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Flesh of the Gods

THE RITUAL USE OF HALLUCINOGENS

EDITED BY

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The Divine Mushroom of Immortality

I have often told the story of our visits to the remote mountains of southern Mexico in search of survivals of the cult of the sacred mushroom. Rather than repeat it here, I now prefer to give my readers this chapter of my life in perspective—that is, to say what I think the Mexican hallucinogenic mushrooms mean to us all, what bearing they may have on the origin of the religious idea among primitive peoples. I shall be writing retrospectively, after many years' absence from the Mazatec hills. I am told many things have changed there.

Let me start at the beginning. Those who do not know the story will be interested in learning how it came about that my late wife, a pediatrician, and I, a banker, took up the study of mushrooms. She was a Great Russian and, like all of her countrymen, learned at her mother's knee a solid body of empirical knowledge about the common species and a love for them that is astonishing to us Americans. Like us, the Russians are fond of nature—of the forests and birds and wild flowers. But their love for mushrooms is of a different order, a visceral urge, a passion that passeth understanding. The worthless kinds, the poisonous mushrooms—in a way, the Russians are fond even of them. They call these "worthless ones" *paganki*, the "little pagans," and my wife would make of them colorful centerpieces for the dining-room table, against a background of moss and stones and wood picked up in the forest. On the other hand, I, of Anglo-Saxon origin, had known nothing of mushrooms. By inheritance, I ignored them all; I rejected those repugnant fungal growths, manifestations of parasitism and decay. Before my marriage, I had not once fixed my gaze on a mushroom, not once looked at a mushroom with a discriminating eye. Indeed, each

of us, she and I, regarded the other as abnormal, or rather subnormal, in our contrasting responses to mushrooms.

A little thing, some will say, this difference in emotional attitude toward wild mushrooms. Yet my wife and I did not think so, and we devoted a part of our leisure hours for more than thirty years to dissecting it, defining it, and tracing it to its origin. Such discoveries as we have made, including the rediscovery of the religious role of the hallucinogenic mushrooms of Mexico, can be laid to our preoccupation with that cultural rift between my wife and me, between our respective peoples, between the mycophilia and mycophobia (words we devised for the two attitudes) that divide the Indo-European peoples into two camps. If this hypothesis of ours be wrong, then it must have been a singular false hypothesis to have produced the results that it has. But I think it is not wrong. Thanks to the immense strides made in the study of the human psyche in this century, we are now all aware that deep-seated emotional attitudes acquired in early life are of profound importance. I suggest that when such traits betoken the attitudes of whole tribes or peoples, and when those traits have remained unaltered throughout recorded history, and especially when they differ from one people to another neighboring people, then you are face to face with a phenomenon of profound cultural importance, whose primal cause is to be discovered only in the wellsprings of cultural history.

Many have observed the difference in attitude toward mushrooms of the European peoples. Some mycologists in the English-speaking world have inveighed against this universal prejudice of our race, hoping thereby to weaken its grip. What a vain hope! One does not treat a constitutional disorder by applying a band-aid. We ourselves have had no desire to change the Anglo Saxon's attitude toward mushrooms. We view this anthropological quirk with amused detachment, confident that it will long remain unchanged, for future students to examine at their leisure.

Our method of approach was to look everywhere for references to mushrooms. We gathered the words for "mushroom" and the various species in every accessible language. We studied their etymologies. Sometimes we rejected the accepted derivations and worked out new ones, as in the case of "mushroom" itself and also of *chanterelle*.^{*} We were quick to discern the metaphors in such words, metaphors that had lain dormant, in some cases for thousands of years. We searched for the meaning of these figures of speech. We sought for mushrooms in the proverbs of Europe, in myths and mythology, in legends and fairy tales, in epics and ballads, in historical episodes, in the obscene and scabrous

* A little yellow mushroom, in French also called *girolle*, in German *Pfifferling*.

vocabularies that usually escape the lexicographer, in the writings of poets and novelists. We were alert to the positive or negative value that the mushroom vocabularies carried, their mycophilic and mycophobic content. Mushrooms are widely linked with the fly, the toad, the cock, and the thunderbolt; and so we studied these to see what associations they conveyed to our remote forebears. Wherever we traveled we tried to enter into contact with untutored peasants and arrive at their knowledge of the fungi—the kinds of mushroom they distinguished, the names of the mushrooms, the uses to which they were put, and the peasants' emotional attitude toward them. We made trips to the Basque country, to Lapland, to Friesland, to Provence, to Japan. We scoured the galleries and museums of the world for mushrooms, and we pored over books on archaeology and anthropology.

