

The Golden Banana Skin

In J.G. Frazer's great work on mythology, *The Golden Bough*, he follows the oldest stories in the book back to their roots in the oral tradition and finds, amid the prototype plots and archetypal characters, the origins of narrative as we know it.

In this paper, *The Golden Banana Skin*, I would like to try the same thing on a smaller scale; to look for the beginnings of comedy. Its etymological root is Komos, the Greek God of drunken frolics, cup-bearer to Dionysus. Also found close to the source of fun is Thalia, the Muse of comedy, to whom the writers and performers on the earliest circuits owed their punchlines and their comic pauses. Can we see them as a primitive double act, Komos and Thalia? Originally booked for spring rites and fertility rituals, are they still funny today?

Under this banana tree, then, we start digging for clues to the first slip-ups. Perhaps the earliest signposts, the first visual pointers to a place of humour, are the masks of classical drama; comedy and tragedy, that matching pair. They seem to celebrate the birth of twins, a dialectical moment at the origin of laughter and tears, joy and despair. Dig a little deeper, though, and we find that 'comedy is not merely older than tragedy but older by hundreds, perhaps by thousands, of years' (Dover; 1972; 218-219).

In his book *Aristophanic Comedy*, K.J. Dover says: 'What the Greeks regarded as the beginning of [Attic] comedy will [...] simply be the year in which the names of people who composed humorous drama for performance at the City Dionysia began to be included in the records of the festival, in consequence of which it became customary for those poets to put into circulation written copies of what they had composed. Before that date comedy will have been, as Aristotle put it, 'improvised.'" (Dover; 1972; 219). Beneath those mulchy layers of early comic scripts we find the pre-literate history of humour, whose evidence is in pictures on the broken pottery of earlier civilization. And this is where the fun really starts:

A Corinthian vase of the sixth century BC seems to show men with 'abnormally large genitals'. If, as historians suspect, this depicts comic actors rather than a scene from real life, 'the vase gives us direct evidence of comic drama at Corinth a hundred years before the inclusion of comedy in the City Dionysia at Athens' (Dover; 1972; 220).

An earlier jar still shows men in a Phallic Procession. Wearing red leather phalluses, riding on phallic poles, carrying enormous phalluses between them; it's their footprints we're following back to the beginnings of comedy. Roger Dunkle says in *The Origins of Comedy* 'Aristotle has his theory... but he is most likely doing no more than giving an educated guess. His evidence probably was not much more reliable than what is available to us today' (Dunkle; (n.d.); 1).

The paintings on vases and jars show these men in costumes padded to give a rotund appearance. The roly-poly comedians of ancient Greece would have processed through the countryside to Dionysiac cult centres, shouting obscenities on their way to make sacrifices to gods. Semonides records how the phallus-carriers made fun of their audience, with sexually explicit verbal abuse (Dunkle; (n.d.); 1).

Accurate or not, Aristotle pinpoints the birth of a comic voice with 'those who lead off the phallic songs'; the leader, as opposed to the rowdy chorus. Hence the word Comedy comes from 'singing in a Komos'. Oide is the Greek for song, and the Komos (typically spelt with a K) was that 'noisy, happy, drunken procession' (Dover; 1972; 219) that ended in a sacrifice.

Bakhtin backs up this idea of comedy as a function of early religious ritual in his work on the grotesque. He says:

'The people's laughter which characterized all the forms of grotesque ... from immemorial times was linked with the bodily lower stratum. Laughter degrades ... Degradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with the earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time....To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth' (Vice; 1997; 155).

In these words from *Rabelais and his World* we witness an earlier world, in which the transition from winter to spring was marked with a parade of reproductive organs and an outpouring of sexual relief. Later we will see if these comic traditions survive in a culture that doesn't necessarily notice the passing of the seasons; but for the moment, let's keep our focus on the people whose experience of earth was never far from heaven.

'Most Greeks would have answered the question 'What is Comedy?' in terms of the god at whose festival that genre played a part' (Dover; 1972; 219). So meet the god Comus; usually known now by his Latin spelling. The son of Dionysus, he was the spirit of revelry and nocturnal merrymaking. His mother Circe was a sorceress; and it was perhaps the combination of wine and witchcraft in his blood that led Comus to create a magic potion that gave anyone who drank it the head of a beast. The character of Puck, in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, clearly descends from this archetype.

