

## The Renaissance of Comedy: Reflections on Positive Individuation and Absurd Wit as anti-device.

El renacimiento de la comedia: reflexiones sobre la individuación positiva y el ingenio absurdo como antidispositivo.



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### Abstract.

The therapeutic culture promoted by self-help literature is based on a principle of individuation that idealizes self-regulation through moderation and self-knowledge. The origin of this principle can be found in the mythical figure of the Greek god Apollo, whose function is, according to Friedrich Nietzsche and Giorgio Colli, to provide limits to the subject and to promote the acceptance of various orders through sublime art. The idea we explore in this paper is that the figure of the Greek god Hermes, described by William G. Doty, can be interpreted as the representation of wit and the acceptance of the absurd, and that through comedy he could disarticulate the principle of individuation as a device of positive thinking.

**Keywords:** Self-help. Self-regulation. Positivity. Hermes. Creativity. Comedy.

### Resumen.

La cultura terapéutica promovida por la literatura de autoayuda se fundamenta en un principio de individuación que idealiza la autorregulación a través de la medida y el conocimiento de sí mismo. El origen de este principio puede encontrarse en la figura mítica del dios griego Apolo, cuya función es, según Friedrich Nietzsche y Giorgio Colli, brindar límites al sujeto y promover la aceptación de diversos órdenes por medio del arte sublime. La idea que exploramos en este documento es que la

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figura del dios griego Hermes, descrita por William G. Doty, puede ser interpretada como la representación del ingenio y la aceptación de lo absurdo, y que a través de la comedia podría desarticular el principio de individuación en tanto dispositivo del pensamiento positivo.

**Palabras clave:** Autoayuda. Autorregulación. Positividad. Hermes. Creatividad. Comedia.

*"Laugh, laugh, laugh, laugh like a monster, just laugh, laugh,  
even if you're already dead, just laugh, laugh, laugh,*

*laugh with joyfulness."*

**Cucho Lambreta**

## Introduction

The self-help literature coming from the 20th century is the written manifestation of a therapeutic culture that revolves around the principle of individuation. This principle idealizes moderation and self-knowledge as essential means to achieve personal well-being and articulates them as a self-regulation device. In this sense, the therapeutic culture is based on the meritocratic idea that the individual must work on himself to improve his life and achieve a balance between his emotions and behaviors. This approach gained popularity in our contemporary 21st century context, equated economic well-being with psychological well-being, and was organized as an individuation device.

I consider in the following that this individuation device extends its roots to the mythical figure of the Greek god Apollo. According to Friedrich Nietzsche and Giorgio Colli, Apollo plays the role of providing boundaries for the subject and encouraging the acceptance of various orders through sublime art. Apollo, as a symbol of rationality and control, represents the structure and harmony sought to be achieved through self-regulation. His mythical figure embodies the human capacity to measure and regulate emotions, promoting a vision of the human being as a self-controlled and balanced entity.

In contrast to this divinity of individuation, the figure of the Greek god Hermes, described by William G. Doty, offers a contrasting perspective. Hermes can be considered the representation of wit and absurdity. Unlike Apollo, Hermes does not conform to

established boundaries but questions and disarticulates them through his cunning and absurd humor. Doty's interpretation suggests that Hermes, through comedy, invites us to accept the irrational and the chaotic as an inherent part of human existence. This mythological figure challenges the rigidity of the Apollonian principle of individuation and offers us a more flexible and dynamic view of life.

The hypothesis I put forward in this text is that wit and absurdity, embodied in the mythological figure of Hermes, can act as disarticulating mechanisms of the individuation device promoted by therapeutic culture and positive thinking. To explore this hypothesis, literature review and integration of the notions of individuation, creativity and wit are employed to allow an updated and contextualized interpretation of mythological figures and their relevance in contemporary culture. This proposal seeks to reveal how laughter and humor, as creative acts of wit and absurdity, can be understood as anti-dispositional and contribute to the acceptance of our transgressive capacity to alter order.

