

*Return Trip to Nirvana**

A few weeks ago I received a Letter dated from Divinity Avenue, Cambridge, Massachusetts. That symbolic address refers to the Center for Research in Personality of Harvard University. The writer was a friend, an American psychiatrist working in that Department.°

Dear K ...,

Things are happening here which I think will interest you. The big, new, hot issue these days in many American circles is DRUGS. Have you been tuned in on the noise?

I stumbled on the scene in the most holy manner. Spent last summer in Mexico. Anthropologist friend arrived one Weekend with a bag of mushrooms bought from a witch. Magic mushrooms. I had never heard of them, but being a good host joined the crowd who ate them. ~Vow! Learned more in six hours than in Aast sixteen years. Visual transformations. Gone the perceptual machinery which clutters up our view of reality. Intuitive transformations. Gone the mental machinery which slices the world up into abstractions and concepts. Emotional

* First published in the *Sunday Telegraph*, 12.3. 1961, with the editorial caption: 'Mystical Hallucinations induced by drugs are arousing controversy in America. After taking a mushroom drug used in Mexico, the author challenges Aldous Huxley's defence of the cult.'

° The friend in question was Dr. Timothy Leary who, a few years later, was to attain world-wide notoriety as the Leader of the LSD cult.

201

transformations. Gone the emotional machinery that causes us to load life with our own ambitions and petty desires.

Came back to U.S.A. and have spent last six months pursuing these matters. Working with Aldous Huxley, Alan Watts [noted authority on Zen Buddhism], Allen Ginsberg the poet. We believe that the synthetics of the cactus peyote (mescaline) and the mushrooms (psilocybin) offer possibilities for expanding consciousness, changing perceptions, removing abstractions.

For the person who is prepared, they provide a soul-wrenching mystical experience. Remember your enlightenments in the Franco prison? Very similar to what we are producing. We have had Gases of housewives who have never heard of Zen, experiencing satori [mystic enlightenment] and describing it....

We are offering the experience to distinguished creative people. Artists, poets, writers, scholars. We've learned a tremendous amount by listening to them....

We are also trying to build this experience in a holy and serious way into university Curricula.... If you are interested I'll send some mushrooms over to you.... I'd like to hear about your reaction....

Shortly afterwards, I went to the States, to participate in a Symposium at the University of California Medical Center in San Francisco.* One of the main subjects of the Symposium was 'The Influence of Drugs on the Individual'. But this was not much of a coincidence, as, at the present moment, a surprising number of Americans, from Brass to Beat, seem to have, for different reasons, drugs on the brain: the Brass because they are worried about brain-washing and space-flight training; the Beat because drugs provide a rocket-powered escape from reality; the Organisation Men because tranquillisers are more effective than the homely aspirins and fruit salts of yore; the medical profession because some of the new drugs promise a revolution, by 'chemical surgery', in the treatment of mental disease; and the spiritually frustrated on all levels of society because drugs promise a kind of do-it-yourself approach to Salvation. Thus there is a confluence of motives, and an Inflation in academic

* See p. 213 ff

drug-research projects, financed on a lavish scale by Government agencies, universities and foundations.

On the way from San Francisco to my friend at Harvard, I stayed for a few days at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. I had been invited there for quite different reasons, but on the first morning of my stay the subject of the magic mushroom cropped up. The psychiatrist in Charge of the mushroom was an Englishman of the quiet, gentle, unAmerican kind. Based on his own experiences-he had taken it on several occasions-and on experiments with ten test subjects, he ventured the tentative opinion that, compared to the fashionable wonder-drugs mescaline and lysergic acid, the effect of the mushroom was relatively harmless and entirely on the pleasant, euphoric side.

It is well known that the mental attitude, the mood in which one enters the Bates of mushroomland, plays a decisive part in determining the nature of the experience. Since Dr. P. was such a pleasant person and the atmosphere of his clinic appealed to me, I volunteered as a guinea pig-though I felt a little guilty towards my enthusiastic friend in Harvard. We fixed the date of the experiment, and I was told not to make any appointments on that day until the evening, as I would remain under the influence of the drug for about six hours.

