

VOCATION AND SOCIETY

W. H. Auden

6

Soon after the opening of the Second Act of The Magic Flute, Tamino and Papageno find themselves alone in a ruined temple in the middle of the night ~~during a thunderstorm~~ during a thunderstorm. Two priests enter, and the following conversation ensues.

First Pr. - "What urges you to penetrate within ~~these~~ ^{our} walls?"

Tam. - "~~Kiss~~ Friendship and love."

First Pr. - "Are you ready to risk your life for them?"

Tam. - "I am."

First Pr. - "Even though death should be your Fate?"

Tam. - "Yes."

Second Pr. (to Papageno) - "Will you also fight for the love of acquiring wisdom?"

Pap. - "Fighting is not my business; what's more, I've no longing for wisdom. I'm an ordinary sort of chap, satisfied if I can eat, drink and sleep - and, of course, if I could some day put my hand on a pretty little sweetheart" -

Second Pr. - "She shall never be yours unless you submit to our trials."

Pap. - "What are these trials?"

Second Pr. - "You must submit to all our commands and show no fear, not even of death."

Pap. - "I'll stay single."

Second Pr. - "Even if you should win a pretty and virtuous sweetheart?"

Pap. - "I'll stay single"

Tamino, as a hero very properly should, braves the trials of fire and water, attains wisdom, and wins the hand of the Princess Pamina. Of course, in that foreshortening which is at once the charm and the danger of Art, the trials are over in the twinkling of an eye, whereas in life, not only do they last for ever, but also they are, not antecedent to, but co-terminous with marriage. Still, the moral is clear and familiar: he is blessed because he has risked everything, even complete failure.

What is more surprising, perhaps, is that, after all, Papageno also gets his girl. Why? Because he is shameless, honest, selfish and himself, because he is willing to give her up rather than lose his life. The gods smile and Papageno is blessed. Wisdom he may not have, but he is granted his double, his Papagena, his happiness, and they both live, increase and multiply ever after in a naive unity with Nature, the beloved children of Eros in whom he is well pleased.

For Tamino and Papageno have two things in common. Firstly, Passion. Papageno has a passion for being immediately alive, even if that means remaining a bachelor. We may see that his motions of boasting, hunger, terror, delight, are conditioned by objects outside himself, but to him, just because he is conscious of nothing beyond the immediate moment, there is no distinction between object and subject, a lion and a feeling of fear. Like, all children, he can speak of himself in the third person.

Tamino, on the other hand, has had a vision; he has seen Pamina's picture. From that moment on, his life is dedicated to passibility, to becoming worthy of her: he must look for her, whether he find her or not, whether he succeed in marrying her or not. He has a vocation.

Secondly, ~~and because~~ because they both have Passion, both are willing to suffer, Tamino positively by risking his life in undergoing the ordeal, Papageno negatively by renouncing his wish for a sweetheart.

To all of us the gods offer a similar choice between two kinds of existence, between remaining Papageno the lowbrow, and becoming Tamino the highbrow. What they permit to none of us, is to be a middlebrow, that is, to exist without passion and without a willingness to suffer. For the middlebrow wishes to have his cake and eat it. He is not willing to be nobody in particular, married to a vulgar little baggage like Papagena; on the other hand, he does not wish to ~~become~~ become wise, only to be wise, to graduate cum laude. So, when he is asked if he is prepared to risk the ordeal, he shouts 'of course' and strikes a noble attitude, while thinking

(3)

to himself: "All this talk about suffering is old-fashioned rubbish. I'm smart and modern. I'll take the trial by correspondence, or buy a bottle of aspirin at the drug-store and feel nothing. After all, what are college professors and scientists for?"

We are all born lowbrows and, in so far as we are physical organisms that can only function under certain physical conditions, we remain so.

Sleeping, eating, fighting physical dangers and obstacles, in all our immediate existence, that is, we are Papagenos, for in the immediate we are not conscious of a definite self separated from the rest of reality, and the word selfish, therefore, has no meaning. Like the trolls in Peer Gynt, we are sufficient to ourselves.

