural of "anecdote" is "data"! — suggest that one of its major therapeutic achievements far beyond the boundaries of any church has been to help cure the amnesia of many students and scholars in this generation about all of these several pasts — not only the Christian, but also the Classical and the Jewish — and about the interrelation of these pasts with one another. Having come to find my natural habitat not in a theological seminary of the Church, nor even in a divinity school at the University, nor even in a department of religious studies within the University, but in a department of history within the faculty of arts and sciences of the University, I have also made the University rather than only the Church the venue, as well as sometimes the object, of my studying, teaching, and writing. Therefore I have, in *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination*, acknowledged a mind set that I was pleased to note I shared with Cardinal Newman, so that what his biographer, Ian Ker, has said of Newman could be said also of me: "Newman's idea of the Church is couched

in terms noticeably similar in some respects to his idea of the university.” And, as I continued there, “if, as Newman said, ‘among the objects of human enterprise . . . none higher or nobler can be named than that which is contemplated in the erection of a University,’ then it follows that the university is, in God’s good world, the principal community through which human rationality can examine all existing communities, families, and structures — including itself, but also including the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church — and thus can help them to become what they are.”

And so, to shift the metaphor for a moment from the therapeutic to the military, I have, in recounting the history of the explosion that has been the Christian tradition, been paying ever more explicit attention as well to the fallout from the explosion in several areas of human culture: both my *Jesus Through the Centuries* and my *Mary Through the Centuries* deal, as the subtitles indicate, with the “place in human culture” of these two massive figures. Those of you who know me well will be aware that for me the most important of these areas of culture has always been music — a propensity that I am proud to share with Jacques Barzun! Already in my second book, published in 1955, the real hero was Johann Sebastian Bach; and thirty years later, in 1985, for the tercentenary of Bach’s birth, I took it upon myself to read all the available writings of Bach’s librettists and on that basis to put his cantatas, motets, Passions, Masses, and chorales into the context of the Rationalism, Pietism, and Protestant Orthodoxy of the first half of the eighteenth century. This work, which led to the book *Bach Among the Theologians*, had the happy byproduct of bringing me into close association with several conductors and other musical performers — above all, Robert Shaw, Richard Westenburg, and Yo-Yo Ma — with whom I have maintained an ever-deepening friendship to the present. Many readers of that book, together with members of the audiences to which I have lectured in this growing avocation of mine, have been kind enough to tell me that though they had been lifelong admirers and even performers of

the works of Bach, they had never understood this intellectual and theological context of his compositions, fully three-fourths of which were written to be performed in church. And I have been emboldened to extend the coverage of my practice of musical amnesiology to other composers and works, including this past January Mendelssohn's *Elijah* at Carnegie Hall with Robert Shaw and next January, also with Maestro Shaw, Haydn's *Creation*.

My boyhood fantasies about becoming a musician remained just that. Instead, my creative medium of choice has been words and language, in which I as a scholar have been the pupil of the writers: Goethe above all, but alongside him Dante, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy, and for English Emerson and Gibbon. What Professor Barzun has written of the young Berlioz — that to him “the figure of Faust seemed to embody the will of the moment Learned, passionate, curious, tender, courageous, bewitched, and desperate, [Faust] stood for genius in all its greatness and misery” — was true of me when, at sixteen, I read Goethe's *Faust* for the first time; and I resolved to read it every year from then on. This I have done for nearly sixty years now, until finally, in 1995, I published *Faust the Theologian*. I took as my text one of the epigrams in Goethe's *Maxims and Reflections*: “When we do natural science, we are pantheists; when we do poetry, we are polytheists; when we moralize, we are monotheists.” Goethe applied this primarily to himself, but I have tried to make it a key to the development of *Faust* as a kind of Bildungsroman, from the natural science and pantheism of the opening scenes with the *Erdgeist* to the poetry and polytheism of the Classical Walpurgis Night to the morality and monotheism of the apotheosis in the closing scene, as this has been sublimely and unforgettably celebrated in the second movement of Gustav Mahler's *Eighth SynThony* in musical, but also theological, counterpoint with the medieval hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus*, which provided the text for the first movement. It was with considerable trepidation that I exposed this little book to the critical

scrutiny of the professional Goethe scholars; as a publisher friend, Cass Canfield, used to say in his wry way, “Some books are released, others are permitted to escape!” But I was deeply gratified by their gracious welcome (or *Willkommen*), which once again confirmed my conviction that at a time when a knowledge of theology or even of the Bible can no longer be taken for granted among literary scholars — as I said to a colleague of mine in the English department, one of the benefits of secularism is that now you can teach *Paradise Lost* to students who don't know how the story turns out! — identifying the forgotten connotations of a work like Goethe's *Faust* can serve to counteract the amnesia even of the learned, who may have forgotten, for example, that each of the titles of *the Mater Gloriosa* in that final scene — “Jungfrau, Mutter, Königin, Góttin” — had a long history in both the devotion and the theology addressed to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