Just before awakening on the morning of the appointed day, I had a dream which is relevant to what follows. I saw standing before me a large earthenware jar; in it squatted a man, with only his head visible over the rim of the jar; the colour of his face was a yellowish brown, he seemed in great pain, but had a resigned look; a dispassionate voice explained to me that this was St. Michael undergoing martyrdom; and that presently he was to be lifted out and put into another jar to be boiled alive in oil. I woke up with a faint nausea, and at once connected the dream with an experience on the previous day. In one of the laboratories for experimental psychology, I had seen a monkey's head-its body was hidden behind an enclosure so that the head alone was visible. An electric plug had been inserted into the creature's

skull, and a wire led from it to the ceiling. The plugged head was perfectly, unnaturally still (the body was immobilised in a restraining jacket); only the eyes, old as Methuselah's, turned in their sockets to follow the visitors' movements, quietly, resignedly. I hasten to reassure the reader that, as far as human knowledge goes, the monkeys in these experiments do not suffer pain. The plug is connected to electrodes which are inserted into the brain under anaesthesia, and once placed, cause neither pain nor discomfort: the purpose of the experiment does not concern us here. I had read about it before; nevertheless, the sight of that sad little head, with the electric plug sticking out of its fur, filled me with an unreasoning horror; hence the dream about St. Michael's martyrdom. Thus I faced the mushrooms in a depressed state of 'floating anxiety', as the psychiatrists say.

The mushroom comes synthesised, in the shape of little pink pills; they look harmless and taste bitter. I swallowed nine of them (18 milligrams of psilocybin), which is a fair-sized dose for a person of my weight. They were supposed to start acting after thirty minutes, and reach their maximum effect after about an hour.

However, for nearly an hour nothing at all happened. I was chatting with Dr. P. and one of his assistants, first in his office, then in a room which had a comfortable couch in it and a tape recorder; after a while I was left alone in the room, but Dr. P. looked in from time to time. I lay down on the couch, and soon began to experience the kind of phenomena which have been repeatedly described by people who experimented with mescaline. When I closed my eyes I saw luminous, moving patterns of great beauty, which was highly enjoyable; then the patterns changed into planaria-a kind of flatworm which I had watched under the microscope the previous day in another laboratory; but the worms had a tendency to change into dragons, which was less enjoyable, so I walked out of the show simply by opening my eyes. Then I tried it again, this time directing the

the table-lamp, which had a strong bulb, straight at my closed eyelids, and the effect was quite spectacular - rather

like the explosive paintings of schizophrenics, or Walt Disney's *Fantasia*. A flaming eddy, the funnel of a tornado, appeared over my head, drawing me upward; with a little auto-suggestion and self-dramatisation I could have called it a vision of myself as the prophet Elijah being taken to Heaven by a whirlwind. But I felt that this was buying one's visions on the cheap ('Carter's little mushrooms are the Best, mystic experience guaranteed or money refunded'); so I again walked out of the Show by forcing my eyes to open. It was as simple as that, and I congratulated myself on my sober self-control, a rational mind not to be fooled by little pills.

By now, however, even with open eyes, the room looked different. The colours had become not only more luminous and brilliant, but different in quality from any colour previously seen; they were located outside the normally visible spectrum, and to refer to them one would have to invent new words - so I shall say that the Walls were green, the curtains were dark, and the sky outside emerald. Also, one of the Walls had acquired a concave bend like the inside of a barrel, the plaster statue of the Venus of Milo had acquired a grin, and the straight dado-line was now curved, which struck me as an exceedingly clever joke. But all this was quite unlike the wobbling world of drunkenness, for the transformed room was plunged into an underwater silence, where the faint hum of the tape recorder became obtrusively loud, and the almost imperceptible undulations of the curtains became the Ballet of the Flowing Folds (the undulations were caused by warm air ascending from the central-heating body). A narrow strip of the revolving spool of the tape recorder caught the gleam of the lamp every few seconds; this faint, intermittent spark, unnoticed before, observed out of the corner of the eye on the visual periphery became the revolving beam of a miniature lighthouse. This lowering of the sensory threshold and simultaneous heightening of the intensity and emotional significance of perceptions is one of the basic phenomena of