Comus was often shown in ancient art as a young man on the point of passing out from drink. His appearance in one picture is described by Philostratus the Elder rather reprovingly, thus:

'While painters ought usually to represent the faces of those who are in the bloom of youth, as without these the paintings are dull and meaningless, this Komos has little need of a face at all since his head is bent forward and the face is in shadow. The moral, I think, is that persons his age should not go revelling, except with heads veiled' (Atsma; 2006;1).

Nevertheless he has a crown of dewy roses on his head, and a torch about to fall from his hand. Under the influence of this slender youth, men and women swapped clothes. The comic traditions of cross-dressing, animal costumes and funny fat men associated with his myth, all seem to have survived the party.

We see Comus most vividly in English literary history in a Masque written by Milton and performed at Ludlow Castle on Michaelmas, 1634.

Two brothers and their sister are lost in the wood. The sister is weary and the brothers wander off to find her some berries. While she is alone, Comus

dances onto the stage; we watch his merry antics, then we hear his mocking voice:

'Break off, break off, I feel the different pace
Of some chaste footing near about this ground.
Run to your shrouds within these brakes and trees;
Our number may affright: some virgin sure
(For so I can distinguish by mine art)
Benighted in these woods. Now to my charms
And to my wily trains; I shall ere long
Be well stocked with as fair a herd as grazed
About my mother Circe.
(Enright, (Ed.); 1975; 38-39.)

The echo of Shakespeare's Puck is heard again through the trees of middle English or ancient Athens; but where does Comus show himself today? There are not many mentions on the World Wide Web; the most bizarre one is very local. In Old Portsmouth, near the Royal Garrison Church, a memorial plaque says:

'Close to this spot is buried Comus; A favourite pony given by King William the IV; To Lord Fred Fitzclarence 1832; Died 1851. (Backhouse, Ed.; 2002; 1.)

Comus also shows up in an internet search as the name of a 1970s rock band, and as a mascot of the New Orleans Mardi Gras, or 'fat Tuesday' (the pagan precedent to a pre-Lenten pig-out). All carnival resonates to the roots of comedy, from the phallic procession onwards. With the fancy dress, the prosthetic enhancements, ordinary men become king for a day and, for one day only, make fun of their real rulers. The hungry get plump and the impotent get powerful; but the costumes come off when the night is over. So, all carnival owes something to Comus, but since 1857, he's been commemorated by name in the New Orleans Mardi Gras 'krewe';

'The descendants of the French and Spanish settlers ... were devotees of music, dance and theatrical amusements. In 1827, thanks largely to petitioning by prominent Creoles, the City Council lifted the ban on masking from January 1 through Mardi Gras. As street masking burgeoned, bands of musicians and ornamented carriages began joining in the processions.

'As did, by the 1850s, gangs of rowdy revelers, who bombarded maskers and spectators with quicklime, dirt and the occasional brickbat. It was against this backdrop, with newspapers lamenting the degeneration of Mardi Gras, that the Mistick Krewe of Comus made its parading debut, with two floats, costumed maskers and brass bands.

'In a torch-lit procession on the night of Mardi Gras, the Comus krewemen, most of whom were well-to-do Anglo-Americans, were garbed as "The Demon Actors in Milton's Paradise Lost." Their thematic, meticulously organized street spectacle, and the tableau ball that followed, established a paradigm

that would be widely imitated' (Button, G.; 2006;
<http://www.mardigrasunmasked.com/mardigras/history.htm>).

In our rooting around for the origins of comedy, we've found the God himself, the alleged creator of mirth and merriment. But who is this other personification of the theme, the female counterpart, a Muse of amusement; and what might be the connection between them be?

Born of Zeus and the Titan Mnemosyne, in a marriage that lasted nine days, the Muses were said to have discovered letters and invented language. They were represented as beautiful virgins, adorned with wreaths of palm leaves, laurel and roses. Early art shows them dancing in a circle (semi-clad) around their leader, Apollo (Muses Guild, The; 2001; 1).

Hesiod wrote in the *Theogony*; 'it is through the Mousai that there are singers and harpers upon the earth ... and happy is he whom the Mousai love: sweet flows speech from his mouth. For though a man have sorrow and grief in his ... soul and live in dread because his heart is distressed, yet, when a singer, the servant of the Mousai, chants the glorious deeds of men of old and the blessed gods who inhabit Olympos, at once he forgets his heaviness and remembers not his sorrows at all.' (Atsma, A; 2006;
<http://www.theoi.com/Ouranios/Mousai.html>).

