

“Under Which Lyre” Or the Angry Poet Turned Prophet, Almost

This poem of W. H. Auden was selected because the writer has gone through several phases of life comparable to its author. Auden has here given us four types of men, those belonging to Ares, Zeus, Apollo and Hermes. Ares represents war and the war-like man—military, pugilistic and anti-Gandhian. Zeus represents the universal outlook; Hermes the adventurers the doers, the radicals in every field; and Apollo the forces of law and order without which perhaps any society might be impossible.

The observance here is not only may Auden be “right” but he is in accord, if not under the influence of the great psychologist, Karl Jung and this is very definitely a “Jungian” poem. Auden essays to champion Hermes here but he remains an Apollonian all the while in that it is he who must do the telling, the advising, even the commanding. This is the “Angry Young Man.” Auden himself had been a believer in astrology and the occult, but in his later years followed, without wearing, the high-church clerical collar; proving that he was never entirely free from Apollonian influences which he derides here. This is not a poem of which he is proud today.

In this he seems to be traveling in the way of Wordsworth. But a comparative with Tennyson at this point is, perhaps, in order. Tennyson essayed prophecy in his “Lockley Hall” poems. They took on a Apollonian form, but they prophesied the “future.” This is Hermetic-prophecy. On the other hand, Auden sees universally in “Under Which Lyre” and instead of looking to the future (Hermetic-prophecy) he summarizes the social universe as it probably was, is and will be, and in this sense the poem is Jovetic and not Hermetic.

The structure is a six-line stanza, a-a-c-b-b-c. The a- and b- lines are iambic tetrameter, and the c-lines double spondees. This reminds one of the Tango and it is mentioned because Tennyson poetry arose in the age of the Waltz and our North Beach poetry is associated with Jazz. The Tango, while utilized in the ball-room is one of restricted space and free movements whereas the Waltz is one of free space and restricted movements. One can read this work seated at a table, without trying a dance or musical interpretation. Indeed it would sound well on a soap-box or any kind of oratory.

Although this work appears in Untermeyer, it was not selected until “The Selected Poetry of Auden” was read. Here one finds “In Memory of Sigmund Freud” which is not Apollonian at all and which reveals that Auden was either a student of modern psychology or an admirer of psychologists. If the writer were not a follower of Hermes he might have selected this instead.

The work has a sub-title “A Reactionary Tract for the Times.” The “Times” is an elegant

newspaper, which prints news, factual news, and although strictly Apollonian and basically Tory, it is not guilty of many of the sins described in the verses to follow. It is exceedingly proper and perhaps would publish articles decrying the new commercial dictums which seem to control our world.

The opening lines are “Ares at last has quit the field.” Intentionally or not it describes what has been happening socially after our wars—in this case it would apply equally to the periods after World Wars I, and II; but if one looks at history on a broader basis, substantially the same has happened elsewhere and at other times.

The world is a university in which people are to be trained “For mastering the arts and sciences” which clearly implies not only academic education but a complete apprenticeship for the operation of a gadgeted industry “Among bewildering appliances”—opening of third stanza. Though they did not invent them, the Apollonians clearly want to control them—to compensate for their not having invented—and to reinforce this control by a moral matrix which the others (the Hermetics) certainly did not invent. So we have:

“... And nerves that steeled themselves at slaughter

Are shot to pieces by the shorter

Poems of Donne.”

Thus we have a world now divided between the cooperationists or followers of Hermes, and the well-ordered people, followers of Apollo who obtain the reins largely because they have been so trained. And if one studies poetry today, there is a great demarcation between the “proper” people who look upon the Elizabethan Shakespeare as their grandest, and those teeming with some sort of protest, who look to Donne. Donne is actually the poet of inventors, whether in science, art, literature or any field of endeavor. He is the daring man.

The fourth stanza brings:

“Professors back from secret missions

Resume their proper eruditions,...”

During the war one might have been expected either to quote or to fulfill high ideals—to “Win the war to end war;” “To save the World for Democracy;” to end all tyranny. Or one might have taken part in some revolutionary or underground movement against the enemy. This is to become “unthinkable” **now**. That sort of thing does not belong in a well-ordered Tory, Apollonian world.

The professor, during the War, did not always have command over bodies of men; but they did exert power and they cannot forget it.

“... They liked their dictaphones a lot,

They met some big wheels and do not

Let you forget it.”

So the scions of Apollo must avail themselves of the inventions of the followers of Hermes. But they also recognize that there is a power beyond them:

“But Zeus’ inscrutable decree

Permits the will to disagree ...”

In previous ages Zeus, a “real”-Jungian archetype, and not necessarily either the same or different from an imagined Father-God, has introduced an inexorable democracy, especially in politics, so we have a strange world with a revealed or ordered democracy, not one which arose by its own revolution or reform.

Stanza 6 re-presents the original theme and more clearly:

“Let Ares doze, that other war

Is instantly declared once more

‘Twixt those who follow

Precocious Hermes all the way

And those who without qualms obey

Pompous Apollo.”