the mushroom universe. The intermittent light-signal from the slowly revolving spool became important, meaningful and mysterious; it had some secret message. Afterwards I remembered, with sympathetic understanding, the fantasies of paranoiacs about hidden electric machines planted by their enemies to produce evil Rays and Influences.

The signalling tape recorder was the first symptom of a chemically induced state of insanity. The full effect came on with insidious smoothness and suddenness. Dr. P. came into the room, and a minute or two later I saw the light - and realised what a fool I had been to let myself be trapped by his cunning machinations. For during that minute or two he had undergone an unbelievable transformation.

It started with the colour of his face, which had become a sickly yellowish brown - the colour of the monkey with the electric plug. He stood in a corner of the room with his back to the green wall, and as I stared at him his face split into two, like a Gell dividing. It oscillated for a while, then reunited into a single face, and by this time the transformation was complete. A small scar on the Doctor's neck, which I had not noticed before, was gaping wide, trying to fingest the flesh of the chin; one ear had shrunk, the other had grown by several inches, and the face became a smirking, evil phantasm. Then it changed again, into a different kind of Hogarthian vision, and these transformations went on for what I took to be several minutes.

All this time the doctor's body remained unchanged, the hallucinations were confined to the space from the neck upward; and they were strongly two-dimensional, like faces cut out of cardboard. The phenomenon was always strongest in that corner of the room where it had first occurred, and faded into less offensive distorting-mirror effects when we moved elsewhere, although the lighting of the room was uniform. The same happened when other members of the staff joined us later. One of them, the jovial Dr. F., was transformed into a vision so terrifying - a Mongol with a broken neck

thought I was going to be sick; yet I could not stop myself staring at him. We stood face to face in the 'evil corner', and with my pupils dilated by the drug I must have looked unpleasant, for he asked in an embarrassed voice: 'Why are you staring at me so?' In the end I said: 'For God's sake let's snap out of it', and we moved into another part of the room, where the effect became much weaker. As the last remark indicates, I was still in control of my outward behaviour, and this remained true throughout the whole three or four hours of the experience. But at the same time I had completely lost control over my perception of the world. I made repeated efforts 'to walk out of the show' as I had been able to do during the first stages on the Couch, but I was powerless against the delusions. I kept repeating to myself: 'But these are nice, friendly people, they are your friends', and so on. It had no effect whatsoever on the spontaneous and inexorable visual transformations. At one stage, these spread from the faces of others to my own right hand which shrivelled into a cripple's, and to the metal bars of the table lamp, which were transformed into the claws of a predatory bird. Then I asked for a mirror to be brought in, expecting to see a picture of Dorffan Gray. Strangely enough, there was no change in my own face.

After an hour or two (one's inner Glock goes completely haywire under the drug), the effect began to wear off. They gave me a sedative, and after a suitable interval took me back to the hotel, where I had a meal with one of the doctors in the public dining-room. The world was normal again, except for a minute or two when the doctor's head, for the last time, went through two or three rapid mutations across the dining-table. These, however, were no Tonger frightening, but rather like a brilliant actor's impersonations of various character-types in quick succession—all of which, I felt with deep conviction, were different aspects of the doctor's personality. This conviction of possessing the gift of second sight, of being able not only to 'read' but to see a person's hidden character as if it were projected on a screen, is

another typical symptom in certain forms of schizophrenia. I had faint recurrent whiffs of it for quite a while. The faces of friends or of strangers in the train would for a moment become unreal, like projections of a magic lantern, and at the same time revealing their innermost secret—but I never managed to express or define just what had been revealed. This was the only after-effect of the experience that I am aware of. It lasted for about a week.

