

this disadvantage is finally literature's greatest gain" (*Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980], p. 108).

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**"Hungry for Equals"—The University  
of our Hearts\***

Putting aside little mysteries of the passage of time, I've been thinking, apropos of tonight, about some ideas of Walt Whitman's and Matthew Arnold's. They have to do with the creative and humanistic spirit that should charge our entire educational system but is so weakly present. In the preface to his 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman described true poets as engaged with the whole of life and eager for companions in the adventure. Such poets, he said, are marked by "generosity and affection." They even "encourage competitors" because they are "hungry for equals." Fourteen years later Arnold, in his "Culture and Anarchy," put forth "sweetness and light" as essentials of culture. By these words he meant the sense of beauty and the workings of clear, disinterested reason—but also the desire to share the fruits of art and thought.

Neither Whitman nor Arnold was talking of universities, which only too rarely glow with intellectual passion and collegiality. Original intelligence and imagination come from no administrative decree or permission but are revealed in one sole, highly improvisatory self at a time. Yet universities, corporate bodies though they are—with chains of command, budgets, and publicity offices—do exist to harbor angels of sweetness and light hungry for equals: that is, for companions of the mind. The more such companions the merrier! That should be our cry. Hunger for equals is the spur, far more than fame, not only for humanists but for all who would create the enlightened electorate this country's founders longed for. Bless the universities for the sacred groves of communion, however tiny,

they protect. But please God, let us find ways to make those groves the *whole* of the enterprise rather than curious enclaves.

To transfer, alive, a way of thinking and feeling, an absorbed engagement, a disciplined openness to unpredictable wisdom (rather than a gray routinizing or solemn abstracting or cost analysis of all that human genius delights to find)—now, there's a purpose for the university of our hearts! Art and learning are an almost endless layering of living memory—the deepest past overlaid by the next phase, yet still visible—and so on to this latest moment. An endless surprise party! Centuries rearranging themselves under our eyes. Dead facts of rote scholarship rising from paper graves to reenter their proper bodies. Shakespeare seen as a modern poet, and Joyce as Homer reborn. No wonder our most vivid minds speak of knowledge with utter zest, though dreading its tragic revelations as well. No need to go into the tragic aspect here, except to say that only shared knowledge can—perhaps—free us to examine our lives impersonally and arrange for more, and deeper, human joy. As Pound has it,

Knowledge the shade of a shade,  
Yet must thou sail after knowledge. . . .

These are the words of Circe, commanding Odysseus to seek out Tiresias, the prophet, among the shades of the dead. In the poem's context, they imply a modern command as well—the command of our inmost desire and destiny to seek and love knowledge, however elusive and dangerous, not only from our own perceptions but from the quickened dead. What a lucky command, to us and the university that can follow through!

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