If that is true of Goethe and of *Faust*, it applies *a fortiori* to another of George Santayana's “philosophical poets,” Dante Alighieri. And within the *Divine Comedy*, it is above all for the reading of the *Paradiso* that the amnesia has been so devastating. This judgment could even be quantified, if one were to compare the number of books and articles on the *Inferno*, the *Purgatorio*, and the *Paradiso*, even though Dante himself, poor man, viewed the sequence of the three as a progression. So it was the *Paradiso* that I subjected to a *close explication de texte* in my book *Eternal Feminines* (title borrowed from Goethe!), with special attention also to the explicit and implicit role of the doctrine of the Trinity in its structure. Therefore I took up “three theological allegories in Dante's *Paradiso*: Beatrice as *Donna Mia*; The Church as *Bella Sposa*; Mary as *Nostra Regina*.” For the depiction of Beatrice as Theology, an Eternal Feminine, Dante was able to draw on the patristic and medieval tradition, in which the accident of gender in Greek and Latin grammar had enabled theologians and philosophers to treat *theologia and philosophia*

as the embodiment and fulfilment of the Classical *sophia*, the term that was used by the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew *Chokhma*. To identify the Church as an Eternal Feminine, the Bride of Christ, betrothed to him forever but also sometimes tragically unfaithful to him, he appropriated especially the rich exegetical tradition of the allegorical interpretation of the *Song of Songs*. And to celebrate Mary as the ultimate Eternal Feminine,

umile e alta piu che creatura [more humble and sublime than any creature],

it was above all Bernard of Clairvaux who supplied him with the metaphors both of humility and of sublimity. Behind all of this stands, as an Eternal Feminine, Lady Philosophy, the *Philosophia* of Boethius, to whose *Consolation* Dante turned when Beatrice died, and of whom he wrote that Boethius (in the words that William James selected for the epitaph on the urn of his sister Alice)

. . . came from martyrdom and exile to this peace:

. . . *da martiro*

e da essilio a questa pace.

Such was the background I brought to a formidable assignment for which I was far less equipped than I was for the study of music or of literature, when the National Gallery of Art here in Washington invited me to deliver the Andrew W. Mellon Lectures for 1987, ten years ago. 1987 was the 1220th anniversary of the Seventh Ecumenical Council of the Church, the Second Council of Nicaea, which was convoked to deal with the challenge of iconoclasm and to provide a justification for the use of images in Christian worship; and so I called the lectures *Imago Dei*. Here my task as amnesiologist was twofold: to supply the missing points of reference for many specific icons, as they dealt with biblical scenes or the lives of the saints or the doctrines of the Creed; but above all to expound the arguments by which what I called in the subtitle “the Byzantine apologia for icons” invoked the central dogma of the Incarnation to maintain that the

divine prohibition of images in the Second Commandment had been turned a full 180 degrees, to become instead a divine imperative to draw images, because the God who could not be seen had made himself visible in the flesh through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of a historical Person who was at the same time “the only-begotten God.” Imperial and ecclesiastical *Realpolitik*, Neoplatonic metaphysics, Byzantine aesthetics — all of these were factors in the eventual victory of the icons, and all of these are relatively intelligible to modern historians and art historians as they interpret the victory. But what these interpreters are sometimes in danger of forgetting, and what I felt obliged to recall — that is, to re-call — were the missing presuppositions.

The liberal and liberating education for which this Academy stands as champion and defender depends upon a living sense of both continuity and change in relation to our several traditions. “To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born,” Cicero warned, “is to remain always a child.” And G. K. Chesterton called tradition “an extension of the franchise” by “giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors.” To understand ourselves, we must understand our past. But to understand our past, we must understand how it has understood its past in turn. It is the responsibility of the historian to help in that understanding, to combat the epidemic of pernicious amnesia, and to explore what Saint Augustine in Book X of the *Confessions* called “the fields and vast palaces of memory, where are the treasuries of innumerable images.” The mysteries of that process of recollection and ἀνάμνησις in which all of us, whether we like it or not, are simultaneously the products and the participants, and the moral imperative it lays upon us have never been more powerfully expressed than in lines from Goethe’s *Faust* that have become the melody of my life:

Was du ererbt von deinen Vatern hast,

Erwirb es, um es zu besitzen:

What you have as heritage, Take now as task;

For thus you will make it your own!