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Andrzej Dorobek

Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Zawodowa w Płocku

**„OUTSIDE OF SOCIETY”: SOCIO-POLITICAL ASPECTS
OF PSYCHEDELIC/NARCOTIC CONSUMPTION
IN SELECTED EUROAMERICAN LITERATURES**

„POZA SPOŁECZEŃSTWEM”: SOCJOPOLITYCZNE ASPEKTY
KONSUMPCJI PSYCHODELICZNO-NARKOTYKOWEJ
W WYBRANYCH LITERATURACH
Z KRĘGU EUROAMERYKAŃSKIEGO

Abstract

Psychedelically/narcotically-inspired literature originally concentrated on the authors' experiences (vide De Quincey), in line with the idea of Romantic individualism. Promoting the attitudes considered anti-social or immoral, it was unacceptable for the protectors of any socio-political status quo, and thus found itself „in exile” from the middle-class society. With fin-de-siecle or surrealist writers (vide Rimbaud), it became more directly rebellious: evolving later from the Beats' isolationism and „passive resistance” towards a socio-political utopia that, in the

Abstrakt

Literatura o genezie psychoedelicznej czy narkotykowej pierwotnie eksponowała osobiste doświadczenia autorów (patrz De Quincey), zgodnie z ideą romantycznego indywidualizmu. Propagując postawy społeczne czy wręcz amoralne z perspektywy obrońców socjo-politycznego status quo, znalazła się „poza” społeczeństwem” (kapitalistycznym i mieszczańskim). Dzięki Rimbaudowi i francuskim surrealistom stała się bardziej buntownicza - później zaś, w USA, ewoluowała od artystowskiego izolacjonizmu i “biernego oporu” beatników do socjopolitycznej utopii,

Psychedelic Revolution era, was intended as an alternative to the cul-de-sac of late capitalism. i. e. as a mainstream socio-cultural project. In this essay, we shall attempt to trace the development of the socio-political traits in drug-inspired literature, with special stress upon A. Huxley, a tentative believer in the aforementioned utopia, and W. S. Burroughs, its „dystopian” deconstructor.

Keywords: psychedelics; narcotics; isolation; escapism; revolution; utopia; dystopia.

która w czasach rewolucji hipisowskiej zyskała szerszy wymiar socjokulturowy jako antidotum na miazmaty późnego kapitalizmu. Niniejszym przedstawiamy zarys ewolucji wątków socjopolitycznych w literaturze „psychodeliczno-narkotykowej”, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem A. Huxleya, jednego z inicjatorów owej utopii, oraz W. S. Burroughsa, jej świadomego dekonstruktora.

Słowa kluczowe: psychodeliki; narkotyki; izolacja; eskapizm; rewolucja; utopia; dystopia.

1. Introduction: from ancient Greece to Victorian England

Within the Euroamerican cultural circle, the earliest literary evidence of mind-expanding or narcotic consumption comes, arguably, from the ancient Greece – considering the suggestions that Pindar, as a participant of Eleusinian rites, must have been familiar with the LSD-related *kykeon*, which may have had some influence on his writings [Hofmann, 2001, p. 226-227], or hypotheses that Homer was known by his contemporaries to be initiated into opium [De Quincey, 1982, p. 139]. As for later epochs, it is claimed, for example, that Pierre de Ronsard, the most eminent French Renaissance poet, was an avid consumer of poppy seed (raw material for opium production), which was later reflected in his poetry [Cocteau, 1990, p. 79] – or that Thomas Shadwell, an English dramatist of the 17th century, was an “opium eater” [De Quincey, 1982, p. 139].

The above instances would suggest that, at least in Europe, the use of the aforementioned substances was initially limited to artistic, intellectual, or, generally, elite circles. Still, in England, where substances of supposedly hallucinogenic properties were known already in Queen Elizabeth I’s times [Leary, 1998, p. 105], in the first half of the 19th century opium became widely available at any chemist’s, diluted with water and sold under the name of laudanum. As a result, masses of industrial workers from London or Manchester quickly started using it on a regular basis [De Quincey, 1982, p. 24-25] - along with sophisticated literary figures, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge or George Gordon Byron [Parandowski, 1950, p. 140].

Assuming the sociological perspective, it would be rather easy, at this point, to identify the immanently paradoxical nature of psychedelic/narcotic intoxication: apparently fit for both refined tastes of the elite and lowdown appetites of the common folk. However, one should be aware that, from the same perspective, in both cases the results of the aforementioned intoxication seem quite similar, being basically reduced to the indifference to broadly understood social concerns. The indifference that inevitably puts anyone involved *outside of society* [Smith, 1978]: as Patti Smith, a noted American rock singer/poet was to state in the second half of the next century in remotely similar reference.