Once, however, we wake into self-consciousness, when the division between objective and subjective becomes apparent, either we discover within ^{ourselves} us a subjective passion for becoming, or we freeze into that passionless Great Boyg of self-love where "Backward or forward, it's just as far. Out or in, the way's as narrow." For, in the conscious individual, passion can no longer be concerned with immediate being and the actual, only with becoming and the possible. Moreover, this change is a real mutation. There is no turning back. If we take the first step, we must take the last.

Once woken, Papageno must either go forward like Tamino, or degenerate into Monostatos or Caliban.

This mutation into consciousness is beautifully described in the myth of Cupid and Psyche. As long as Psyche does not know who her immortal lover is, he is immediately there, but the moment she sees him, he vanishes, and her life becomes a search, a dedication to the possible. What happens when the flash of vision fails to arouse passion, is described in another tale, Hans Anderson's The Snow Queen.

"Kay and Gerda sat and looked at the picture book of beasts and birds. Then it was, while the clock was just striking five on the church tower that Kay said: "Oh, something struck my heart and pierced me in the eye." The little girl fell upon his neck; he blinked his eyes. No, there was nothing at all to be seen.

"I think it is gone," said he; but it was not gone. It was just one of those glass fragments which sprang from the mirror - the magic mirror that we remember well, the ugly glass that made everything great and good which was mirrored in it seem small and mean, but in which the mean and wicked things were brought out in relief, and every fault was noticeable at once. Poor little Kay had also received a splinter just in his heart, and that will now soon become like a lump of ice. It did not hurt him now, but the splinter was still there.

"Why do you cry?", he asked. "You look ugly like that. There's nothing the matter with me. O fie, that rose is worm-eaten and this one is quite crooked. After all, they're ugly roses. They're like the box on which they stand." And then he kicked the box with his foot and tore the roses off.

A vocation, then, is, if I may borrow a term from Professor Koehler, a state of "subjective requiredness", requiredness because it is indifferent to calculation of success or failure, and subjective because it is concerned with possibility; objective requiredness only concerns its How, never its Why. Moreover to acknowledge a vocation is, like marriage, to take a vow, to ~~live henceforth~~ live henceforth by grace of the Absurd, to love for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part.

No one can hope to have a vocation, in fact, if he makes a private reservation that, should circumstances alter, he can get divorced.

For this reason Vocational Guidance is a contradiction in terms. The only reasons another can give me why I should adopt this career rather than that are that I should be more successful or happier or it pays better, but such matters are precisely what I must not think about if I am really to find my vocation. If I say, "Miss So-and-So is a nice girl. A bit homely, ~~but~~ unfortunately, but she's rich and in love with me. I might as well marry her", it may show my common sense, but it certainly shows that I am not in love.

There are two, and only two, possible kinds of large-scale differentiated society that can function: a static society in which each member has a fixed occupation and a fixed social status, based on the belief that requiredness is, for all except a small minority, objective; and a dynamic democratic society, based on the belief that, for all except a small minority, requiredness can be subjective, that all men are equal, not in their

gifts, which they plainly are not, but in their common capacity each to recognise his peculiar vocation.*

Note *. The historical relation between Vocation and Democracy as an unconditional ideal rather than, like the Greek Polis, an epiphenomenon of exceptional geographical conditions, is, I think, fairly clear. In the Middle Ages society as a whole was of the fixed status type, but there was one career, that of the priest, which was recognised as a vocation, and, in consequence, the Church was a democratic institution in the sense that anyone, irrespective of his social origin could enter it with the possibility of rising to a high position. The breaking down of the feudal concept of status at the Reformation, the new possibility for the ~~virtuous~~ virtuous apprentice to marry the Master's daughter was, as Max Weber has pointed out, intimately related to the Lutheran doctrine that a '~~worldly~~' 'worldly' occupation also could and should be regarded as a Beruf. Nor is it an accident, I think, that the social group which has, so far, both in its religious and its social life, the most obviously democratic ~~character~~ is precisely the one which has consciously based itself upon a belief in the Inner Light, the Society of Friends.