### Individuality in psi culture

The twentieth century is crossed by a tradition of positive thinking whose origins can be traced to the beginnings of therapeutic culture, also called *psi* culture, and its wide range of texts categorized as self-help literature. According to Vanina Papalini (2013), *psi* culture was articulated with the growth of capitalism in North America, with its model of the entrepreneur who manages diverse resources, and the popularization of social sciences; only that the capitalization and management of the objects of the world was directed towards the subject itself in the world, and the social sciences were vulgarized in order to make them accessible to a greater number of individuals. This therapeutic culture raised a banner of self-sufficiency that ensured the prosperity of the subject through self-regulation. The possibility of obtaining a state of well-being then fell on the subject himself, regardless of his personal circumstances, such as his nationality, sex, social class or any other social, cultural or political condition to which he had the good fortune, or misfortune, to belong.

In this therapeutic culture the responsibility of the individual obeys a neoliberal rationality, which promotes, from the teeth outwards, the autonomy of the subject to govern, develop and manage himself; the individual is then a project that is under his complete control. This is what Fernando Ampudia (2006) refers to when he speaks of self-help literature as texts that offer strategies for managing the self, and the way in which it revitalized the social sciences, especially psychology, at the cost of turning them into an informal knowledge that could be consulted by all without the supervision of a scientist accredited in any of these sciences. The precepts of this culture dictate that the individual can and should take charge of himself, survive in an increasingly competitive world, and even heal his psychological wounds and physical ailments through self-directed psychological training.

The motto of this literature is that the individual can do anything with and through his psychic capacities, so that the therapeutic culture can be understood as part of the tradition of positive thinking, a thinking propitiated, according to Barbara Ehrenreich (2009), by late consumer capitalism and the imperative of personal growth. If the individual is enough for himself to fulfill all his needs and desires, then the only thing he must control is himself, and to do so he must know himself completely, recognize his weaknesses to be improved and his strengths to be exploited. Self-knowledge is, again, the means of balance, freedom and prosperity that is accessible to all through the texts of a democratized psychology.

How can we conceptualize this exaltation of the individual's self-regulation? According to Helena Béjar (2014) positive thinking used individuation as a device and made health and success equivalent; health achieved mainly with autosuggestion, and success that translates into financial independence. His notion of device is understood, from the proposal of Giorgio Agamben (2011a), as the "*set of praxis, knowledge, measures and institutions whose goal is to manage, govern, control and orient - in a sense that is intended to be useful - the behaviors, gestures and thoughts of men*" (p. 256). In this sense, individuation can be understood as the device that places regulation in the hands of the subjects.

Faced with this positive outlook, it is not possible to stand idly by. But in addition to describing the discursive regulation and practices of self-constitution that underlie the therapeutic culture, as Stuart Hall (2003) and the specialists so far mentioned do, one also has the option of doing thinking exercises that, in terms of Raymundo Mier (2017), help us to miss this "normal" state of affairs, and encourages us to propose, if not revolution, the rescue of critical attitudes of resistance.

In this sense, Agamben's proposal gives us guidance about the possible ways out of this positive labyrinth. Agamben (2019) refers that acts of creativity are acts of resistance to perceived paradigms. According to this philosopher the same power that gives rise to acts of production, such as the creation of subjectivities through devices, contains its very resistance, resistance that translates as the negation of the act itself. All power, understood as control over something, is linked to the deprivation of its exercise. To create a positive subject from individuation would contain as an act the possibility of not producing the subject. According to Agamben (2019) reaching this negation is the creative stage that exercises the critique of the act.

Now, where can we find inspiration for negation, critique, or at least a suspension of individuation as a positive device? To continue with Agamben's (2011b) proposals, the suggestion in this text is to look to the origins of this principle of individuation, to the archaic past that is neither dead nor sterile, but that survives in our present, especially in our Western mentality educated on the basis of Greco-Christian syncretism. In this look into the past we must first turn to the work of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (2014), who described in *The Birth of Tragedy* a figure that personifies individuation, the brilliant, logical and Delphic god Apollo. It will also be of great help to take into account the complementary and subsequent observations of Giorgio Colli (2020) about the main characteristics of such Greek divinity and his role in the creation of comic art.