In other words, the decision to start taking psychedelics or narcotics on a more or less regular basis inevitably means the resolution to do what the society at large – or, in e. e. cummings’s words *mostpeople* – would rather abstain from. The so called normal citizens, having regular jobs and families to take care of, could hardly afford to concentrate on cultivating a narcotic habit, which, for anybody seriously involved, becomes virtually their *raison d’être*. Thus, Thomas De Quincey, the author of autobiographical *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821) that may be considered the first classic of drug-informed literature, makes it clear that, once he developed the habit, his life, even on the level of simplest everyday activities, became increasingly dominated by it, making him totally unproductive from the perspective of the society’s needs and obligations. Equally unproductive, in the same reference, seems to be the hero of *Obermann* (1804) by the French pre-Romantic writer, Etienne Pivert de Senancour¹ (1770-1846), a largely autobiographical novel in the form of a set of letters, where the melancholic hero’s emotions are stirred by appropriately selected drinks and stimulants, such as colours or smells. A closely related instance – from the same country, in the *fin-de-siecle* era of intensified psychedelic/narcotic experimentation – is des Esseintes, the main hero of Joris-Karl Huysmans’s novel *A rebours* (1884). It should be stressed, however, that, along with indulging in mind-expanding adventures, he would also thoroughly examine diverse perfume smells: as a typical dandy, alienated from the *bourgeois* society and almost exclusively concentrated on his own self, definitely should.

Taking look at the opposite end of the social ladder, e. g. the aforementioned industrial workers indulging in opium, we shall come across other instances of the alienation in question. Following the title character of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), apparently modelled upon *A rebours* [see Kunczewiczowa, 1979, p. 156], into the opium dens of London, we shall instantly notice the habitués concentrated on their own selves for totally different reasons: consumed by poverty and mental/physical degradation, they are waiting for the next “fix” to extend their lowdown, definitely anti-social existence even for a few hours – thus providing a more fitting object of description for social realists or naturalist writers than for analysts of psychological/spiritual/aesthetic aspects of psychedelic/narcotic consumption.

2. From *fin-de siècle* bohemians to the Beats

Considering the use of psychedelics and selected narcotic substances in the context identified in the title of this essay, we shall not fail to acknowledge the political significance of the activity in question: having in mind the renowned Polish poet Wisława Szymborska’s remark that everything we do unavoidably has political references. Thus, if one decides to undergo a psychedelic/narcotic adventure, one automatically resolves to step into the areas of experience that *mostpeople* would never dare

¹ Also known as the author of *Reflections upon the Primitive Nature of Man (Reveries sur la nature primitive de l’homme, 1800)*, a virtually pioneering work (at least in the realm of Euroamerican culture) that, according to Baudelaire [Baudelaire, 1992, p. 7], describes the effects of hashish, from euphoria through oblivion to stupefaction, thus prefiguring his own *Artificial Paradise* (1860).

enter, and, consequently, finds oneself in opposition to them. The immediate reason is that, having undergone psychedelic/narcotic adventure/initiation, one's mind no longer works along the same lines as the mind of any regular, law-abiding citizen. Ultimately, the growing number of citizens with "illegally" modified minds or perceptions means, at least in theory, a growing threat for the existing sociopolitical order – as Timothy Leary was well aware, calling for wide availability of mind-expanders in the late 1960s' Psychedelic Revolution era.

Thus, the rather general statement that *opium equals rebellion* [Cocteau, 1990, p. 34], made in 1931 by Jean Cocteau, a renowned "opium eater" from the circle of French surrealists, would acquire an unexpectedly concrete meaning. The premonition of Jean Arthur Rimbaud, a founding father of surrealism, who already in 1886 prophesied the commercial crisis of the 1960s' both cultural and sociopolitical revolution, finding *anarchy being on sale for the masses* [Rimbaud, 1998, p. 80], seems to be even more strikingly relevant in this particular reference. Still, it ought to be noted that the *fin-de-siecle* bohemia that Rimbaud was a legitimate part of hardly displayed subversive ambitions on a global scale: as the example of the Abbey of Thelema would suggest.