In theory, either of these kinds of society is possible. What is quite impossible is a dynamic democracy based upon a trust in objective requiredness, in the effectiveness of ~~any~~ such stimuli as happiness, success, utility, avoidance of pain, or any other of those things in which astrologers, psychoanalysts, and advertising agents believe. Such a democracy is without passion and must inevitably dissolve into an amorphous abstraction called the General Public in which everyone is, as Kierkegaard says, 'like the interjection, without influence on the sentence, and at the very most takes a case, eg O me miserum, and the politicians are like the Greek reciprocals ($\alpha\lambda\lambda\eta\lambda\omicron\iota\nu$) which are wanting in the nominative singular and all subjective cases, and can only be thought of in the plural and possessive cases'.

In consequence we are now faced with a large, powerful, and ruthless body of people who believe that a democratic society is impossible.

On one point Hitler is right, and his success is largely due to his insight that, without passion, there can be today, not only no democracy, but no society at all. In the struggle with Fascism it is becoming clearer

(6)

daily that (a) in a technical industrialised ~~society~~ a static society of innocent little Papagenos is no longer possible, and (b) ~~if the expansion necessary~~ under an economy of abundance where Nature no longer acts as a stimulus, if the passion necessary to make society function must be aroused from ~~without~~ without, then it must be stimulated artificially; a Pseudo-Nature of imaginary objective dangers, Jews, plutocrats, communists, foreigners, must be consciously manufactured by the State which in the end, of course must provide real ones, the Police and finally War.

It is a disquieting but necessary ^ereflection that two of the fascist assertions, that a society without passion does not function but breaks down into economic chaos and class-war, and that, under the external stimulus of war, a society will function, have been proved correct.

We have, therefore, not only to defeat our enemies in the field, but, ^{to} disprove, which we have not yet done, their third assertion that there is no alternative that war is the natural state of an industrialised society, by proving that a peaceful society can function under modern conditions.

For those of us who are concerned with education, this means that our first ~~major~~ problem is what, if anything, can we do, to make a sense of vocation the normal instead of the exceptional thing.

In a static society, the rôle of education is clear and positive; — to ^uequip the young with whatever skills are necessary to exercise their occupation, the nature of which is already decided upon by ~~their~~ the accident of their birth. In a fascist society, or in any society at war, education has a similar positive rôle, to ^{teach} techniques for such occupations as the State shall require, and to indoctrinate the proper passion. But in a peaceful democratic society, this is not so, and if our educational theory and practise are in the mess that they are, we have at least the excuse that ^{our} ~~are~~ problems are much more complex and subtle..

The negative objection of progressives to traditional education, namely, that it stunted individual growth by forcing children into moulds for which

their natures were unsuited, was, in the main, sound. But they then proceeded to assume that the way to help a child to discover its vocation was to remove every obstacle, to make ~~life~~ its life as easy as possible. But passion is never aroused by ease, only by obstacles. The defect in traditional education was, not that it failed to arouse passion, but that this, in too many cases, was the passion of rebellion, and rebellion is not a vocation, ie, subjective, being only the mirror image of that against which it rebels. Baudelaire's classic expression of romantic revolt: "When I have succeeded in inspiring universal horror and disgust, I shall have conquered solitude", betrays a refusal to accept solitude which is essentially no different from that of the Rotarian or Fraternity Boy.

If the traditionalists caused the child to stumble by putting up a barbed wire fence, the progressives have equally sinned against him by greasing the floor. The former may have been a savage old battle-axe who thundered, "Boys, be pure in heart or I will flog you till you are", but the latter is a hygienic cocotte, a Carmen in cellophane who sings of a Never-Never Land where there is neither suffering nor requiredness, only the vital expressive self.

Le ciel ouvert, la vie errante,
 Pour pays l'univers,
 Et pour loi sa volonté,
 Et surtout la chose enivrante,
 La liberté.

And that affair, as our little Don José's presently discover, starts out Hans Anderson but ends Grimm.

Whether they define it in terms of authority and obedience, or of mutual interest and affection, both traditionalists and progressives share a common assumption that there should be a direct relation between teacher and pupil. I believe this to be false. I am certain, too, that it implies on the teachers' part, which the traditionalist would admit, that he is essentially superior to the pupil he claims the right to assist.

"We are all here on earth to help others; what on earth the others are here for I don't know."