I would not have my readers think that we ventured into all these learned paths without guidance. We drew heavily on our betters in the special fields we were exploring. When we were delving into questions of vocabulary, in working out an original etymology for a mushroomic word, we were always within reach of a philologist who had made of that tongue his province. And so in all branches of knowledge. Sometimes it seems to me that our entire work has been composed by others, that we served merely as *rapporteurs*. Since we began to publish, in 1955, people from all walks of life have come to us in increasing numbers to contribute information, and often the contributions of even the lowliest informants have been of the highest value, filling lacunae in our argument. We were amateurs, unencumbered by academic inhibitions, and therefore we felt free to range far and wide, disregarding the frontiers that ordinarily segregate the learned disciplines. What we produced was a pioneering work. We know, we have always known, better than the critics, the flaws in our work, but our main theme, which we adumbrated rather diffidently in *Mushrooms, Russia, and History* (1957), seems to have stood up under criticism. My recent volume on *Soma* (1968) is Ethno-mycological Studies No. 1. If I live and retain my vitality, you may see published over the coming years a series of volumes, and, at the end of the road, there may be a new edition of our original work, reshaped, simplified, with new evidence added and the argument strengthened.

I do not recall which of us, my wife or I, first dared to put into words, back in the '40's, the surmise that our own remote ancestors, perhaps 6000 years ago, worshiped a divine mushroom. It seemed to us that this might explain the phenomenon of mycophilia *vs.* mycophobia, for which we found an abundance of supporting evidence in philology and folklore. Nor am I sure whether our conjecture came

before or after we had learned of the role of *Amanita muscaria* in the religion of several remote tribes of Siberia. Our bold surmise seems less bold now than it did then.

I remember distinctly how it came about that we embarked on our Middle American explorations. In the fall of 1952, we learned that the sixteenth-century writers describing the Indian cultures of Mexico had recorded that certain mushrooms played a divinatory role in the religion of the natives. Simultaneously we learned that certain pre-Columbian stone artifacts resembling mushrooms, most of them roughly a foot high, had been turning up, usually in the highlands of Guatemala, in increasing numbers. For want of a better name, the archaeologists called them "mushroom stones," but not one archaeologist had linked them with mushrooms or with the rites described by the sixteenth-century writers in neighboring Mexico. They were an enigma, and "mushroom stone" was merely a term of convenience. Some of these stone carvings carried an effigy on the stipe of a god or a human face or an animal, and all of these carvings were very like mushrooms. Just like the child in "The Emperor's New Clothes," we spoke up, declaring that the so-called mushroom stones really *did* represent mushrooms, and that they were the symbol of a religion, like the cross in the Christian religion, or the Star of Judea, or the crescent of the Moslems. If we are right—and accumulating evidence is strongly in our favor—then this Middle American cult of a divine mushroom, this cult of God's flesh, as the Nahua called it in pre-Hispanic times, can be traced back archaeologically at least to 500 B.C. and probably 1000 B.C. This places the ancestral mushroom cult in the culture of the highland Maya at a time when stone sculpture was making its first appearance in Middle America.*

Thus we find a mushroom cult in the center of one of the oldest civilizations in Middle America. These mushroom stones are stylistically among the finest we have. It is tempting to imagine generations of wooden effigies earlier still, mushroomic symbols of the cult that have long since turned to dust. Is not mycology, which someone has called the stepchild of the natural sciences, acquiring a wholly new and unexpected dimension? Religion has always been at the core of man's highest faculties and cultural achievements, and therefore I would suggest that we learn to contemplate the lowly mushroom in a new light: what patents of ancient lineage and nobility are coming its way!

It remained for us to find out what kinds of mushroom had been

* Some Middle American specialists may challenge my assumption of a connection between the "mushroom stones," which ceased to be made centuries before Columbus arrived on these shores, and today's surviving mushroom cult. For years I had only an assumption to go on, but now, thanks to discoveries made by the late Stephan F. Borhegyi and us, I think we can tie the two together in a way that will satisfy any doubter.