**Friedrich Nietzsche: the Apollonian and the Dionysian**

In his onslaught against the morality of Christianity and the exaltation of German music, Nietzsche (2014) asked himself what importance the gods Apollo and Dionysus had in the emergence of Greek tragedy as a lyrical genre after the Homeric epic, and in doing so he drew on the philosopher Artur Schopenhauer's notions of will and representation. To explain the dialectics of Greek tragedy Nietzsche (2014) equated the figure of Dionysus with the will itself and assigned him the place of the chorus in the tragedies of Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides. The chorus is understood as an undifferentiated mass of music that entails an instinctive and unconscious wisdom. The Dionysian is about the foundation of life itself, nature in its inconceivable splendor and embodied in the music that accompanies the staging of a tragedy; it is the unbridled manifestation of existence that produces the very liberation of existence. Such a state of Dionysian intoxication cannot be apprehended by itself, like the will or the Kantian noumene, and therefore requires another element for its expression and manifestation. Such element is the Apollonian.

Nietzsche (2014) describes the figure of Apollo as the divinity that is equivalent to the representation in Schopenhauer's proposal, and to that extent its function is to express the vital foundations of the Dionysian. Apollo's mission is to translate the vast and unconscious wisdom of Dionysus into the language of beautiful images, of understandable appearances that protect the subject from the same orgiastic force of the Dionysian. We can understand that for Nietzsche (2014) Apollo is a figure that produces and inspires concrete manifestations of beauty, that is, images or artistic works, from Dionysian states. By working as a representation conjugated with the will, the figures of Apollo and Dionysus produce the tragic myth of the Greeks. Tragedy is then a lyrical narrative that brings and directs human beings towards the limits of the world and their own condition as subjects; it reveals the natural tendency towards annihilation, but it is also the safeguard through the beauty of appearances.

With his dialectical proposal of Greek tragedy Nietzsche (2014) highlighted the individualizing function of Apollo. Faced with the chaotic force of an instinctive,

undifferentiated and Dionysian interiority, the figure of Apollo provides boundaries that allow the subject an integrative differentiation through restraint and self-knowledge. The Nietzschean Apollonian embodies the principle of individuation that integrates unconscious vital foundations with concrete and conscious representations that the subject can assimilate. The language of Apollonian images, which translates Dionysian, is the resistance to this primordial feverishness, and imposes as resistance an order in the heteroclitite. The Apollonian is, then, the origin of the principle of individuation that affirms restraint in the face of orgiastic destruction, and self-knowledge as the constitution of subjectivity.

For Nietzsche (2014) Apollo embodies individuation as a necessity of diverse orders, in the aesthetic, in the ethical, in the interpersonal and in language, that is, in the constitution of subjectivity. The god Apollo embodies the principle of individuation, and, although it is grounded in Dionysian interiority, the principle of individuation takes the modern form of dispositif insofar as it demands restraint and self-knowledge, that is, self-regulation. Now, this proposal of Nietzsche (2014) seems to oppose the figures of Dionysus and Apollo in a dialectic that has Greek tragedy as its product; however, this contraposition is apparent and ambitious in its scope. To clarify this, we can turn to the observations of Giorgio Colli (2020) regarding the relationship between the Apollonian and Dionysian in Greek tragedy.

### **Apollonian individuality and Dionysian suspension**

Colli (2020) refers that Nietzsche's proposal (2014) supported by a theory that by itself does not propose a sharp contraposition between will and representation, or in Nietzschean terms, between the Dionysian and the Apollonian. By considering Dionysus as interiority, the musical and undifferentiated, and Apollo as expression, schematism logical and individualizing, the so-called timeless philosopher is grounding the Apollonian in the Dionysian. In doing so the orgiastic impulse provoked by Dionysus can then be seen as the necessary antecedent on the road to individuation. The Dionysian for Colli (2020) would not be anti-individualistic, but the necessary condition of the principle of individuation; it would not be a rupture of the Apollonian order, but the primordial matrix of that order.