When the mind is split into separate layers, some of which function more or less normally, while others are deranged, one exists in a world of Paradoxa. At certain moments I thought that I had been lured into a trap, that the malign faces surrounding me were somehow connected with the Gestapo or the G.P.U., and it was a comfort to know that the room was on the first floor so that if it came to the worst I could bolt through the window. I always managed to snap out of it after a moment or two, persuading myself that all this was a delusion; but the visual delusions persisted independently of my better knowledge, and against these I was helpless. The horror of the experience lies not so much in the apparitions themselves, but in the moments of panicky suspicion that the condition might become irreversible.

And that suspicion is not entirely unfounded. One member of a medical research team whom I met, inadvertently took an overdose of the pills with the result that he suffered from intermittent delusions of persecution for a period of two months. I know of two other people who experimented under insufficient medical supervision and had to be hospitalised for varying periods. These, however, are exceptions. I have mentioned before that all of Dr. P.'s previous subjects had positive, euphoric experiences; I 'broke the series', as he ruefully remarked over post-mortem drinks on the next day. The same is true of the majority of the Harvard team's subjects. The reasons why I had been so unlucky are related to the monkey and the subsequent dream; they were the wrong kind of preparation. If one adds to this the burden of past experiences as a political prisoner, of past

tions with brain-washing, torture and the extraction of confessions, it will seem evident that I was a rather unfortunate choice for a guinea pig-except perhaps to demonstrate what mushroomland can do to the wrong kind of guinea pig. The Phantom faces were equally obvious projections of a deep-seated resentment against being 'trapped' in a Situation which carried symbolic echoes of the relation between prisoner and Inquisitor, monkey and experimenter, persecutor and victim. Poor Dr. P. and his nice colleagues had to endure what they would call a 'negative transference', and serve as projection screens for the lantern slides of the past, stored in the mental underground. I suspect that a sizeable minority of people who try for a chemical Lift to Heaven, will find themselves landed in the other place. This may be due to character or accident-the wrong time or setting for the experiment bringing the wrong type of lantern slides out of storage; and no experimental psychiatrist, however skilled, can exercise complete control over all the variables in the Situation, nor guarantee the result.

I do not want to exaggerate the small risks involved in properly supervised experiments for legitimate research purposes; and I also believe that every clinical psychiatrist could derive immense benefits from a few experiments in chemically induced temporary psychosis, enabling him to see life through his patients' eyes. But I disagree with the enthusiasts' belief that mescaline or psilocybin, even when taken under the most favourable conditions, will provide artists, writers or aspiring mystics with new insights, or revelations, of a transcendental nature.

I profoundly admire Aldous Huxley, both for his philosophy and uncompromising sincerity. But I disagree with his advocacy of 'the chemical opening of doors into the Other World', and with his belief that drugs can procure 'what Catholic theologians call a gratuitous grace'.* Chemically induced hallucinations, delusions and raptures may be frightening or wonderfully gratifying; in either case

* *The Doors of Perception*, London, 1954.

they are in the nature of confidence tricks played on one's own nervous system.

I have before me a file, compiled by the Harvard research team, containing the productions of various writers and scholars while under the influence of one of the drugs, or shortly afterwards. The first, by a well-known novelist, starts:

Mainly I felt like a floating Khan on a magic carpet with my interesting lieutenants and gods ... some ancient feeling about old gods in the grass, and temples, exactly also like the sensations I got drunk and pulgued floating in the Xochimilco gardens....

The second, by an aspiring writer, starts:

Dear ... Experiences with Psilocybin in me have been very tasty & eatable & when the effects come on, wham, I am in the middle of this ever growing larger and larger cosmos of vibrating hums of wishes & desires & mistrot' plays as in Shakerpiere, about to enter the stage & speak in the play. Somehow these pills make the soul more real.... (The spelling is a semi-conscious mannerism often induced by the drug.)