Fig. 30. A pre-Classic mushroom effigy stone from highland Guatemala, about 500 B.C. Many such stone carvings of mushrooms, dated between 1000 and 300 B.C., have been found in Guatemala, as well as in Tabasco and Veracruz in Mexico, with or without anthropomorphic and zoomorphic effigies at the base. The effigy here is a crouching jaguar with a human head, possibly signifying shamanic transformation under the influence of the hallucinogenic mushroom or depicting the guardian spirit of the sacred plant. Coll. Edwin Janss, Jr., Thousand Oaks, Calif. (Photo by Peter T. Furst.)

worshiped in Middle America, and why. Fortunately, we could build on the experience of a few predecessors in the field: Blas Pablo Reko, Robert J. Weitlaner, Jean Bassett Johnson, Richard Evans Schultes, and Eunice V. Pike. They all reported that the cult still existed in the Sierra Mazateca in Oaxaca. And so we went there, in 1953. So far as we know, we were the first outsiders to eat the mushrooms, the first to be invited to partake in the agapé of the sacred mushroom.* I propose now to give the distinctive traits of the Amerindian cult of a divine mushroom, which we have found a revelation, in the true meaning of that abused word, but which for the Indians is an everyday feature, albeit a Holy Mystery, of their lives.

Here let me say a word parenthetically about the nature of the psychic disturbance that the eating of the mushroom causes. This disturbance is wholly different from the effects of alcohol, as different as night from day. We are entering upon a discussion in which the vocabulary of the English language, of any European language, is seriously deficient. There are no apt words in it to characterize one's state when one is, shall we say, "bemushroomed." For hundreds, even thousands, of years, we have thought about these things in terms of alcohol, and we now have to break the bonds imposed on us by our alcoholic obsession. We are all, willy-nilly, confined within the prison walls of our everyday vocabulary. With skill in our choice of words, we may stretch accepted meanings to cover slightly new feelings and thoughts, but when a state of mind is utterly distinct, wholly novel, then all our old words fail. How do you tell a man who has been born blind what seeing is like? In the present case this is an especially apt analogy, because superficially the bemushroomed man shows a few of the objective symptoms of one who is intoxicated, drunk. Now virtually all the words describing the state of drunkenness, from "intoxicated" (which literally means "poisoned") through the scores of current vulgarisms, are contemptuous, belittling, pejorative. How curious it is that modern civilized man finds surcease from care in a drug for which he seems to have no respect! If we use by analogy the terms suitable for alcohol, we prejudice the mushroom, and since there are few among us who have been bemushroomed, there is danger that the experience will not be fairly judged. What we need is a vocabulary to describe all the modalities of a divine inebriant.

These difficulties in communicating have played their part in certain amusing situations. Two psychiatrists who had taken the mushroom

* This was on the night of June 29-30, 1955. In 1938 Jean Bassett Johnson had led a party to Huautla de Jiménez that attended a night-long mushroom ceremony, but they were not invited to partake of the divine mushrooms.

and known the experience in its full dimensions have been criticized in professional circles as being no longer "objective." Thus it comes about that we are all divided into two classes: those who have taken the mushroom and are disqualified by subjective experience, and those who have not taken the mushroom and are disqualified by total ignorance of the subject! As for me, a simple layman, I am profoundly grateful to my Indian friends for having initiated me into the tremendous Mystery of the mushroom. In describing what happens, I shall be using familiar phrases that may seem to give some idea of the bemushroomed state. Let me hasten to warn that I am painfully aware of the inadequacy of my words, any words, to conjure up for you an image of that state.

I shall take you now to the unilingual villages in the uplands of southern Mexico. Only a handful of the inhabitants have learned Spanish. The men are given to the abuse of alcohol, but in their minds the mushrooms are utterly different, not in degree, but in kind. Of alcohol they speak with the same jocular vulgarity that we do. But about mushrooms they prefer not to speak at all, at least when they are in company, and especially when strangers, white strangers, are present.* If you are wise, you will talk about something, anything, else. Then, when evening and darkness come and you are alone with a wise old man or woman whose confidence you have won, by the light of a candle held in the hand, and speaking in a whisper, you may bring up the subject. Now you will learn how the mushrooms are gathered, perhaps before sunrise, when the mountainside is caressed by the predawn breeze, at the time of the New Moon, in certain regions only by a *doncella*, an untouched maiden. The mushrooms are wrapped in a leaf, perhaps a banana leaf, sheltered thus from irreverent eyes, and in some villages they are taken first to the church, where they remain for some time on the altar, in a *jacara*, or gourd bowl. They are never exposed in the market place but pass from hand to hand by prearrangement. I could talk to you for a long time about the words used to designate these sacred mushrooms in the languages of the various peoples who know them. The Nahua before the Spaniards arrived called them God's flesh, *teonanacatl*. I need hardly draw attention to a disquieting parallel, the designation of the Elements in our Eucharist: "Take, eat, this is my Body . . ."; and, again, "Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear son. . . ." But there is one difference. The orthodox Christian must accept on faith the miracle of the conversion of the bread into God's flesh: that is what is meant by the doctrine of transubstantiation. By contrast, the mushroom of the

* I am speaking of 1953-57. Conditions have changed in the past fifteen years.