Being one myself, I glance from time to time at a journal put out for the benefit of ~~English~~ teachers of English Literature, and what do I find? Article after article on such topics as 'How to make Dickens appeal to 12+ boys from the Bronx' or 'Poetry and the Maladjusted Girl'. Why this incessant emphasis, not on our subject, but on our relationship to our pupils? Is it not because, as a group, we English teachers have no personal passion for literature or for teaching ourselves through literature?

Since we can offer no practical financial advantages for getting an A in English, except to other budding English teachers, our only assurance of our importance becomes the popularity of our courses. We become, in fact, the showmen of a parade of cultural Powers Models: "Melville would look beautiful on Modom. The young lady would feel provocative in Proust".

It is hardly surprising, then, if we get the students we deserve, the debutante, the yearner, the woolly-minded, the domestic servant intellect.

Let not the science teacher, however, thank God that he is not as we are. We, at least have one advantage over ~~them~~^{him}: we are found out sooner, so that we do less harm to less valuable material. A student majors in Literature. Nothing happens. He is undeceived. A student majors in Physics. Nothing happens either. But he has learned to determine the co-efficient of expansion of brass and so gets a good job in industry. Accordingly he can go through ~~his~~ his life without realising that he is without passion, one of those trimmers in the Inferno of whom Virgil says: "Mercy and Justice disdains them; let us not speak of them; but look and pass."

Can any of us, whatever ^{his} our field of learning, read ~~and~~ this passage from Nietzsche without a red face?

"Science has to-day absolutely no belief in itself, let alone in an ideal superior to itself, and wherever Science still consists of passion, love, ardour, suffering, it is not the opposition to the ascetic ideal, but rather the incarnation of its latest and noblest form... The fact of its having contented workers is absolutely no proof of science as a whole having to-day one end, one will, one passion for a great faith. When ~~Science~~ it is not the latest manifestation of the ascetic ideal, Science is a hiding-place for every kind of cowardice, disbelief, remorse, despectio sui, bad conscience - it is the very anxiety that springs from having no ideal, the suffering from the lack of a great love, the discontent with an

circling this road is our pain renewed: I say pain and ought to say solace^u, can help them to risk that dread, that loss.

Moreover it is only thus that we shall be able to restrain our natural lust for power and approval, to exhibit in our relation to our pupils that careful indifference, that conscious refusal to help, (which is, of course, only genuine in the degree to which we wish to help, in the degree to which ^{refused} it causes us suffering), which is, I believe the proper educational obstacle to arouse subjective passion. The gifts of the Spirit are not to be had at second hand, and until a child has discovered his vocation, it is neither the traditional birch nor the progressive lollipop that we should offer him, but a vacuum. Once he finds it, he is no longer a pupil but a colleague who teaches as much as he learns, and who knows that every human relationship, in work, play, or love, is a marriage of two solitudes.

Why, in the last analysis, do we think it essential to abolish poverty, ignorance, disease, tyranny, if not because we know that these external sufferings deafen men to the voice of subjective requiredness? If we imagine or allow others to imagine that we are thereby abolishing suffering itself, that there will no longer be a command before which a man must walk in fear and trembling, then we are middlebrows and the truth is not in us.

What, after all, is a Democracy but a society in which each individual has the right to choose his suffering and be tormented by his own Either-Or? And is not the only freedom for which it is worth dying, the freedom to risk failure continually for the sake of a Pamina, of whom we have only seen a picture?

It would be dishonest of me to conceal my conviction that the notion of subjective requiredness presupposes a belief that man is born in sin but may be saved by the Grace of God, but it would be presumptuous of me to pretend that I speak here with any authority.

So, to modify slightly a statement of E.M. Forster's: "Two cheers for Democracy: one because it admits vocation, and two because it permits contrition. Two cheers are quite enough. There is no occasion to give

three. Only Agapé, the Beloved Republic, deserves that".

And concerning that republic, I cannot conclude more fittingly than with the closing lines ^{from} of the most recent poem of the greatest poet now living, one in whom America and England may both rejoice, one whose personal and professional example are to every other and lesser writer at once an inspiration and a reproach, Mr. T.S. Eliot.

With the ^{drawing} ~~drawing~~ of this Love and the voice of this Calling

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that, which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always -
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are infolded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one."