The third is the beginning of a Poem, also by a well-known writer, called *Lysergic Acid (God Seen thru Imagination)*

It is a multiple million eyed monster/it is in all its elephants and selves it hummeth in the electric typewriter/it is electricity connected to itself, if it hath wires/it is a vast Spiderweb/and I am an the last millionth infinite tentacle of the Spiderweb....

Some of the reports in the Eile, written after the experience, are in a more sober vein, but not a Single fitem contains anything of artistic merit or of theoretical value; and the druginduced productions were all far beneath the writers' normal Standards (Huxley's report was not in the file). While working an the material I was reminded of a Story George Orwell once told me (I do not recall whether he published it) : a friend of his, while living in the Far East, smoked several pipes of Opium every night, and every night a Single phrase

210

rang in his ear, which contained the whole secret of the universe; but in his euphoria he could not be bothered to Write it down and by the morning it was gone. One night he managed to jot down the magic phrase after all, and in the morning he read: 'The banana is big, but its skin is even bigger.' I had a similar revelation when I took the mushroom the second time, under more happy and relaxed conditions. This was in the apartment of my Harvard friend from whose Letter I haue quoted, and there were six of us in a convivial atmosphere, after dinner and wine. All of us took various amounts of the pill, and this time I took a little more (either 22 or 24 m/m, for I lost count). Again there were delusions: the room expanded and contracted in the most extraordinary manner, like an accordion played slowly; but the faces around nie changed only slightly and in a pleasant manner, becoming more beautiful. Then came the Moment of Truth: a piece of chamber music played an a tape recorder. I had neuer heard music played like that before, I suddenly understood the very essence of music, the secret of its magic; the harmony of the spheres was revealed to me ... Unfortunately, I was unable to teil the next day whether it had been a Symphony or a quintet or a trio, and whether by Mendelssohn or Bach. I may just as well haue listened to Liberace. It had nothing to do with genuine appreciation of music; my soul was steeped in cosmic schmalz. I sobered up, though, when a fellow niushroom-eater-an American writer whom I otherwise rather liked-began to declaim about Cosmic Awareness, Expanding Consciousness, Zen Enlightenment, and so forth. This struck nie as downright obscene, more so than fourletter words. This pressure-cooker mysticism seemed the ultimate profanation. But my exaggerated reaction was no doubt also mushroom-conditioned, so I went to bed. In Heaven and Hell, defending the mescaline ecstasy against the reproach of artificiality, Huxley, the most lüghly respected exponent of the cult, argues that 'in one way or another, all our experiences are chemically conditioned'; and

211

that the great mystics of the past also 'worked systematically to modify their Body chemistry ... starving themselves into low blond Bugar and a vitamin deficiency. They sang interminable psalms, thus increasing the amount of carbon dioxide in the Jungs and the bloodstream, or, if they were orientals, they did breathing exercises to accomplish the Same purpose.' There is, of course, a certain amount of truth in this an a purely physiological level, but the conclusions which Huxley draws, and the advice he tenders to modern man in search of a soul, are all the more distressing: 'Knowing as he does what are the chemical conditions of transcendental experience, the aspiring mystic should turn for technical help to the specialists in pharmacology, in bio-chemistry, in physiology and neurology ...'

I would like to answer this with a parable. In the beloved Austrian mountains of my school-days, it took us about five to six hours to climb a 7,000-ft. peak. Today, many of them can be reached in a few minutes by Gable-Gar, or ski-lift, or even by motorcar. Yet you still sec thousands of schoolboys, middle-aged couples and elderly men puffeng and panting up the steep path, groaning under the load of their knapsacks. When they arrive at the alpine refuge near the summit, streaming with sweat, they shout for their traditional reward -a Blass of shnapps and a plate of hot pea-soup. And then they look at the view-and then there is only a man and a mountain and a sky. My point is not the vertue of sweat and toil. My point is that, although the view is the Same, their vision is different from those who arrive by motorcar.

KOESTLER, Arthur 1968: Return Trip to Nirvana. In *Drinkers of Infinity. Essays 1955-1967*. London: Hutchinson. S. 201-212.