Nahua carries its own conviction: every communicant will testify to the miracle that he has experienced. In the language of the Mazatecs, the sacred mushrooms are called 'nti¹ si² tho³.^{*} The first word, 'nti¹, is a particle expressing reverence and endearment. The second element means "that which springs forth." Our muleteer in 1953 had traveled the mountain trails all his life and knew Spanish, although he could not read or write, or even tell time by a clock's face. We asked him why the mushrooms were called "that which springs forth." His answer, breathtaking in its sincerity and feeling, was filled with the poetry of religion, and I quote it word for word as he gave it:

El honguillo viene por sí mismo, no se sabe de dónde, como el viento que viene sin saber de dónde ni porqué.

The little mushroom comes of itself, no one knows whence, like the wind that comes we know not whence nor why.

When we first went down to Mexico, my wife and I, we felt certain that we were on the trail of an ancient and holy mystery, and we went as pilgrims seeking the Grail. To this attitude of ours I attribute such success as we have had. It has not been easy. For four and a half centuries the rulers of Mexico, men of Spanish origin or at least of Spanish culture, have never entered sympathetically into the ways of the Indians, and the Church regarded the sacred mushroom as an idolatry. The Protestant missionaries of today are naturally intent on teaching the gospel, not on absorbing the religion of the Indians. Nor are most anthropologists good at this sort of thing. For more than four centuries the Indians have kept the divine mushroom close to their hearts, sheltered from desecration by white men, a precious secret. We know that today there are many *curanderos* who carry on the cult, each according to his lights, some of them consummate artists, performing the ancient liturgy in remote huts before minuscule congregations. With the passing years they will die off, and, as the country opens up, the cult is destined to disappear. They are hard to reach, these *curanderos*. Almost invariably they speak no Spanish. To them, performing before strangers seems a profanation. They will refuse even to meet with you, much less discuss the beliefs that go with the mushrooms and perform for you. Do not think that it is a question of money: *No hicimos esto por dinero* (We did not this for money), said Guadalupe, after we had spent the night with her family and the *curandera* María Sabina. (For those who know the Mazatecs this simple declaration will be all the more remarkable: money is hard to come by in the Sierra Mazateca, and the Mazatecs are notoriously avaricious.) Perhaps you will learn the names of a number

* The superscript digits indicate the pitch of the syllable, ¹ being the highest of four. The initial apostrophe indicates a glottal stop.

of renowned *curanderos*, and your emissaries will even promise to deliver them to you, but then you wait and wait and they never come. You will brush past them in the market place, and they will know you, but you will not know them. The judge in the town hall may be the very man you are seeking, and you may pass the time of day with him, yet never learn that he is your *curandero*.

After all, who would have it different? What priest of the Catholic Church will perform Mass to satisfy an unbeliever's curiosity? The *curandero* who today, for a big fee, will perform the mushroom rite for any stranger is a prostitute and a faker, and his insincere performance has the validity of a rite put on by an unfrocked priest. In the modern world religion is often an etiolated thing, a social activity with mild ethical rules. Religion in primitive society was an awesome reality, "terrible" in the original meaning of that abused word, pervading all life and culminating in ceremonies that were forbidden to the profane. This is what the mushroom ceremony was in the remote parts of Mexico.

We often think of the Mysteries of antiquity as manifestations of primitive religion. Let me now draw your attention to certain parallels between our Mexican rite and the Mystery performed at Eleusis in the first millennium B.C., and probably much earlier. The timing seems significant. In the Mazatec country, the preferred season for "consulting the mushroom" is during the rains, when the mushrooms grow, from June through August. The Eleusinian Mystery, a sacred rite of purification and initiation related to deities of the earth, was celebrated in September or early October, the season of the mushrooms in Europe. At the heart of the Mystery of Eleusis lay a secret. In the surviving texts there are numerous references to the secret, but in none is it revealed. Yet Mysteries such as the one at Eleusis played a major role in Greek civilization, and thousands knew the experience. From the writings of the Greeks, from a fresco in Pompeii, we know that the initiate drank a potion. Then, in the depths of the night, he beheld visions, and the next day he was still so awestruck that he felt he would never be the same man as before. What the initiate experienced was "new, astonishing, inaccessible to rational cognition."* One writer in the second century A.D., by name Aristides, pulled the curtain for an instant, with this fragmentary description of the Eleusinian Mystery:

Eleusis is a shrine common to the whole earth, and of all the divine things that exist among men, it is both the most awesome and the most luminous. At what place in the world have more miraculous tidings been

* For this and the following quotation, see Walter F. Otto, "The Meaning of the Eleusinian Mysteries," in Joseph Campbell, ed., *The Mysteries*, Bollingen Series XXX, 2 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1955), pp. 20 *et seq.* Italics mine.

sung, where have the *dromena* called forth greater emotion, where has there been greater rivalry between seeing and hearing?

And he went on to speak of the "ineffable visions" that it had been the privilege of many generations of men and women to behold.

Just dwell for a moment on that description. How striking that the Mystery of antiquity and the mushroom rite in Mexico are accompanied in the two societies by veils of reticence that, so far as we can tell, match each other point for point! The ancient writers' words are as applicable to contemporary Mexico as to classic Greece. May it not be significant that the Greeks were wont to refer to mushrooms as "the food of the gods," *brōma theon*, and that Porphyry is quoted as having called them "nurslings of the gods," *theotrōphous*? * The Greeks of the classic period were mycophobes. Was this because their ancestors had felt that the whole fungal tribe was infected "by attraction" with the holiness of some mushrooms, and that they were not for mortal men to eat, at least not every day? Are we not dealing with what was in origin a religious taboo?

For me there is no doubt that the secret of Eleusis lies in the hallucinogens. I should like to think that the agent was a mushroom, and there are clues hinting that it was, but the plant world withholds from us in our modern times many mysteries that may have been known to the untutored herbalist of former times. The natural hallucinogens were the concern of the hierophants of Eleusis, and these exalted priests must have had several of them at their disposal to face any eventuality when the annual invitation went out far and wide. The cult never faltered for want of the miraculous potion.

All the utterances concerning Eleusis, such as the one from Aristides, quoted above, the awe and wonderment, the instinctive reticence, for me bespeak a hallucinogen. This reticence, observed to the end, deserves more attention than it has received. I believe that it was spontaneous, upwelling among the initiates before a great Mystery. It prevailed throughout the Greek world. Anyone could become an initiate on two conditions: that Greek was his tongue, and that he was not an unabsolved murderer. Even slaves could present themselves. Thus the reticence was not a self-imposed rule of an elite guarding a secret from the profane, as it was among the Aryans of India. Much has been made of the sanctions imposed by Athens for the slightest infraction of the secrecy. True, the law was severe. Many examples of its enforcement survive. Alkibiades, a rich, popular, handsome young Athenian belonging to the café society of his day, dared to impersonate the hierophant of Eleusis at a private party in his own home. By decree he suf-

* Giambattista della Porta, *Villa* (Frankfort: 1592), p. 764.

ferred the loss of all his wealth.* But the Athenian rescript did not run throughout the Greek world, whereas the silence did, to the end of the age. I think the silence imposed itself, spontaneous and voluntary, precisely the same reticence that we found among the Mazatec Indians when we went there in 1953-55, precisely the same reticence that prevails in all circles when face to face with the deepest Mysteries of religion.

But how much could we have learned if the initiated of Eleusis had spoken? Perhaps only the details of their experience, whereas the secret of secrets, the identity of the hallucinogen, may well have been the arcanum of the hierophant and his next of kin. The Eleusinian cult, according to George Mylonas, flourished for about 2000 years without interruption.† The hallucinogens, whatever they were, seem never to have been wanting. The effects on the initiates were, as near as we can say, the same as follow the ingestion, in proper dosage, of peyote, of ololiuqui, of the hallucinogenic mushrooms of Mexico. Plants chemically allied to the Mexican hallucinogens may well flourish in the Aegean basin, their virtues still hidden from us. At present I am inclined to think that the potion of Eleusis did not contain the juice of the fly agaric of the forest belt of Eurasia, the Soma of the Aryans. The action of the fly agaric on the human organism is different: there is a period of abnormal somnolence, and then a phase in which the imbiber is stimulated to perform feats of physical endurance renowned both in Siberia and in the hymns of the Rig-Veda. We have no hint of these effects from the Eleusinian potion. The chemistry of the fly agaric is not the chemistry of the Mexican plants.