Calliope is the eldest and most distinguished of the Muses, identified with philosophy. Her emblems are stylus and wax tablets. Clio is the Muse of historical and heroic poetry and she is shown with a parchment scroll. Erato presides over love and erotic poetry with her lyre, Euterpe over music with her double flute. Polyhymnia is goddess of the sublime and sacred song; Terpsichore rules dance; Urania rules astronomy and astrology. Melpomene is the Muse of tragedy, often shown with the tragic mask; and her sister Thalia is the Muse of comedy and pastoral poetry. She favours rural pursuits, and is pictured holding a comic mask and a shepherd's staff.

The masks of comedy and tragedy are superimposed on goddess archetypes that predate them. Invoking the Muses was standard artistic and intellectual practice for poets and philosophers before Homer and Plato; who would not have started to speak or write without an invocation, a plea to some higher source of inspiration.

Hesiod admits to a process of dictation behind his words as he opens the *Theogony*; 'These things declare to me from the beginning, ye Mousai who dwell in the house of Olympos, and tell me which of them first came to be.' And *Orphic Hymn 76* describes the overture to creative writing thus:

'To the Mousai, Fumigation from Frankincense. Daughters of Mnemosyne and Zeus, loud-sounding, and divine, renowned, Mousai Pierides, sweetly speaking Nine... Kleio, and Erato who charms the sight, with thee, Euterpe, ministering delight: Thalia flourishing, Polymnia famed, Melpomene from skill in music named: Terpsikhore, Ourania heavenly bright, with thee who gavest me to behold the light. Come, venerable, various powers divine, with favouring aspect on your mystics shine; bring glorious, ardent, lovely, famed desire, and warm my bosom with your sacred fire. (Atsma; 2006;
<http://www.theoi.com/Ouranios/Mousai.html>).

This translates, in many different eras and many different authors, as a formal invocation at the beginning of a work. By the early fourteenth century, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, sometimes called the first writing of the renaissance, put it succinctly; 'O Muses, O high Genius, help me now!' Here though, it turns out that the literary aid is coming from a dead poet: 'Are you, then, that Virgil, that fount which pours forth so broad a stream of speech?' (Adler, Ed.; 1992; 1-2). We hear a similar plea in George Meredith's essay 'On the Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit', written in 1877:

'O for a breath of Aristophanes, Rabelais, Voltaire, Cervantes, Fielding, Moliere! These are spirits that, if you know them well, will come when you do call. You will find the very invocation of them act on you like a renovating air...' (Meredith; 1918; 64).

His list of comic masters is comprehensive, but he also understands the female part: 'Comedy, we have to admit, was never one of the most honoured of the Muses. She was in her origin, short of slaughter, the loudest expression of the little civilization of men' (Meredith; 1918; 11).

Meredith takes us right back to the mountain spring of inspiration where the goddesses of creativity sat; 'Comedy is the fountain of sound sense; not the less perfectly sound on account of the sparkle; and comedy lifts women to a station offering them free play for their wit, as they usually show it, when they have it, on the side of sound sense. The higher the Comedy, the more prominent the part they enjoy in it' (Meredith; 1918; 28).

[Just to keep the note of local interest sounding George Meredith was actually born in Portsmouth; but later pretended not to have been, stating on a census form 'near Petersfield'. There was a query over his paternity, possibly; one source whispering William IVth, giver of the pony Comus, in connection with this! (Francis, David; unpublished? Reference forthcoming.)]

'In a move to social equality of the sexes,' Meredith said, 'cultivated women should realise that the comic muse is one of their best friends' (Meredith; 1918; 60).

For all his forward thinking on the female question, though, Meredith retains a pre-enlightenment view of the source of humorous inspiration:

'You will, when contemplating men, discern a spirit overhead; not more heavenly than the light flashed upward from glassy surfaces, but luminous and watchful...It has the sage's brows, and the sunny malice of a faun lurks at the corners of the half-closed lips... That is the comic spirit' (Meredith; 1918; 90).

On the one hand we see that for Meredith, like Dante, the invocation has become a plea to previous writers, the bard rather than the god or muse is the source of ideas; and this was in keeping with a contemporary approach to comic genius. On the other hand, the ectoplasm Meredith summons up here as the old-fashioned spirit of comedy also gave rise to a feminism, strong enough to use humour as a social tool.

So, is Thalia a separatist feminist, refusing to share the stage with Comus and his mother-in-law jokes? Although they both come from the same body of ancient mythology, I've found no stories in which they actually meet. And indeed, the male/female double-act is the rarest kind of comedy duo. Let's dig now to find some common ground.