This is much more than the strife between Conservative and Liberal; or between Tory politicians and Laborites. It is a conflict between two ways of life. One can see it in the **title** “Science and Sanity”, a book presumably written by Count Korzybski claiming to be a champion of the Hermes people. The book was attacked by the scientists who are followers of Hermes and today, actual, general Semantics, theoretically pioneered by Korzybski, is actually in the hands of the followers of Apollo. One reads in their literature articles by Mortimer Adler, certainly the leader of the intellectual Apollonians in this region; and none by Physicists, Chemists or “Natural Philosophers.”

This same point is brought out much more clearly in this month’s “Scientific American” with its long review on what are called “the two cultures.” In the first group are the creative spirits: artists, technologists, scientists, craftsmen, inventors; in the second group the social scientists,

metaphysicians, newspaper men, advertisers, salesmen, etc. The two groups fit in exactly with Auden's prototypes.

So in Stanza 7 we have:

"... This dialectic strife between

The civil gods is just as mean,

And more fanatic."

Stanzas 8 and 9 bring out what Auden calls the sophomoric type. The suggestion is that when we approach the forties in our lives, there is a danger of becoming fat, prosperous and superficial—though it is then we hold the reins of power perhaps more than at any other age. In contrast (Stanza 10):

"The sons of Hermes love to play,

And only do their best when they

Are told they oughtn't;

Apollo's children never shrink

From boring jobs but have to think

Their work important.

So we have the stuffed shirt, the civil servant, the professional classes. Incidentally this stanza is very **English** in the sense that its language is that of the "average man." Stanza 11 boldly asserts this division among us:

"... A compromise between us is

Impossible;

Respect perhaps but friendship never:..."

In Stanza 12 Shaw is mentioned as a Hermes man and here Auden includes the Phi-Beta-Kappas, the cream of the intellectuals, which would suggest the type winning Noble prizes, etc. It reminds one of Shaw's statement that he felt he might be able to convert a banker to socialism, but a banker's clerk, never.

Yet Auden is quite aware of the fallacies and weaknesses of the scions of Hermes, for

“... The earth would soon, did Hermes run it,

Be like the Balkans.” (Stanza 13)

One is reminded here of the quasi-political life of some of our physicists. Adventurous people do not adhere to law, order, stability.

On the other hand the followers of Apollo are always expressing their “we’s” in taking credit and

“... Unable to invent the lyre,

Creates with simulated fire

Official art. (Stanza 14)

This theme is then further developed where we see the Extrovert in power, offering us all the orthodoxies. This is what may be called “the adjective-charm” type, responsible for the extinction of morals in our TV and radio contests, in the false reports about Laos and in the loss of foreign markets, manufacturing “problems,” but keeping the world in excitement, who has

“His radio Homers all day long

In over-Whitmanated song

That does not scan,

With adjectives laid end to end,

Extol the doughnut and commend

The Common Man.” (Stanza 16)

Here one can substitute bread, cosmetics, soap, cigarette and the false avoidance of the “ordinary.” Or the over-abuse of words like “best,” “mild,” “flavor,” and other terms.

This theme is developed in detail in the following stanzas, where Apollonians, with his “thinking man’s tastes” comes

“In fake Hermetic uniforms

Behind our battle-line, in swamps

That keep alighting.

His existentialists declare

That they are in complete despair

Yet go on writing.”

This naturally leads to revolts among students, among beatniks, among the dissatisfied generally, so

“By night our student Underground

At cocktail parties whisper round

From ear to ear;

Fat figures in the public eye

Collapse next morning, ambushed by

Some witty sneer.” (Stanza 23)

Or today by headlines in the newspaper or radio, mostly by the very confreres of the guilty parties, the Apollonian claiming credit for exposing other Apollonian. So Auden challenges this whole regime by stating:

“In our morale must lie our strength

So, that we may behold at length

Routed Apollo’s

Battalions melt away like fog,...

This, of course, usually does not happen. But he proposes in that stanza “the Hermetic Decalogue” which ends the poem.

The last four stanzas embody the negative commandments for the Hermetic “brotherhood.” They definitely set forth the two classes of persons proposed above, but separate them now by specific details. Here only the end of Stanza 26 and the beginning of Stanza 27 are repeated, because they are, in the universals or Jovetic sense, true of the present moment:

“... Thou shalt not sit

With statisticians nor commit

A social science.

“Thou shalt not be on friendly terms

With guys in advertising firms,...”

The present valor of Red China is one based on a system of pseudo-statistics already established by Apollonians in the West and so the liars are protected because the matrix of their methods has already been established by their worst foes, or, what has been put in forensic language **Teucer duce**. The social scientists do not have a fixed but have movable matrices and dialectic bases, herenow and this gives our very “enemies” opportunities which they would never have if the Hermetic people were in the saddle.

This comes to the low-high point in the advertising profession of the day as stated before. The rest of the poem is specific but not basic.

