[Under Which Lyre](https://allpoetry.com/Under-Which-Lyre) (A Reactionary Tract for the Times)

W.H. Auden (read by the author [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZE_bhSUgG8))[[1]](#footnote-1)

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.

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1. Read by the author before Harvard’s Phi Beta Kappa club in 1946. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)