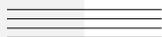


H E R M E S , M A S T E R O F
T H E R O A D S



B O N N I E C O S T E L L O

During a stay in Padua, Italy, at the end of June, I witnessed a centuries-old annual ritual in the main square. Graduation in Padua is carnivalesque, at least for those receiving advanced degrees, and involves a lot of high-spirited humiliation of the new master or doctor. Friends and family of the new graduate prepare a *papiro*, or scroll, a poetic narrative of the graduate's life. But this is no eulogy, no catalogue of the young person's accomplishments and promising future. Quite the opposite. It's a bawdy narrative with scandalous illustrations that begins with the graduate's conception and recounts in burlesque detail a variety of childhood, adolescent, and college misadventures up to the present. After a formal and solemn public thesis defense, the young person is marched to the town square, often dressed in little more than a diaper or some obscene, flesh-colored suit with exaggerated body parts, and required to read the scroll aloud, offering embellishments. The text of the scroll (according to the linguist Noelle J. Mole) is a mixture of English, standard Italian, and Veneto dialect, so that the inductee inevitably trips up and is subject to further mockery and festive punishment. Liquids – the slimy, the potable, and the intoxicating – are abundantly applied to or hurled at the

graduate. The scroll is posted on a wall in the square for all to see. Finally the initiate is paraded out to a chorus singing a slogan that I will not repeat here, even in Italian. You can go to YouTube if you want more information.

It's hilarious, Dionysian fun, but what is it all about? I'm no ethnographer, but it seems to me there are two messages in this tradition, and they are related: First, You are not a god. Your head is attached to a body. And now that you have passed all your tests and performed all the official tasks, you should let your riotous side out. And second, You have been in the ivory tower, but now you must come out into the town square. You are still part of ordinary life and the ordinary people who raised you. You must rejoin the community, not just as a "leader" who owes "service," but also as someone sharing the limits and impulses and language of the people.

The poet W. H. Auden never observed this ceremony, so far as I know, but he shared these values and would have appreciated the spirit of the event. The high achiever, Auden knew, can become addicted to approval and thus overly cautious intellectually; he or she can mistake official knowledge for truth, conventionality for wisdom, mastery of forms for superiority of mind. But we harbor an imp that troubles our vanity, thumbs its nose at authority, and prods our intellect. For Auden, traveler and cosmopolitan, it is less Dionysus than Hermes, the one who sheltered and reared Dionysus when Hera was after him, who presides over the future. Hermes is on the move; he is "master of the roads."

When Auden was invited to deliver an address at an elite university's Phi Beta Kappa Literary Exercises, he brought along his imp and played Falstaff to all the newly crowned Prince Hals. In 1946 Auden was, after T. S. Eliot, the most celebrated poet in the English language. But it's unlikely that the dons at Oxford twenty years earlier would have bet on his career. He had spent most of his university days avoiding his academic responsibilities and had performed unimpressively on exams. He was not a slacker, though he followed the Lord of Misrule as ardently as any other undergraduate. But his young mind was mercurial and passionate, full of unrealistic notions discarded as quickly as they were embraced, all feeding his vitality, which he poured into poetry. He read recklessly and without a plan, not according to the syllabus. The

mature Auden wrote some of the most memorable public poetry of the twentieth century – his “September 1, 1939,” written on Britain’s entry into World War II, for instance, was frequently quoted after the attack on the World Trade Center:

Our world in stupor lies;
 Yet, dotted everywhere,
 Ironic points of light
 Flash out wherever the Just
 Exchange their messages.

But precisely because he was so good at public speaking and could so easily “have the audience roaring,” he was wary of the demagogue within and liked to let the imp loose, salting his oratory with comic skepticism.

Auden hadn’t managed to learn Greek in college, but he loved the classics, and invoked Greek gods for Greek honors. But to which god should he express obeisance? “Under Which Lyre” is the title of the poem he wrote for Harvard’s Phi Beta Kappa ceremony, and the first god Auden evokes in it is Ares, lord of war. When a nation is at war all other considerations are secondary, of course; but the year is 1946 – Ares has “quit the field,” and there’s room again for wit, and in particular for the mock-heroic. The G.I.s are coming home and flooding the universities, where they have to wage a different kind of battle: “nerves that never flinched at slaughter / Are shot to pieces by the shorter / Poems of Donne.” (John Donne was a favorite of New Critics and close readers teaching students on the G.I. Bill.) Auden turns for a moment to the faculty in their regalia, those petty tyrants back from their war-time consultancies, and exposes their vanity:

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 after this introduction concerning the postwar resumption of academic life, Auden turns to his real subject: What divinity shall govern our lives now the war is over, Apollo or Hermes? Both are

associated with oratory and with the lyre of poetry. The real battle on campus, says Auden, is “Twixt those who follow / Precocious Hermes all the way / And those who without qualms obey / Pompous Apollo.” Obviously, given his adjectives, Auden is with Hermes “all the way.” “A compromise” he says, is “impossible.” But of course his poem, neatly rhymed and metered, consistent in its dualistic logic but swift in its change of focus and inventive in its scope, is a testament to their cooperation.