In speaking to two people who have known Auden they consider that he was almost our greatest esthete and greatest prophet—both in the Hermetic and Jovetic sense, and this poem is an example of it. In view of all the pseudo-news and exposures of the moment, it may be that “Under Which Lyre” will go down in history as a tremendous contribution of the day.

Under Which Lyre

A Reactionary Tract for the Times

(Phi Beta Kappa Poem, Harvard, 1946)

W. H. Auden

Ares at last has quit the field,

The bloodstains on the bushes yield

To seeping showers,

And in their convalescent state

The fractured towns associate

With summer flowers.
Encamped upon the college plain
Raw veterans already train
As freshman forces;
Instructors with sarcastic tongue
Shepherd the battle-weary young
Through basic courses.
Among bewildering appliances
For mastering the arts and sciences
They stroll or run,
And nerves that steeled themselves to slaughter
Are shot to pieces by the shorter
Poems of Donne.
Professors back from secret missions
Resume their proper eruditions,
Though some regret it;
They liked their dictaphones a lot,
They met some big wheels, and do not
Let you forget it.
But Zeus' inscrutable decree
Permits the will-to-disagree
To be pandemic,

Ordains that vaudeville shall preach

And every commencement speech

Be a polemic.

Let Ares doze, that other war

Is instantly declared once more

'Twixt those who follow

Precocious Hermes all the way

And those who without qualms obey

Pompous Apollo.

Brutal like all Olympic games,

Though fought with smiles and Christian names

And less dramatic,

This dialectic strife between

The civil gods is just as mean,

And more fanatic.

What high immortals do in mirth

Is life and death on Middle Earth;

Their a-historic

Antipathy forever gripes

All ages and somatic types,

The sophomoric

Who face the future's darkest hints

With giggles or with prairie squints

As stout as Cortez,

And those who like myself turn pale

As we approach with ragged sail

The fattening forties.

The sons of Hermes love to play

And only do their best when they

Are told they oughtn't;

Apollo's children never shrink

From boring jobs but have to think

Their work important.

Related by antithesis,

A compromise between us is

Impossible;

Respect perhaps but friendship never:

Falstaff the fool confronts forever

The prig Prince Hal.

If he would leave the self alone,

Apollo's welcome to the throne,

Fasces and falcons;

He loves to rule, has always done it;

The earth would soon, did Hermes run it,

Be like the Balkans.

But jealous of our god of dreams,

His common-sense in secret schemes

To rule the heart;

Unable to invent the lyre,

Creates with simulated fire

Official art.

And when he occupies a college,

Truth is replaced by Useful Knowledge;

He pays particular

Attention to Commercial Thought,

Public Relations, Hygiene, Sport,

In his curricula.

Athletic, extrovert and crude,

For him, to work in solitude

Is the offence,

The goal a populous Nirvana:

His shield bears this device: Mens sana

Qui mal y pense.

Today his arms, we must confess,

From Right to Left have met success,

His banners wave

From Yale to Princeton, and the news

From Broadway to the Book Reviews

Is very grave.

His radio Homers all day long

In over-Whitmanated song

That does not scan,

With adjectives laid end to end,

Extol the doughnut and commend

The Common Man.

His, too, each homely lyric thing

On sport or spousal love or spring

Or dogs or dusters,

Invented by some court-house bard

For recitation by the yard

In filibusters.

To him ascend the prize orations

And sets of fugal variations

On some folk-ballad,

While dietitians sacrifice

A glass of prune-juice or a nice

Marsh-mallow salad.

Charged with his compound of sensational

Sex plus some undenominational

Religious matter,

Enormous novels by co-eds

Rain down on our defenceless heads

Till our teeth chatter.

In fake Hermetic uniforms

Behind our battle-line, in swarms

That keep alighting,

His existentialists declare

That they are in complete despair,

Yet go on writing.

No matter; He shall be defied;

White Aphrodite is on our side:

What though his threat

To organize us grow more critical?

Zeus willing, we, the unpolitical,

Shall beat him yet.

Lone scholars, sniping from the walls

Of learned periodicals,

Our facts defend,

Our intellectual marines,

Landing in little magazines

Capture a trend.

By night our student Underground

At cocktail parties whisper round

From ear to ear;

Fat figures in the public eye

Collapse next morning, ambushed by

Some witty sneer.

In our morale must lie our strength:

So, that we may behold at length

Routed Apollo's

Battalions melt away like fog,

Keep well the Hermetic Decalogue,

Which runs as follows:

Thou shalt not do as the dean pleases,

Thou shalt not write thy doctor's thesis

On education,

Thou shalt not worship projects nor

Shalt thou or thine bow down before

Administration.

Thou shalt not answer questionnaires

Or quizzes upon World-Affairs,

Nor with compliance

Take any test. Thou shalt not sit

With statisticians nor commit

A social science.

Thou shalt not be on friendly terms

With guys in advertising firms,

Nor speak with such

As read the Bible for its prose,

Nor, above all, make love to those

Who wash too much.

Thou shalt not live within thy means

Nor on plain water and raw greens.

If thou must choose

Between the chances, choose the odd;

Read The New Yorker, trust in God;

And take short views.