On the other hand, as Nietzsche (2014) pointed out, Apollo and Dionysus conjugate a dialectical process that expresses the tension between the human being and the law of *Ananké*, *i.e.* fatality, destiny. The tragic heroes experience the Dionysian suffering of Apollonian individuation, and no matter how hard they try to break with the cosmic order that weighs on them, the culmination of their misfortunes and vicissitudes is the resignification of their life; it is beauty triumphing over pain. According to Simone Weil (1941) Greek tragedy shows the humiliation of the subject to the force of the law, of the *Ananké*. The tragic protagonist manages to overcome his mortality and does not choose any of the conventional options he has to act on, but in doing so, he submits himself to the order that he cannot understand, that is, he accepts the Apollonian limits. Thus, for Colli (2020), the Dionysian is not about the opposition against order or its transformation, but the desire for the suspension of all orders.

What is important to highlight from the above observations is that, although the Dionysian seems to be the negation of order, that negation is prevented by the Apollonian individuation it founded, so that the figure of Dionysus can only offer us a suspension of order. In search of negation of the device of individuality, Nietzsche (2014) already provided us with the origin and description of the Apollonian, however, his Dionysian proposal does not offer us the intended negation but a liberation, understood as suspension, of the Apollonian through tragedy. This may have served and sufficed for the ancient Greeks, however, Colli (2020) warns us that modern man lives mainly in the world of representation, in the Apollonian appearance now disconnected from the Dionysian interiority that gave rise to it, a phenomenon he called the general Apollonian. Where, then, could we find the negation of this Apollonian individuality, which has lost all trace of Dionysian instinct that served at least as a tragic suspension as a counterweight?

### **Hermes: the divine transgressor**

If perhaps it now seems difficult to consider ourselves prone to the Dionysian delirium provoked by tragic art, it does not mean that we are left helpless by the ancient gods to resist

the individualizing brilliance of Apollo. To venture into *pantheion* we can turn to the Homeric and Hesiodic hymns about the gods. Since Nietzsche (2014) declared the death also of tragedy, then Greek mythology shows itself to us as a suitable option to try to discover some principle or figure that disarticulates the Apollonian device of individuation. We do not have to go very far along the Olympian path to realize that, among the various gods, the one who has successfully confronted Apollo is the son of the Olympian Zeus and the Mayan pleiad, the trickster and messenger Hermes.

According to the *Homeric Hymns* (Barnabas, 1978) and the *Theogony* of Hesiod (1978) the god Hermes was born in Cilene, and together with his mother Maya inhabited a cave, far from the other immortals. Aware of his divine and bastard lineage, he decided to obtain a place on Olympus, and to do so he committed the famous theft of Apollo's cows. Ancient Greek myths tell us how, the day after he was born, Hermes visited the mountain of Pieria where the sacred cattle of the gods grazed and herded fifty cows to perform with two of them a sacrifice in honor of the Olympian deities, who were then 11 in total. In this rite the mortals were to consume the meat of the sacrificed animals and reserve the bones for the deities. Hermes prepared 12 pieces of exquisite meat, and despite the provocative aroma they had, he did not consume any of them. In this way the cunning son of Maya and Zeus secured himself on one of the thrones of Olympus.

When the god Apollo became aware of the theft, he went to accuse Hermes, who declared himself completely innocent. The dispute was brought before Zeus himself, who ordered him to hand over the stolen cattle. When Hermes took the solar god to the grotto where he had hidden the sacred cows, he calmed Apollo's anger by singing with a lyre that he had invented using the shell of a tortoise. In that song he narrated the origin of all the Olympian gods, again including himself. Apollo was so moved by the song that he burst out laughing. Upon receiving the lyre created by Hermes as a gift, Apollo ended up forgiving the divine trickster and granted him a part of his prophetic power.

This myth reveals to us how the god Hermes begins his ascent to Olympus from a condition inferior to the immortals, and how he was able to obtain the favors of Apollo and

make him laugh with his skills despite having challenged his authority. This relationship between gods puts us on the track of the Greek figure of Hermes as an alternative of direct, comic and cunning resistance against the Apollonian principle of individuation.