In Auden’s polemic, Apollo is the conventional and sober spirit, his followers fond of approval and addicted to order; they are the ultimate bureaucrats. To extrapolate: they go to the gym at least three times a week, and weeknights they are in bed by midnight. Hermes is the inventive and unruly one, a bit bored by ceremony and prone to subversive and ludic behavior, to “hard liquor, horseplay and noise,” as Auden would describe it in the journey poem “Atlantis.” He hates the gym, but he’s not the least bit lazy; when he cuts class you might find him rock climbing in New Hampshire. “The sons of Hermes love to play, / And only do their best when they / Are told they oughtn’t.” Auden knows of course that no one gets a Phi Beta Kappa key without following Apollo much of the time; but it’s precisely for that reason that he makes his case for Hermes. Now, Hermes is no angel. In fact he’s a thief; he stole cattle from Apollo’s ranch, but he also invented the lyre and gave it to Apollo in reparation. We might think of Apollo as a CEO of a blue chip company, but Hermes is the god of exchange, a patron saint of merchants, the angel of the start-up. He doesn’t hoard his capital; he reinvests. Apollo may be the dean of public relations, but Hermes would win the grand prize at the film festival. No matter what you majored in, Apollo and Hermes were partners, if often feuding partners, in the enterprise of education.

Apollo: god of reason, order, music, healing; the sun god, and hence the god of reality, of truth – a certain kind of truth at least. How could we not worship him? Without Apollo there would be no institutions, no laws, no cities. Our nation’s president is certainly on the side of Apollo, as he should be. But for Auden in 1946 the memory of many false Apollos, those who had chosen for emblems “Fasces and falcons,” was strong – their obsession with order and insistence on obedience had caused a great disorder. A brighter, more democratic Apollo was shining again: “Today his

arms, we must confess / From Right to Left have met success, / His banners wave.” But risks remain, subtler risks of a society that has returned to the business of educating the young: for if Apollo is a provost, governing and coordinating the affairs of the university, he can have a detrimental effect on learning. His voice is loud and clear in op-ed pages these days, where liberal arts and especially the humanities are called frivolous luxuries, where the answer to the genuine crisis of college costs is to connect the plan of study to the first job – forget philosophy, major in IT or accounting. Frank Bruni’s 2012 *New York Times* piece “The Imperiled Promise of College” advocated just that. But Auden warns, “when he [Apollo] occupies a college, / Truth is replaced by Useful Knowledge.” This is polemics, of course. We do want to know what our English major is good for. So Dean Apollo writes those reassuring memos that say: *More and more often, businesses that are technical or scientific in nature are looking for people who can read, write, and think analytically and creatively. The skills you gain as an English major – problem-solving, effective written and oral communications, argumentation, analysis, interpretation, research – will be a valuable set of strengths in any profession.* And it’s all true. In fact I looked up Frank Bruni, the successful *New York Times* journalist – and guess what: he was an English major.

Now even Auden admits that a society as a whole can’t live under the lyre of Hermes – Hermes, the dreamer: “The earth would soon, did Hermes run it, / Be like the Balkans,” that is, choppy, pluralistic, chaotic. But Apollo has a tendency to be a bit authoritarian, not to say totalitarian, and Auden wants to make sure there’s a place for Hermes in the university and in society. Because without Hermes societies grow arrogant, rigid, and dull. Apollo preaches that our global competitiveness depends more and more on high-order skills, and he will test us on them, from MCATs to LSATs – but we will also need Hermes’ swiftness, his cross-over mentality, his connectivity.

Hermes is more obscure than Apollo and has less power: he is the messenger god, the god of liminality, who brought Psyche up to Olympus; he is the god of travel, of merchants, and also the god of thieves – thus a god of change. He is certainly the god of the Internet and social media, though Apollo tries his best to control

it. When you are in a rut, Hermes is the one to follow. He doesn't dig in his heels; there are wings on his shoes. Now the university is anchored in the value of reasoning, not of dreaming. We can hope that our reasoning ability has been sharpened and focused during our years of study, and that those skills will make us excellent stewards of the society that sent us to school. But I think Bernard Shaw in *Man and Superman* was taking a page from Hermes when he wrote: "Reasonable people adapt themselves to the world. Unreasonable people attempt to adapt the world to themselves. All progress, therefore, depends on unreasonable people." And I don't think Shaw had in mind anything like the current obsession with "creativity" which Apollo has appropriated into a regulated field of study and practice.

A conversation I recently overheard: "Poetry doesn't matter, it's so marginal," says the historian. Poet replies: "Ah, but all the really interesting things happen on the margin." Apollo is the official god of poetry, assuring its musical harmonies, but Hermes is the god of dreams, and the one who gives poetry its strangeness, its subversive quality. "Aphrodite is on our side," says Auden to the acolytes of Hermes. There are of course "fake Hermes," and many a Hermes becomes an Apollo once he or she gets a taste of success (think of Steve Jobs). Auden at Harvard knows his audience, but he is not just playing devil's advocate when he closes, with a new Hermetic decalogue.

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.

The moral I draw from Auden: always keep a little statue of Hermes in your pocket; he will keep you nimble. Hermes the dreamer, the traveler, the appropriator, who goes on his nerve – the enabler of change and exchange, the one who keeps our minds and our societies from becoming too regimented, stuffy, or stuck up. He is active wherever swift and sudden change is in the air, wherever old ideas are appropriated and applied to something new,

wherever the stakes are high and the odds long. When you need to cross boundaries, he is your god; he's a good business partner for anyone who wants to grow in this twenty-first century of constant mobility.

Most of our official learning takes place in the temple of Apollo, but he sends blessings from Hermes, master of the road.

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