Now that we are struggling unsuccessfully to control drug addiction in our modern world, let us turn to our "primitive" kin to see how they handled the dangers inherent in all hallucinogens. Among the Aryans, only the Brahmins were privy to the secret of Soma; they alone knew how it was prepared and imbibed. Similarly, in the Valley of the Ob, in Siberia, the Vogul laid down a severe taboo on the ingestion of the fly agaric: only the shaman and his acolyte could consume the mushroom with impunity—all others would surely die. In Greece the initiates generally attended the celebration at Eleusis only once in their lives, a few being permitted to return for the second time the following year. In Mexico the shamans (*curanderos*) and their next of kin know which plants are hallucinogenic. In the Mazatec country the *curanderos* pre-

* See George E. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 223 *et seq.*

† *Op. cit.*, p. 285; but see p. 257 for the one occasion when the celebration was called off.

scribe the dose that each will take. Throughout my sojourns in Mexico I was constantly being warned that the divine mushrooms were *muy delicados*, "very dangerous," and their consumption is hedged about with many taboos, differing from village to village, some of them inconvenient and arbitrary. As I said before, the Indians never abuse the plants, which they treat with respect, and I have known Indians, some of them alcoholics, who had taken the mushrooms only once in their lives. They spoke of the mushrooms with reverence but did not wish to repeat the experience. During an all-night session, the *curandero* (or *curandera*) watches solicitously over those who have taken the hallucinogen and is quick to act if there is sign of upset. The communicants are enjoined not to leave the house (a one-room hut) under any circumstances as long as the effect of the plant lasts. There is always one person, sometimes two, who do not share in the agapé and who stand guard against interruptions from without and any untoward happenings within. Afterwards, those who have participated whisper among themselves, exchanging confidences about the events of the night. All those who have shared in the communion feel close to one another, having passed together the unforgettable hours.

I would not be understood as contending that only the hallucinogens (wherever found in nature) bring about visions and ecstasy. Clearly, some poets and prophets and many mystics and ascetics (especially in India) seem to have enjoyed ecstatic visions that answer the requirements of the ancient Mysteries and that duplicate the mushroom agapé of Mexico. I do not suggest that St. John of Patmos ate mushrooms in order to write the Book of the Revelation. Yet the succession of images in his vision, so clearly seen and yet such a phantasmagoria, means for me that he was in the same state as one bemushroomed. Nor do I suggest for a moment that William Blake knew the mushroom when he wrote this telling account of the clarity of "vision":

The Prophets describe what they saw in Vision as real and existing men, whom they saw with their imaginative and immortal organs; the Apostles the same; the clearer the organ the more distinct the object. A Spirit and a Vision are not, as the modern philosophy supposes, a cloudy vapor, or a nothing; they are organized and minutely articulated beyond all that the mortal and perishing nature can produce. *He who does not imagine in stronger and better lineaments, and in stronger and better light than his perishing eye can see, does not imagine at all.**

This must sound cryptic to one who does not share Blake's vision or who has not taken the mushroom. The advantage of the mushroom is that it puts many (if not all) within reach of this state without having

* *The Writings of William Blake*, Geoffrey Keynes, ed., vol. III, p. 108 (Italics mine).

to suffer the mortifications of Blake and St. John. It permits you to see, more clearly than our perishing mortal eye can see, vistas beyond the horizons of this life, to travel backward and forward in time, to enter other planes of existence, even (as the Indians say) to know God. It is hardly surprising that your emotions are profoundly affected, and you feel that an indissoluble bond unites you with the others who have shared in the sacred agapé. All that you see during this night has a pristine quality: the landscape, the edifices, the carvings, the animals—they look as though they had come straight from the Maker's workshop. This newness of everything—it is as though the world had just dawned—overwhelms you and melts you with its beauty. Not unnaturally, what is happening to you seems fraught with significance, beside which the humdrum events of every day are trivial. All these things you see with an immediacy of vision that leads you to say to yourself, "Now I am seeing for the first time, seeing direct, without the intervention of mortal eyes." (Plato tells us that beyond this ephemeral and imperfect existence here below is an ideal world of archetypes, where the original, the true, the beautiful pattern of things exists forevermore. Poets and philosophers for millennia have pondered and discussed his conception. It is clear to me where Plato found his ideas; it was clear to his contemporaries too. Plato had drunk of the potion in the Temple of Eleusis and had spent the night seeing the great vision.)