### **Creativity of the witty and absurd god**

Religious scholar William G. Doty (1997) describes Hermes as the marginal, ingenious and creative god who is capable of altering the established orders of natural, divine and human laws. In the Greek family of gods, Hermes is considered the dark counterpart of the brilliant Apollo, something like the other side of the coin, since they share similar abilities and domains, such as medicine, music, knowledge of the future and the arts, however, as we have noted above, Apollo's mission is to draw and enforce the sacred boundaries of the law of destiny. For his part, Hermes is the god who transgresses the limits in search of benefits, mainly for himself and humanity. With his wiles Hermes created the very notion of sacrifice as a way of intercession between the human and the sacred. Although he alters the pre-established orders, Hermes as a mediator creates traps and deceptions to reach new stages of civilization, so he is also considered as a cultural benefactor. His actions are shown to us as direct resistance against the limits imposed and preserved by his brother Apollo. Here we no longer speak of the desire for the suspension of order, but of the authentic transformation of order to recover Dionysian interiority.

How can such a transformation of order be achieved? Doty (1957) refers that Hermes, besides being a transgressor and benefactor, is the god of wit. This Greek divinity is characterized by his creative capacity to introduce new, ingenious and unexpected elements into the *status quo*. Hermes is adept at muddying the calm waters and often creates forces of tension between a given situation and his quest for profit. In those tense situations, the resolution he himself gives is the astute creation of opportunities, understood as the articulation between an unexpected element with a given situation.

From the myths about Hermes, we can understand that he is the god of opportunities because he manages to cunningly articulate all kinds of objects in situations in which they do

not normally intervene, for example, the use of the shell of a turtle to create a lyre. The result of this hermesiac process<sup>1</sup> is the anticipation of benefits and the production of laughter as an expression of resolution. According to Doty's proposal (1957) Hermes as an ingenious creator is not afraid to fall into the absurd to obtain the benefits sought, and that trait of extravagance that provokes laughter unites Hermes with comedy, understood from Aristotle's definition (2014) as the imitation of the inferior and absurd that is laughable.

### **Comedy: the laughter of the cunning god.**

According to Nietzsche (2014) and Colli (2020) in Greek tragedy we find the artistic subjection of the subject to the terrible law of fate, subjection that was recognized as the sublime, one of the two ideas that art uses to produce representations that allow man to dignify his life. The other idea is the comic. For Nietzsche (2014) comedy emerged as a late artistic genre when the musical chorus of tragedy was silenced, gradually, by the same Apollonian expression that it had engendered and that exalted the beauty of appearances and the earthly world. According to this philosopher, Greek Attic comedy was based on everyday life, and he added that, mainly under the pen of Euripides, the heroes that took the artistic stage were a representation of the spectators themselves, of the humans of everyday life. In contrast to tragedy and its dialectical tension between the mortal and the divine, comedy as a genre was characterized by the artistic catharsis aroused by the absurd.

The comic was already found in the mythical texts of the Greeks, as we have made clear in the myth of Hermes and Apollo. Thus, we can suggest that Hermes, the paradoxical cunning and absurd god, is an appropriate figure of Greek comedy insofar as he appeals to the inferior, the openness to the different, for the resolution of tense situations, and whose cathartic expression would be laughter. If we understand the laughter provoked by the ingenious absurdity as a result of the timely alteration of an established order to obtain

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<sup>1</sup> I coin here hermesiac to make direct reference to Hermes, and to distinguish it from the hermetic which is related to the philosophical and religious tradition attributed to the legendary Hermes Trismegistus, and from the notion of hermeneutics which alludes to Hermes as the creator of human languages and divine messenger between gods and humans.

benefits, we could then consider that the actions of Hermes could be a comic negation of the principle of individuation embodied in Apollo.

