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Ideas

FROM THE NATIONAL HUMANITIES CENTER

The Director's Desk



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Instead of dirt and poison we have rather chosen to fill our hives with honey and wax; thus furnishing mankind with the two noblest of things, which are sweetness and light.


Jonathan Swift, *The Battle of the Books* (1704)

VISITORS TO THE NATIONAL HUMANITIES CENTER often suggest metaphors for the building—a monastery, an ivory tower, the Alexandrian library, or a Greek village complete with whitewashed walls, coffee, and a palm tree. My own metaphor has been a beehive, although one without drones or a queen. Swift's aphorism, however, turns that rather self-serving metaphor into an intimidating question: isn't it the responsibility of those of us who enjoy such beehives to furnish mankind with those two "noblest of things, sweetness and light"?

A tall order! Even more so if we get swept along with Matthew Arnold's rhetoric. He expropriated some of Swift's words and said, "He who works for sweetness and light united, works to make reason and the will of God prevail."

One step at a time, Matt. Swift's comment, however, gives us a starting point. Why do we humans so often prefer dirt and poison to honey and wax? Why do we so needlessly hurt one another, especially, it seems, those we value or love the most? Why is it that affluence, education, technology, and other ostensible goods seem often to make matters worse? If these are not the "cutting-edge" questions in science or the issues that in today's colleges and universities bring fame and fortune to scholars in their various specialties, they are surely among the most pressing human questions, ones that lie hidden under much of our study of history, philosophy, or literature. They are ones about which honest humanists will struggle, disagree, and sometimes get mad as hornets. But out of that, now and then, if the setting is right, wax and honey are produced. You will find some in the following pages, I trust, whether in Gerald Early's discussion of Muhammad Ali or Jeremy Popkin's examination of how we assess memories of the Holocaust. The same can be said for an extraordinary collection of essays by a diverse group of our friends and Fellows, reflecting on the grave events that have shaken us so profoundly. Although the humanities should not pretend that they can solve contemporary problems, it is beyond doubt that they can provide us with perspective on them. Because I believe that the study of antiquity is valuable precisely because it compels us to look for points of comparison and contrast to our modern lives, I was pleased when Maura Lafferty, a classicist and medievalist, graciously agreed to edit and introduce the observations of a very thoughtful group of scholars from a cross-section of the humanities.

So, "Tolle, lege," as Augustine heard the playing children shout: "Pick it up and read it."


W. Robert Connor
Director