And all the time that you are seeing these things, the priestess sings, not loudly, but with authority. The Indians are notoriously not given to displays of inner feelings—except on these occasions. One night my *curandera* devoted her attention to her seventeen-year-old son, who seemed to have been mentally retarded. She sang over him, and it was as though what she sang were a threnody of all the mothers of the world from the beginning of time, the Lament of the Grieving Mother, without artifice, without self-consciousness because a stranger was present, without reticence, her naked soul reaching out to the Divine Mother.

The singing is good, but under the influence of the mushroom you think it is infinitely tender and sweet. It is as though you were hearing it with your mind's ear, purged of all dross. You are lying on a *petate* or mat—perhaps, if you have been wise, on an air mattress and in a sleeping bag. It is dark, for all lights have been extinguished save a few embers among the stones on the floor and the incense in a shard. It is still, for the thatched hut is usually some distance away from the village. In the darkness and stillness, that voice hovers through the hut, coming now from beyond your feet, now at your very ear, now distant, now actually underneath you, with strange ventriloquistic effect. The mushrooms produce this illusion also. Everyone experiences it, just as do the tribesmen of Siberia who have eaten of *Amanita muscaria* and

lie under the spell of their shamans, displaying as these do their astonishing dexterity with ventriloquistic drumbeats. Likewise, in Mexico, I have heard a shaman engage in a most complex percussive beat; with her hands she hit her chest, her thighs, her forehead, her arms, each giving a different resonance, keeping an intricate rhythm and modulating, even syncopating, the strokes. Your body lies in the darkness, heavy as lead, but your spirit seems to soar and leave the hut and with the speed of thought to travel where it listeth, in time and space, accompanied by the shaman's singing and by the ejaculations of her percussive chant. What you are seeing and what you are hearing appear as one: the music assumes harmonious shapes and colors, giving visual form to its harmonies, and what you are seeing takes on the modalities of music—the music of the spheres. "Where has there been greater rivalry between seeing and hearing?" How apposite to the Mexican experience was the ancient Greek's rhetorical question! All your senses are similarly affected: a whiff of the cigarette with which you occasionally break the tension of the night smells as no cigarette before had ever smelled; the glass of simple water is infinitely better than a *flûte* of champagne.

Elsewhere I once wrote that the bemushroomed person is poised in space, a disembodied eye, invisible, incorporeal, seeing but not seen. In truth, he is the five senses disembodied, all of them keyed to the height of sensitivity and awareness, all of them blending into one another most strangely, until, utterly passive, he becomes a pure receptor, infinitely delicate, of sensations. (You, being a stranger, are perforce only a receptor. But the Mazatec communicants are also participants with the *curandera* in an extempore religious colloquy. Her utterances elicit spontaneous responses from them, responses that maintain a perfect harmony with her and with each other, building up to a quiet, swaying, antiphonal chant. This is an essential element of a successful ceremony, and one cannot experience the full effect of the role of the mushroom in the Indian community unless one attends such a gathering, either alone or with one or two other strangers.) As your body lies there, your soul is free, with no sense of time, alert as never before, living an eternity in a night, seeing infinity in a grain of sand. What you have seen and heard is cut as with a burin in your memory, never to be effaced. At last you know what the ineffable is, and what ecstasy means.

Ecstasy! The mind harks back to the origin of that word. For the Greeks *ekstasis* meant the flight of the soul from the body. Can a better word than that be found to describe the bemushroomed state? In common parlance among the many who have not experienced it, ecstasy is fun, and I am frequently asked why I do not reach for mushrooms every

