

A Poet's Warning

by Adam Kirsch

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In a witty 1946 poem, W.H. Auden contrasted the way of "experts" with the Hermetic path of the trickster.

In June 1946, Harvard celebrated its long-awaited Victory Commencement. For the first time since the end of the Second World War, alumni and graduates gathered in Harvard Yard—so many of them that the exercises were moved to Tercentenary Theatre. The ceremony was inevitably a time for the University to take stock of all the changes the war had caused, and the even more profound changes that peace was about to bring.

Twenty-six thousand Harvard alumni had served in uniform during the war, and 649 of them had perished. The University itself had been integrated into the war effort at the highest level: President James Bryant Conant had been one of those consulted when President Truman decided to drop the atomic bomb on Japan. William Langer, a professor of history, had recruited many faculty members into the newly formed Office of Strategic Services, the precursor to the CIA. Now that the Cold War was under way, the partnership between the University and the federal government was destined to grow even closer.

As if to symbolize that intimacy, the 1946 Commencement saw honorary degrees awarded to the chiefs of the U.S. Army, Navy, Marines, and Air Force. More questionable was the choice of that year's Phi Beta Kappa orator: Byron Price, who had served as director of the federal Office of Censorship, in charge of monitoring press coverage of the war. Price used the occasion to deliver a rather ominous exhortation to "the man of letters," whom he accused, 10 months after the war ended, of still not doing enough for national morale. "How often," he asked, "shall the seeker find between these myriad covers an ounce of literary beauty, or a thimbleful of spiritual elevation? We are served a fare of dissoluteness and destruction. We are asked to sneer at man and regard him as no better than the worm. We are invited to improve

our minds by studying the endless sagas of criminals and harlots, moving in sordid surroundings, and worshiping only the flesh.”

It was against this backdrop of war and peace, and a university caught between them, that W.H. Auden, that year’s Phi Beta Kappa poet, got up to deliver his contribution to the festivities. If Auden was listening when Price issued his commissar-like advice to writers, he would have been revolted, but not surprised. In fact, his poem—“Under Which Lyre,” impishly subtitled “A Reactionary Tract for the Times”—was designed as a counterblast to Price’s brand of official uplift. In 174 witty, neatly rhymed lines, Auden set out his prescient vision of the challenges facing postwar America in general, and the postwar university in particular. Occasional poems usually fade pretty quickly, but even in 2007, the year of Auden’s centenary, “Under Which Lyre” remains one of his most charming and perceptive works.

Auden had officially become an American citizen just a few weeks before Commencement. He had been living in the United States since 1939, when he left his native England shortly before the outbreak of World War II. But this symbolic confirmation of his new nationality must have been on Auden’s mind when he wrote “Under Which Lyre,” a poem full of American references—from the *New Yorker* to Broadway to the “over-Whitmanated” style so popular with patriotic balladeers. In fact, the poem is Auden’s warning to his new fellow countrymen, and in particular, to the kind of worthies who would be found at a Harvard Commencement.

The poem begins by setting the scene, in language by turns colloquial and quaintly literary. “Ares at last has quit the field,” Auden proclaims, invoking the Greek god of war. Drawing on his memories of bombed-out Germany—which he had visited in 1945, as an analyst with the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey—he writes, “in their convalescent state/The fractured towns associate/With summer flowers.” He then turns to a less somber kind of postwar scene, one that his listeners at Harvard would have recognized with a laugh:

Encamped upon the college plain
Raw veterans already train
 As freshman forces;
Instructors with sarcastic tongue
Shepherd the battle-weary young
 Through basic courses.

Yet even as the College returns to its civilian pursuits and petty vanities—students struggling with the poems of Donne, “professors back from secret missions” bragging about their adventures

—Auden sees another kind of conflict taking shape. This is the war between the two sensibilities, the two social and spiritual visions, that Auden names Apollo and Hermes. Apollo, the Greek god of light and music, becomes for Auden “pompous Apollo,” the patron saint of “official art.” Against him, Auden sets Hermes, the trickster god, protector of thieves and liars, who is “precocious” and undisciplined. Both of these gods can make a kind of music, but Auden asks the reader to decide “under which lyre” he will take his stand.

The comedy of the poem, and its prescience, lies in Auden’s description of Apollo, the presiding spirit of what he calls “the fattening forties.” The danger to postwar America, the poet suggests, lies in the soft tyranny of institutions, authorities, and experts—of people who know what’s best for you and don’t hesitate to make sure you know it, too. Auden gives a wonderful catalog of the things these Apollonians want to impose: colleges where “Truth is replaced by Useful Knowledge,” with courses on “Public Relations, Hygiene, Sport”; poems that “Extol the doughnut and commend/The Common Man” (did Byron Price flinch at those lines?); even processed foods: “a glass of prune juice or a nice/Marsh-mallow salad.” In short, Auden is already predicting the dullest, most conformist aspects of American life in the Cold War years, the kind of prosperous mediocrity that gave the 1950s a bad name.

But if it’s impossible to dislodge Apollo from his throne, Auden suggests, you can still follow Hermes in private. That is why the last stanzas of “Under Which Lyre” offer a “Hermetic Decalogue,” a set of commandments for free spirits who refuse to fall into line:

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.

This advice is half-joking, but only half. For Auden is reminding his Harvard audience that all the official apparatus of the university is extraneous to its highest purpose, which is to cultivate freedom and inwardness. It is a message that still needs to be heard today, when

the expense of higher education forces so many students to look at it as an investment, rather than an adventure.

Auden knows that, if everyone lived by the Hermetic Decalogue all the time, the world would grind to a halt. “The earth would soon, did Hermes run it,/Be like the Balkans,” he ruefully acknowledges. A society run by Hermes would be a disaster; but a society without any followers of Hermes in it would be a nightmare. That message makes “Under Which Lyre” a truly American poem, in the tradition of Emerson and Whitman and Twain, all of them defenders of the individual against the collective. The continued life of Auden’s Phi Beta Kappa poem is a reminder that, when the generals and censors and other powers of the earth are forgotten, it is the mere poet who remains.

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