Established by one the most extreme representatives of the aforementioned bohemia, both controversial and highly influential English occultist, writer and thinker, Aleister Crowley, in the Sicilian town of Cefalu in 1920, it was apparently inspired by Rabelais's concept of Thelema as a utopian happy community presented in *Gargantua And Pantagruel* (1534-1564). Still, in fact Crowley's experiment was definitely closer to the decadent libertinism of Marquis de Sade than to any idea Renaissance idea of *joie de vivre*: his community being preoccupied with indulging their wildest instincts through deviant sex, "strange drugs" or even making "religious" sacrifices of animals. However, the underlying idea of the Abbey of Thelema, no matter how extreme the whole enterprise might actually appear to be, resulted from the conviction that remarkably less controversial 20th century intellectuals would probably share: the conviction assuming that modern civilization, forcing people to live intensely, unavoidably forces them to be constantly stimulated, since the priority of human nature is pleasure and thus one must choose between the intoxication and personality split [Książyk, 2001, p. 44]. This statement, echoing Wilde's philosophy of "new Hedonism", foreshadows, in fact, Terence McKenna (1946-2000), an important postmodern authority on psychedelia, who maintained that the ultimate goal of human evolution is having a *good party* [Brown, 1993]. The bohemian communities that came in between, such as American Beats, may also seem to be the followers of Crowley's Thelema ethos: considering their preference for "deviant" homosexual practices and extensive, not infrequently "strange drug" experimentation (vide, first and foremost, William S. Burroughs). It should be stressed, however, that both the habitues of the Cefalu community and their tentative counterparts from New York/California tended to pursue their "alternative" lifestyle being "in exile" from the "square"² middle-class society. As much as they detested the latter, they felt

² In counter-cultural slang meaning „conventional”.

virtually powerless to transform it (see at least A. Ginsberg's *Howl*). Thus, they could indulge in their alternative status: as the aforementioned younger associate of Ginsberg and Burroughs was to state, singing *Outside of society, that's where I want to be* [Smith, 1978] in the song "Rock'N'Roll Nigger" and proving the continuity of the bohemian ethos in the sociocultural context of rock (generally known for wider public appeal). They could also attempt to gradually change - undermine? - the society in question by infiltrating it with their subversive ideas and unconventional manner of living.

3. *Anarchy on sale for the masses?*

A historic example of global socio-cultural, if not socio-political ambitions of psychedelic/narcotic consumption was provided by Aldous Huxley (1894-1963), a model old school English intellectual and writer, related to such eminent figures of the literary, cultural and scientific history of his country, as Matthew Arnold (his mother's uncle) and Thomas Henry Huxley (his grandfather). Despite this noble ancestry, he betrayed vivid interest in the goods and attitudes highly requested *outside of society* to such an extent that, inspired by his first mescaline experience (allegedly in 1953), only a year later he published *The Doors of Perception*. In this famous essay he suggested that, in modern democratic societies, a number of "doors" (social, religious, or psychedelic) should be opened for anyone wishing to escape from the oppressive dullness of everyday life into an "artificial paradise" [see Huxley, 1991, p. 38-39]. In 1963, at the conference of the World Academy of Arts and Sciences in Stockholm, he went even further, stressing the need to exploit the hitherto unknown potential of human mind [Hofmann, 2001, p. 198-199].

It ought to be observed at this moment that, chronologically, Huxley's "psychedelic" essay was preceded not only by De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* or its partial continuation in the shape of Charles Baudelaire's seminal *Artificial Paradise* (1860), but, more immediately, by *Nikotyna. Alkohol, Kokaina, Peyotl, Morfina. Eter + Appendix*, originally published in 1932, by the eminent Polish dramatist, novelist and philosopher, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz aka Witkacy (1885-1939). This cycle of essays, exploring the nature and effects of the narcotic substances enumerated in the title, i. e. nicotine, alcohol, cocaine, peyote, morphine, and ether, generally stresses the transient and illusory nature of their effects, frequently and rather confusingly identified as comforting or blissfully illuminating. Similarly ambivalent seems the writer's evaluation of cocaine orgies presented in his literary works, such as the novel *Pożegnanie jesieni* ("Farewell to Autumn", 1927), or the drama *Matka* („Mother", 1924). The drug in question appears here to be one of the few similar, not entirely reliable sources of *metaphysical feelings* (as the author calls them in most of his writings), i. e. spiritual experiences of the artistic/intellectual elite that is increasingly endangered by the continuous onslaught of dehumanized, technological civilization favouring *grey masses* [Witkacy, 2010] at the cost of *individual self* [Witkacy, 2010]. Huxley, only nine years younger and thus representing roughly the same generation of Modernist writers/thinkers, had, nevertheless, a remarkably different perspective upon the significance of psychedelics or narcotics for the contemporary society as well as its individual members.