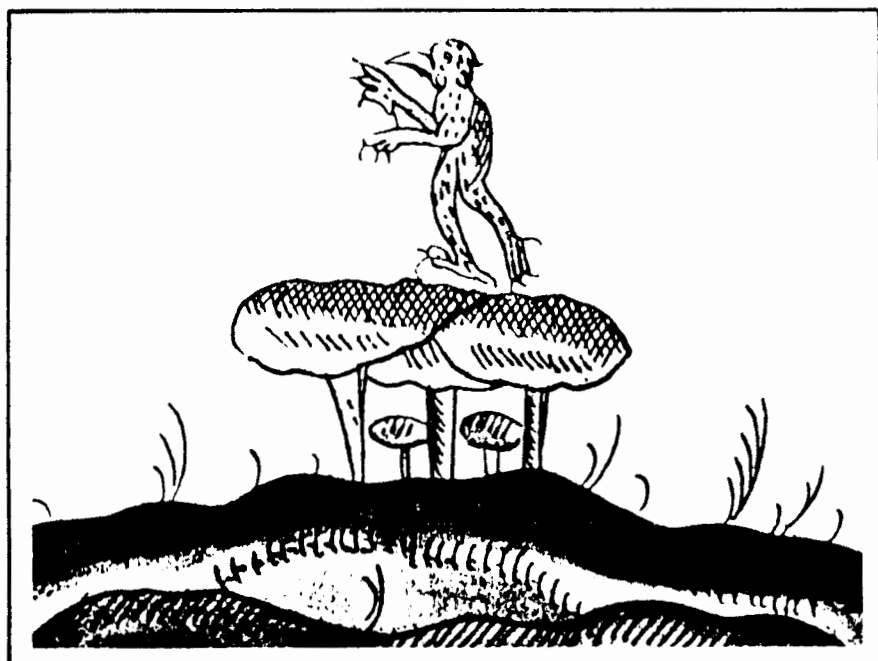


Fig. 31 A sixteenth-century drawing of the sacred mushroom of Mexico. The bird-headed spirit atop the plants presumably symbolizes hallucinogenic vision. From the Florentine Codex, Book 11, by Fr. Bernardino de Sahagun.

night. But ecstasy is not fun. In our everyday existence we divide experiences into good and bad, "fun" and pain. There is a third category, ecstasy, that for most of us hovers off stage, a stranger we never meet. The divine mushroom introduces ecstasy to us. Your very soul is seized and shaken until it tingles, until you fear that you will never recover your equilibrium. After all, who will choose to feel undiluted awe, or to float through that door yonder into the Divine Presence? The unknowing vulgar abuse the word, and we must recapture its full and portentous sense. A few hours later, the next morning, you are fit to go to work. But how unimportant work seems to you by comparison with the portentous happenings of that night! If you can, you prefer to stay close to the house and compare notes, and utter ejaculations of amazement with others who lived through that night.

As man emerged from his brutish past, millennia ago, there was a stage in the evolution of his awareness when the discovery of a mushroom (or was it a higher plant?) with miraculous properties was a revelation to him, a veritable detonator to his soul, arousing in him

sentiments of awe and reverence, gentleness and love, to the highest pitch of which mankind is capable, all those sentiments and virtues that man has ever since regarded as the highest attribute of his kind. It made him see what this perishing mortal eye cannot see. How right were the Greeks to hedge about this Mystery, this imbibing of the potion, with secrecy and surveillance! What today is resolved into a mere drug, a tryptamine or lysergic-acid derivative, was for them a prodigious miracle, inspiring in them poetry and philosophy and religion. Perhaps, with all our modern knowledge, we do not need the divine mushrooms any more. Or do we need them more than ever? Some are shocked that the key even to religion might be reduced to a mere drug.* On the other hand, the drug is as mysterious as it ever was: "like the wind it cometh we know not whence, nor why." Out of a mere drug comes the ineffable, comes ecstasy. This is not the only instance in the history of humankind where the lowly has given birth to the divine. Altering a sacred text, we would say that this paradox is a hard saying, yet one worthy of all men to be believed.

What would our classical scholars not give for an opportunity to attend the rite at Eleusis, to talk with the priestess? They would approach the precincts, enter the hallowed chamber, with a reverence born of the texts venerated by scholars for millennia. How propitious would be their frame of mind if they were invited to partake of the potion! Well, those rites take place now, accessible but unbeknown to classical scholars, ignored by them, in scattered dwellings, humble, thatched, without windows, far from the beaten track, high in the mountains of Mexico, in the stillness of the night, broken only by the distant barking of a dog, perhaps the braying of an ass. Or, since we are in the rainy season, the Mystery may be accompanied by torrential rains and punctuated by terrifying thunderbolts. Then, indeed, as you lie there bemused, seeing the music and listening to the visions, you know a soul-shattering experience, recalling as you do the beliefs of some primitive peoples that mushrooms, the sacred mushrooms, are divinely engendered by Jupiter Fulminator, the God of the Lightning Bolt, in the Soft Mother Earth.

* The case made for the origins of Christianity in a mushroom cult in John Allegro's recent book, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* (1970) has not met with acceptance among scholars, including some who are generally persuaded by Wasson's arguments regarding the identification of Soma with the fly agaric and the role of hallucinogens generally in the religious experience.—Ed.

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