Their main shared interest is inebriation. We know that Comus is closely aligned with Dionysus, sometimes standing in for him, in the drunken festivities from which the first comedy stumbled. The Muses are also associated with intoxication; but their substance of choice is drugs, or rather medical herbs such as hellebore, the nine-leaved black stimulant native to their Mount Helicon home (Graves; 1961; 386), and mind-altering plants like laurel.

In *The White Goddess*, Robert Graves describes the process by which the Muses as a purely feminine source of inspiration were gradually controlled and contained by patriarchy under the leadership of Apollo. God of reason, he prescribed 'nothing in excess'; and his male followers wore the laurel without chewing it.

This dilution also saw the original three-fold muse become nine, in about the eighth century B.C. (Graves; 1961; 390) and their powers devolved to Apollo's more sober posse. The process of Christianity further took the pen and the tickling stick out of the hands of women; not to put it back within their grasp until the time of Meredith.

Like Comus and his pronounced sexual organ, the Muses were connected with erotic ritual and fertility rites. Just as he was sometimes shown as a satyr, and associated with dressing up in animal costumes; our nine lovely ladies had a special relationship with Pegasus, the winged horse, for whom the Hippocrene spring was named. They were also said to have used two products of horse 'to stimulate their ecstasies: the slimy vaginal issue of a mare in heat and the black membrane, or hippomanes, cut from the forehead of a new-born colt' (Graves; 1961; 386).

So while the satyr-like Comus was being satirical, Thalia and her sisters were just horsing around!

It is in Robert Graves' book too, that we find the best link between Comus and Thalia; unearthed by his painstaking cultural archaeology, his digging to the very bottom of myth.

As he scrapes away the layers we see the Virgin Mary as muse of mediaeval poetry, succeeding an earlier pagan saint, the Irish Brigit who was once represented as a triad too. With her triple concerns for poetry, healing and handicraft, this pre-Christian goddess worked by incantations at sacred wells, similar to the spring of wisdom presided over by Thalia, Erato and co.

'The mediaeval Brigit shared the Muse-ship with another Mary, 'Mary Gypsy' or St. Mary of Egypt, in whose honour the oath 'Marry' or 'Marry Gyp!' was sworn. Robin Hood, in the ballads, always [called upon] her' (Graves; 1961; 394-395).

This brings the two halves of my question together. We've already seen how the Comus figure appears as Puck, particularly when he gives men the head of a beast. We know that Puck also answers to the name Robin Goodfellow; and in Graves' formulation Goodfellow and Hood are etymologically linked. He points out that in some old vernaculars, Robin means phallus, for extra measure.

'In the English countryside Mary Gypsy was soon identified with the Love-goddess known to the Saxons as 'The May Bride'' (Graves; 1961; 96). And it is in this guise, as Maid Marion pairing up with Robin Hood, during the May

Day orgies in the Greenwood, that we can finally imagine Thalia and Comus working together.

This meeting may be greatly contrived, their cultural histories simplified, but now that we know roughly who they were; the question is where are they now? Have they had their comic day in the sun?

Bakhtin tells us that 'carnival ... survives in attenuated form in the narrow literary parody of modern time'; in the original kind 'everything has its laughing aspect, for everything is reborn and renewed through death' (Vice; 1997;152). He insisted that 'the negative and formal parody of modern times' only denies without renewing (154-155); only the downward half of the subverting movement has survived.

I would contend that 'the golden banana tree' is still bearing fruit. Its boughs seem to be groaning with images from the earliest comedy.

The fat comedians are still hanging in there, whatever your definition of a funny person is, from Bernard Manning to Jo Brand. And for those not plump enough in the flesh to get a laugh, the padded suits get ever more sophisticated, if we look from *Monty Python's Mr Creosote* (Jones, T. & Gilliam, T.; 1983) to the 'health farm' sketches in *Little Britain* (Lucas, M. & Walliams, D.; 2004).

The phallus jokes are still in place, too. From *Not The Nine O'clock News'* legendary 'It's not Nelson's column, it is Nelson's willy!' (Lloyd, J.; 1979) to almost any codpiece scene from Rowan Atkinson's *Blackadder* series one and two (Lloyd, J.; 1983 & 1986), the original point of comedy is still standing proud. (And perhaps if Robert Graves were able to inspire, muse-like, a comment here he would say that Rowan, like Robin, has a double-meaning too!)