Recall that in the first part of this writing we discussed the principle of individuation that proposes self-regulation through restraint and self-awareness. The principle was embodied in *psi* culture and offered the individual a state of health and success because of his autonomous and self-realizing effort. In the search for the mythical origins of such a principal Nietzsche (2014) provided us with the function of Apollo as the embodiment of individuality, the same that affirms restraint in the face of orgiastic destruction and promotes self-knowledge as the constitution of subjectivity. Apollo is then the figure of individuation as necessity and permanence of diverse orders. If Nietzsche (2014) wondered what the Dionysian and the Apollonian in Greek tragedy was, the question in this paper is to find out what the Hermesian in comedy is, in order to expand and complement the proposal of the timeless philosopher.

Walter Benjamin (1933) considered that if the dominant culture became an oppressive structure laughter would be the best way to survive in it and transform it. *Psi* culture has produced a disproportionate tendency to self-regulation, and in this individualistic situation Doty (1957) agrees that the comic figure can offer a necessary balance.

We have on the one hand the primal impulse of the Dionysian, which is the organic will of individuals, the unconscious interiority that vitalizes them. On the other hand, we have the Apollonian as resistance to that feverishness and imposition of diverse orders that translate the instinctive into representations, but which was taken by self-regulation to a disproportionate level in which the connection with the Dionysian interiority has been lost. It is here that it would be possible for the mythical actions of Hermes to come into play, because they propose the affront to order and the search for new states of benefit through wit and the acceptance of the absurd, that is, of the comedy that could mark the return to instinctual interiority.

### By way of conclusion

Let us recall that for Agamben (2011a) a device is everything that manages, governs, controls and orients behaviors, gestures and thoughts in search of their utility, and such devices have been incorporated in the individual. Hermesian laughter would then be a kind of anti-device that employs wit to exhibit and disarticulate absurd self-regulation. Hermes, as a mythical figure, calls for the ingenious alteration of order, that is, not to the destructive aggression that openly confronts the structures in which the subject has been formed, a struggle in which the individual stands to lose. The suggestion is to challenge the foundations of such structures or principles with the cunning necessary to obtain other kinds of benefits. If the principle of individuation seeks to make the subject fully responsible for his self-regulation, the ingenuity of Hermes as an antidevice would seek the revitalization of interiority and the creation of new goals that do not limit the subject to his own regulation.

The first step that seems to me appropriate in this Hermesian movement would be to divulge and make explicit the absurdity, the laughability of individuation, that is, to show through comedy the dubious relationship between health and success as equivalent ideals in positive thinking. What needs to be created and promoted is a comedy based on the absurdities of self-help literature, of health made entirely responsible to the patient and of self-regulation that confuses moderation with repression and self-knowledge as reification of the human psyche. Ehrenreich (2009) warns that even in positive thinking the sense of humor has been hijacked because there it is considered that one cannot laugh at everything. However, it is not because they are serious matters that they can escape comedy, but it is precisely because they are most serious and important that they should be the subject of witty observations and criticism.

The god Apollo who embodies the principle of individuation cannot be confronted through logical arguments because he is beyond our logical understanding and psychological capacities. It would be like trying to outshine the sun with a flashlight. However, the comedy inspired by Hermes offers us the disarticulation of restraint and self-regulation through the creative experience of wit. As powerful as Apollo is, we can accept the absurdity of our

human condition and play at blocking the Sun with just one finger as a comical and creative act.

Of course, we will have to ask ourselves which artistic expressions of comedy would be the most adequate to disarticulate more effectively the individuation principle of positivist thought. It would be necessary to inquire in what way hermesian laughter can be provoked through satire, mockery, parody, sarcasm or the different types/colors of humor and which of the above is more critical with respect to the Apollonian. However, it seems to me that these questions deserve a much deeper and more extensive answer, which may well start from the observations made by Fatima Coca (2005) on the influence of sociocultural aspects in the conception of the ridiculous and the comic in the field of literature. For the moment, it is enough to keep in mind that positive thinking can be understood as an order of Apollonian origin, and that as such it can be altered for the benefit of humanity, similar to the benefits produced by Hermes in his ascent to Olympus. May our laughter express the absurdities of positive thinking, and may comedy open up new horizons of our human experience.

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