If Witkacy's idea of mind-expanding/narcotic intoxication was quite similar to Rimbaud's skeptical scenario of *muddy pool* [Rimbaud, 1970, p. 210] of everyday reality which marks the uninspiring end of the colourful visions of the mind – see the French writer's classic “psychedelic” poem “La Bateau ivre” („The Drunken Boat“, 1871) - then Huxley's contention that humanity can hardly exist without the idea of “artificial paradise” [Huxley, 1991, p. 38] seems to invite analogies with Crowley's aforementioned statement of pleasure being the priority of man and stimulating his need of intoxication. It should be stressed, however, that Huxley's concept of psychedelic/narcotic experience actually went far beyond the decadent dissolute hedonism that virtually marked the limits of Crowley's experiments in this field. As is clearly indicated in *The Doors of Perception*, mind-expanding adventures that lead to “artificial paradise” were supposed to broaden one's mental horizons as well as fundamentally transform one's intellectual habits or modes of perception. Moreover, when ultimately allowed to be legally used, they would no longer be confined to the *outside of society*: they would, in fact, profoundly influence, or even define the society's mainstream values and attitudes.

Despite competent, fundamental objections against psychedelic/narcotic consumption being promoted on the mass scale [see Hofmann, 2001, p. 185], Huxley's dream of making “artificial paradise” commonly available, relatively soon became reality. As has already been suggested, it happened in the heady times of the Hippie or Psychedelic Revolution, whose mastermind, Timothy Leary, considered the writer's mescaline experiment a historic achievement [see Leary, 1998, p. 248] and a possible signpost for future generations. Still, under a closer analysis, it appears that the signpost was basically misleading.

The main problem is that the concept of “artificial paradise,” as originally formulated by Baudelaire in 1860, hardly implies any idea of intellectual/spiritual progress or emancipation. For the distinguished French poet and essayist, entering this “paradise” is equivalent to *buying genius and happiness for a handful of dimes* [Baudelaire, 1992, p. 54]. In other words, man wants to escape from his uninspiring everyday circumstances even for a couple of hours, as he *first and foremost, appreciates temporary delights* [Baudelaire, 1992, p. 23].

The latter remark sounds almost identical with Crowley's aforementioned assessment of the need of pleasure as fundamental to human nature (probably just borrowed from Baudelaire's highly influential essay). There exists, however, an arguably more significant as well as more contemporary parallel with the French poet's perceptive idea of “artificial paradise” as a *cul-de-sac* [Baudelaire, 1992, p. 23], i. e. idle contemplation of colourful phantasmagorias, far from real effort involved in any kind of mental emancipation (mind-expansion in the proper sense).

Talking about LSD or acid – the main “weapon” of the Psychedelic Revolution, much stronger than hashish that Baudelaire referred to - Eldridge Cleaver, a leading activist of The Black Panther Party³, defined this substance as a *counter-revolutionary*

³ Probably the most important Afro-American counter-cultural organization at the time.

drug, sapping the will to change the world by replacing it with a false new one [Cope, 1996, p. 70]. Thus, following in the footsteps of his great Romantic predecessor, he aptly identified the underlying quality of “artificial paradise”: psychedelic/narcotic escapism. The escapism that largely influenced the majority of sociopolitical attitudes of the Hippie Revolution era⁴, when, let it be stressed once again, psychedelic/narcotic consumption virtually became a mainstream social phenomenon. Far from any “educational” objectives that Huxley and other similarly-minded intellectuals might have associated with it - and perfectly in line with Rimbaud’s sardonic premonition of *anarchy being on sale for the masses*.

The current state of affairs in the field under analysis was rather unexpectedly summed up by Eric Burdon, a renowned English blues-rock singer, living in California since the late 1960s. He publicly stated that, more than three decades after the Psychedelic Revolution, in its North American cradle, *everybody takes drugs* [Burdon, 1998]. It may only be added here that already in the early 1960s, in the second part of the “Nova trilogy”, W. S. Burroughs used drugs as a significant and still valid metaphor for the whole humanity being mentally enslaved and manipulated by anonymous forces that control the world’s past and present, *rewriting* them thanks to the recording technology [Burroughs, 1968, p. 167]. The rhetorical question remains whether this is really the condition aimed at by those who, following Aldous Huxley’s example, postulated changing the status of psychedelics/narcotics from the one of “exiles” from the 20th century “square” society to the one of its mainstream commodity - or at least an integral, legitimate part of the contemporary social conduct.

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⁴ Even though „civil disobedience” or passive resistance, propagated by psychedelic or acid rock artists, such as Country Joe McDonald, did have its share in bringing the Vietnam war to an earlier end.

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