The heckling and verbal abuse of the audience remains an important part of live comedy, with stand-ups like Ben Elton, Jeremy Hardy and Armando Iannucci exploiting the political possibilities of the form.

Beyond party politics, Jerry Sadowitz 'famously opened the Montreal comedy festival with the line "Hello, moose-fuckers" and was promptly knocked unconscious. His refusal to moderate his comedy act has led to difficulties in his career: his debut television show on the BBC attracted a record number of complaints... (Comedy Zone, The; 1999; <http://www.comedy-zone.net/standup/comedian/s/sadowitz-jerry.htm>).

Many of the other carnival themes we've covered here translate easily into TV humour. Comus' tradition of cross-dressing lives on in a list of household names as long as a transvestite's stocking: Julian Clary, Les Dawson, Kenny Everett, Barry Humphries, Eddie Izzard, Lily Savage.

In the same comic generation, the grotesque has been mastered for the mainstream by Jim Carey and Steve Martin; and Jennifer Saunders in *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992 – 2004). The religious imperative, the chanting processions and bloody sacrifices with which humour began has now become a series of jokes as diverse as Dave Allen's wry Catholic meditations, and Meera Syal's archetypal Hindu characterizations in *Goodness Gracious Me* (Gupta, A.; 1998). Every funny nun or comedy vicar modern television has produced was an idea that started on the drunken stagger to Dionysus' temple. (Though not sacrificial, to this day comedians die on that stage.)

It may be spiritually inspired but the material is still not always socially acceptable:

'[Billy Connolly] has outraged audiences, critics and, of course the media, with his free use of the word fuck. He has used masturbation, blasphemy, defecation, flatulence, sex, his father's illness and his aunts' cruelty to entertain... One of Connolly's most famous skits is "The Crucifixion", an early 1970s recording in which he likens Christ's Last Supper to a drunken night out in Glasgow. The recording was banned by many radio stations at the time. (Comedy Zone, The; 1999; <http://www.comedy-zone.net/standup/comedian/c/connolly-billy.htm>).

Thus the twin themes of drinking and drugs, also at the root of the golden banana tree, are represented in today's comedy. A single shake and the branches yield; Charlie Higson's lone roue from *Harry Enfield's Television Programme* whose sozzled monologue always ends 'of course, I was very, very drunk' (Birkin, J. (Dir.); 1990) ... Sitcom *Spaced's* hardcore raver still dancing to the rhythm of the phone ringing next morning (Wright, E. (Dir.); 1999) ... Eddie and Patsy falling out of a taxi (Saunders, J.; 2004) ... *The Young Ones'* Neil's tripping hippy with his catchphrase 'wow' (Jackson, P. & Posner, G.; 1982) ... Small fry alongside the legendary Cheech and Chong; or the Camberwell Carrot in *Withnail and I* (Robinson, B.; 1987).

Even if comics aren't joking about drink or drugs they often seem to need them simply to perform; often with disastrous consequences (see Peter Cook or Freddie Prinze - though his herbal remedy was prescribed by a doctor); but even the functioning comedians, on TV daily in polite teatime slots may have drunk a bottle of spirits in order to go on (legend has it Bob Monkhouse) ... Surely under the influence of Comus; Frankie Howerd in camp classic *Up Pompeii* (Rothwell, T.; 1970). Definitely tickled by the shepherdessing staff of Thalia; Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer, whose surreal comedy references the rural, with vegetables, livestock and farm machinery as recurring images in their act; and celebrates the phallus with their 'Man with a stick' (Birkin, J.; 1993).

So their separate traits are still strong, but again we must wonder about Comus and Thalia's relationship. The male/female partnership is the rarest of comic duos, male/male and female/female being far more common. Its most frequent representation in modern humour is of the dysfunctional couple of TV sitcoms; George and Mildred, Roseanne and Dan, Frank and Betty, Terry and June. These mismatched pairs range from the physically funny, Sid James and Hattie Jacques, to the funny peculiar; the Krankies. For the embodiments of a god and goddess, the modern equivalents of Comus and Thalia are not looking too good. The Goodies singing Funky Gibbon (1975) are more attractive proponents of the dancing animalism and spring fever of the original comedy.

But if we look, finally, for the very finest examples of them in our day, the what's-on guide is more promising. What we find at the roots of comedy, the first joke, the original one-liner, the prehistoric shaggy-dog story, are still blooming funny.

