

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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A Mushroom Omelette I: Strange Things

Pasto
Colombia

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

Gordon Wasson, who rediscovered the ritual use of psychedelic mushrooms in Mexico, wrote some years ago that people can be divided into mycophiles and mycophobes -- mushroom-lovers and mushroom-haters; there seems to be no middle-ground. To some individuals and to some entire cultures mushrooms are not fit for human consumption, and the idea of eating them is disgusting. This deeply-felt revulsion might be linked with a fear of being poisoned. Stories of mushroom-poisonings evoke images of ghastly deaths, and I know some adult Americans who shun even cultivated mushrooms in the fear that they might really be "toadstools."

Wasson explains mycophobia as fear of the mysteries to which certain mushrooms give access. Apparently, from remote times, some species have been used ritually and, often, secretly to put initiates into other states of consciousness and other dimensions of experience. Possibly, the soma of the ancient Aryans was Amanita muscaria, the bright-red fly agaric. Possibly, the potion drunk at the Eleusinian mysteries in ancient Greece was a decoction of psychedelic mushrooms. And, certainly, to the rational, intellectual, ego-centered side of human consciousness, such mysteries and the keys of access to them are things to be feared.

I am a long-time mycophile. To me mushrooms are strangely beautiful, fascinating, delicious. I prefer wild ones to cul-

tivated ones and find myself curious to sample some of the species books call poisonous. To me, fear of toadstools looks irrational. The percentage of mushrooms that are deadly is very small, and the deadly species can easily be learned and avoided. And as for the other "poisonous" ones -- well, one man's toxin is another man's psychedelic. But I readily admit that mushrooms are strange, magical, and, therefore, dangerous.

They are, above all, perfect symbols of the "other" side of consciousness, what Robert Ornstein in his recent book, The Psychology of Consciousness (W.H. Freeman Co., San Francisco, 1972), calls the "night" side, the non-ordinary mode of the dreamer, the visionary, the artist, the intuitive thinker. Ornstein, a psychologist, interested both in neurology and esoteric systems of mind development, presents evidence that the two hemispheres of man's brain serve very different functions. One is the locus of language, of linear thought, of masculine or "day" consciousness; the other is the locus of non-linear, non-rational, feminine, receptive, intuitional consciousness. Of meditation, Ornstein writes (p. 107):

[It] . . . is a technique for turning down the brilliance of the day, so that everpresent and subtle sources of energy can be perceived within. It constitutes a deliberate attempt to separate oneself for a short period from the flow of daily life, and to "turn off" the active mode of normal consciousness, in order to enter the complementary mode of "darkness" and receptivity.

Mushrooms are things of the night rather than the day, ruled by the moon, not the sun. What we call the mushroom is the fruiting body of a form of "lower" life that exists in the soil as a vast network of microscopic cellular threads, invisible to the naked eye. The fruiting body is a gigantic, compact aggregation of these threads -- the result of incredibly rapid cell division. A mushroom can spring up, full-grown, in several hours after a soaking rain. It is this character of springing up full-grown in all of their strange beauty that makes mushrooms such potent symbols of the workings of our unconscious minds. Intuitions, flashes of insight, mystical rap-

tures all burst into ordinary consciousness in all their vividness from the dark, invisible substratum of mind that exists below and within the daylight world of everyday. And like mushrooms, they cannot long exist in the sun but must be taken advantage of as soon as they appear.

Mushrooms lack chlorophyll; they cannot derive energy directly from the sun but must feed on live or dead organic matter. In nature they are vital intermediaries in the life cycle: they dismantle complicated organic structures to simplest constituents that can be used again to build the material shells of living things. They are the Disposers. Their fruiting bodies are works of great complexity compared to the simple strands of cells woven through the soil below.

It is hard to look at certain mushrooms without being struck by their phallic shape. Some species -- the stinkhorns in particular -- are so flagrant in this resemblance that they carry the word "phallus" in their botanical names. Here is another meaningful correspondence: the form of the mushroom is homologous to the form of a part of the human body with very direct connections to the night side of the mind.

So it is not surprising that mushrooms are associated with mysteries, with flights of the soul from the body, and with death itself. For all of these experiences are rooted in unconscious mental activity.

I have implied that some mushrooms called poisonous in books might equally well be called psychedelic. All psychedelics are intoxicants -- that is, poisons; the decision to use a positively- or negatively-loaded term has nothing to do with the reality of the thing itself. Amanita muscaria is an example. It is called the "fly agaric" (agaric is another word for mushroom) because an infusion of it in milk was supposedly set out in olden times to kill houseflies. Nearly all books call it dangerous if not deadly, probably because it is a close relative of a much more dangerous mushroom, Amanita phalloides, the

destroying angel. Yet there is no question that A. muscaria can transport people, quite safely, to realms of powerful, non-ordinary experience. At the present time, many persons in northern California are contentedly using it to take themselves on such trips -- some by drinking infusions of it in milk.

A simple explanation of this discrepancy in the reported effects of fly agaric in man is that people are differently set to interpret effects of this sort. Amanita muscaria does not kill; it does make the body feel very strange, and this strong but essentially neutral change may be interpreted in one of two ways: as a negative, outside force operating against the ego -- that is, as sickness; or as an opportunity to withdraw attention from ordinary things and pay attention to strange ones -- that is, as a high.

In other words, there is simply no line between poisonous and psychedelic mushrooms. Mushrooms are a pharmacological continuum from the white cultivated variety that has no action as a drug to species like the destroying angel that can easily cause death. If one likes to get high by eating mushrooms, he can choose species over a wide range, deciding whether he wants more or less of a change from usual in his physical body.

In the next two newsletters I will tell something of my experiences with psychedelic/poisonous mushrooms in Latin America.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Andrew T. Weil". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name.

Andrew T. Weil