

# A VAIN THING

## THE WORSHIP OF APOLLO

Apollo is the god of young manhood in the Greek Pantheon. He is associated with the sun, gloriously handsome, notoriously bisexual, musical, and physically athletic; he is also active in the dimension of medicine. Like all idols, he embodies things which are present in humanity, and exalts them to the divine level, that is, offers them as objects of worship. It occurs to me that we could interpret much exercise of apparent virtue in our own age as the sustaining of the Apollonian faith rather than the Christian.

### **The Cult of the Body**

*The refusal to respect the body*, in many forms, produces ugly instances of perversion and damage. The body has ways of rebelling when it is not given the attention and honour it deserves. However, the tendency to *identify* the person with the body seems to me to be quite as dangerous; after all, there are things about the body which are far from positive in their effect on human existence. One could instance the tendency of the body to break down and die, its capacity to fail at what we rely on it to perform. Most people have to come to terms, sooner or later, with the fact that their body is far from an obedient servant. Apollonians will soon see what I mean if they find a category which matters to them among the following:

*The Athlete* applies to him-/herself huge discipline which often evokes not only the outward similarity, but also the language, of religion: we speak of *devotion*, *commitment*, *sacrifice*; we hear with equanimity of the early rising for *training* (which the Greeks would call *ascesis*) in a spirit which has lent its name to Christian penance; we eventually talk easily of sport conferring *glory* or *apotheosis*, and we recognise *faithfulness* (in the fans) which frequently seems paradigmed on religious models. Lying behind all this is a demand for selflessness, and frequently for isolation, and for a spiritual grasp which grounds the body's transcendental power (the breaking of records, the achievement of "personal best") and a kind of definitive victory over self and others (being the world champion, etcetera) which can take a place in the personality which is almost identical to the place religion might hold.

*The Musician* - and one might include artists of many kinds - gives over spiritual and physical resources to the art (consider such people as ballet-dancers). The sacrifice of huge amounts of time for practice is clearly in the name of a kind of *communion* between performer and composer: Glenn Gould used to believe, and John Lill still does, that great

composers were present at his side in concerts. The actual performance before an audience can completely take over an artist - whether the performance demands a transference of personality, like that of an actor, or the almost religious ritual of an orchestral concert. Many soloists appear to be "out of the body" or alone with their music in the midst of a hushed crowd, and when the lights come up and the audience applauds, they seem to take some time to "re-awaken" to the ordinary world. Surely this experience of transcendence, whilst open to religiously orthodox forms, can also be a solipsistic experience (*solipsism - the belief that only I exist*) which *is* based in a closed internal world. Can sensitive musicians or artists assume that they have entered into the reality of their life? *Body-builders* may have accepted the total identity between themselves and their physical bodies. The sight of people giving over hours of their time to boringly repetitive physical jerks and gratuitous weight-lifting of the most unproductive quality, followed by lengthy contemplation of the effects in full-length mirrors is certainly suggestive of Apollonian obsession with the body. The implication is that they are "improving" their natural assets: it is questionable whether this means "making better something that is already good" or "repairing something which I strongly feel to be falling short" People who spend vast sums on plastic surgery to alter the state of their bodies are similarly questionable. The notion that a long, painful, expensive operation to alter the shape of my nose is what I have always wanted/needed/deserved indicates a sensitivity to external appearance - almost always unshared by onlookers - that may seriously have missed the point.

*Fashion-followers and the customers of beauticians* would also appear to be following an Apollonian plan. Do they believe that in each plain person there is a beautiful one struggling to get out? Or are they assuming that a plain person *has* got out, on there has to be a concealment-job before the world can be confronted? A fully-committed clothes-horse - especially one who buys new - is committing huge resources to external cladding. Which may not, in fact, reflect the truth of the person adorned.

*High achievers and swots* are likely to have more than a vein of Apollo in their make-up. What drives a person to go for a First at Cambridge followed by an astronomical career in American universities? How does the chemistry work? (Parental pressure? Personal ambition? Fanatic search for security, influence, or money?) Certainly there's an assumption that a distinguished academic career can be identified with personal goodness and value. This does not always follow.

*Saints* represent another field for Apollonian motivation. The programme, inspired by an obsessive self-image, is that of adopting unimpeachable moral stands on everything, so that no-one can assail the devotee from outside. The urge to make oneself unaccusable is a pretty hopeless prospect, but certainly fuels a good deal of effort in the world. Most of us

may fear the real person seeping through the paper bag of deception and eventually spilling out in the sight of everyone. But some saintly characters may deceive most of the people most of the time. The *American telly-evangelist* is quite a good example of Apollonianism, since America is the great capital site for many of the above categories. Every religion needs its high-priests, and the American dream-machine is good at producing such.

You can see that some Apollonians do not fool anyone; but some quite respectable effects can be created, according to the degree of commitment offered by the worshipper. Apollo can take you a hell of a long way towards “the laying-down of your life”, in that there are so many human occupations which cost their devotees nearly everything. In the post-modern world this lends to even some very silly ways of life the ultimate sanction of being *what I most want to do*.

### **Questions**

We could consider the effectiveness of Apollonian inspiration for the fuelling of careers in the armed forces, politics, etc, etc. You could also consider to what extent your own deepest motives spring from the desire for the approval of yourself and of others. Christian motives for living well - involving an acceptance of the Creator’s will - should look profoundly different from Apollonian ones. But do they differ precisely in their inclusion of unappealing features - such as self-denial, humility, acceptance of authority, obedience - the very things that make Christianity hard to sell in the modern world?