Not all comedy descends from Comus and Thalia, though. The satirical elegance of Stephen Fry, the sophisticated paranoia of Woody Allen, the

psychotic nonchalance of Jim Davidson, the gay observations of Ellen DeGeneres. None of these seem to depend on willy jokes.

The handmaids of the Muse of comedy do appear in modern guises; *Smack the Pony's* girl with untrimmed pubic hair exceeding, by a forest, the 'bikini line' (Brigstocke, D.; 1999), for her Bakhtinian concern with the 'lower stratum of the body' and a primal show of prolific growth. Dawn French, dressed as the Easter Bunny in an episode of *The Young Ones* (Jackson, P. & Posner, G.; 1982), unwittingly referencing the animal costumes of the pre-Christian spring rites.

Thalia, the Muse of comedy herself, would be none other than Felicity Kendall in *The Good Life* (Davies, J. H.; 1975). With its themes of rebirth and renewal, of restoring the place of nature in the suburban sprawl, often with hilarious consequences, this show is the perfect vehicle for a muse with mud on her face and laurel leaves in the back pocket of her fetching dungarees.

As for the god Comus then, his clearest modern incarnation appears, after what is allegedly the longest comic pause on TV ever, to be Basil Fawlty; beating up his broken down Austin Allegro with a tree branch (Cleese, J.; 1975). The prize goes to him for the length of his phallic symbol, and the resilient foliage that smacks of those original fertility rituals. A serious contender for second place, however, is *Green Wing's* Dr. Alan Statham, who bursts from the closet dressed only in his underwear, playing on the pipes of Pan, dancing fit to conjure up the immortal joker himself (Pile, V.; 2004).

To bring Comus and Thalia together, finally, for a group photo of the timeless cast of comedy, we need to consult Robert Graves again. 'The most ancient surviving record of European religious practice is an Aurignacian cave-painting at Cogul in North-Eastern Spain of the Old Stone Age Lenaea. A young Dionysus with huge genitals stands [...] in the middle of a crescent of nine dancing women' (1961; 399). Although these scantily clad ladies are closing in for the kill, we can also picture here our nine Muses in bikinis being chased by the aroused god of comedy, Benny Hill, round the golden banana tree. The skins are still there to slip up on today.

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Nietzsche The Birth of Tragedy

•With those two gods of art, Apollo and Dionysus, we link our recognition that in the Greek world there exists a huge contrast, in origins and purposes, between visual (plastic) arts, the Apollonian, and the non-visual art of music, the Dionysian. Both very different drives go hand in hand, for the most part in open conflict with each other and simultaneously provoking each other all the time to new and more powerful offspring, in order to perpetuate for themselves the contest of opposites which the common word "Art" only seems to bridge, until they finally, through a marvelous metaphysical act, seem

to pair up with each other and, as this pair, produce Attic tragedy, just as much a Dionysian as an Apollonian work of art.

•In order to get closer to these two instinctual drives, let us think of them next as the separate artistic worlds of dreams and of intoxication, physiological phenomena between which we can observe an opposition corresponding to the one between the Apollonian and the Dionysian.

•According to the ideas of Lucretius, the marvelous divine shapes first appeared to the mind of man in a dream. It was in a dream that the great artist saw the delightful anatomy of superhuman existence, and the Hellenic poet, questioned about the secrets of poetic creativity, would have recalled his dreams and given an explanation exactly similar to the one Hans Sachs provides in *Die Meistersinger*.

•My friend, that is precisely the poet's work—

To figure out his dreams, mark them down.

Believe me, the truest illusion of mankind

Is revealed to him in dreams:

All poetic art and poeticizing

Is nothing but interpreting true dreams.

•The beautiful appearance of the world of dreams, in whose creation each man is a complete artist, is the condition of all plastic art, indeed, as we shall see, an important half of poetry. We enjoy the form with an immediate understanding, all shapes speak to us, nothing is indifferent and unnecessary.

•For all the very intense life of these dream realities, we nevertheless have the thoroughly disagreeable sense of their illusory quality. At least that is my experience. For their frequency, even normality, I can point to many witnesses and the utterances of poets. Even the philosophical man has the presentiment that this reality in which we live and have our being is an illusion, that under it lies hidden a second quite different reality. And Schopenhauer specifically designates as the trademark of philosophical talent the ability to recognize at certain times that human beings and all things are mere phantoms or dream pictures .

Then: Writing Exercise

‘What makes you laugh, but shouldn’t?’

‘What shouldn’t make you laugh, but does?’

