

Of Transcendental Beauty and Crawling Horror

Robert Anton Wilson

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Four or five years ago I tried marijuana for the first time. I experienced a heightened visual awareness and a sort of nongenital sexuality. Every color I looked at was several degrees brighter than its usual luster, and my entire body had a delightful tingle, as if it were one undifferentiated erogenous zone. In the following months (this was in New York City, where pot is as easy to come by as tobacco if you have the right connections), I took marijuana several times, and once I made love to a girl while under the influence. It was the greatest orgasm I had ever had, and I could have become a confirmed pot-head then and there, except for one thing. A few weeks later I saw a friend go through the “pot horrors” technically known as “hallucinogenic anxiety” or “psychotomimesis” (imitation psychosis). It was a wildly unpretty sight to see. My friend said later that it was the most unpleasant experience of his whole life, and watching it was certainly one of the most unpleasant experiences of mine. A few years later, in California, at a party, I tried pot again. Nothing happened. I concluded later that this absence of reaction was caused by unconscious resistance: I still recalled my friend’s experience and was afraid of repeating it.

One or two more years passed and I read a few things about the “hallucinogenic,” or “psychedelic,” drugs. I learned that many people under the influence of these drugs experience truly mystic states, comparable to religious visions, and that sometimes these effects are long-lasting and even permanent. This is especially true of the chemical lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), and of peyote, a drug obtained from a small cactus known as mescal; but it has been known to result from marijuana and even belladonna, a drug obtained from the poisonous plant. Many religious groups have used psychedelic drugs to induce visions of their gods. There is a peyote cult among the American Indians, a magic-mushroom cult among the Mexican Indians, a yage cult in South America, a marijuana cult among the Moslems. There was even a belladonna cult in Medieval Europe; its practitioners were burned as witches. Some theorists, notably Robert Graves, and Alan Watts, have suggested that all religions can be traced to some group drug experience.

Over a year ago I heard of a place where peyote could be obtained easily. I knew that some people who take peyote have the horrors so bad that they have to be hauled off to a hospital, sometimes to remain for months, sometimes for years. Others have experiences of superhuman joy and blessedness. I am an artist and something of a mystic. I decided to take a chance.

I took the dose in the form of capsules. They were prepared in this way: The top of the peyote cactus was heated and dried until the moisture was removed (two complete cycles in a Laundromat drier did it). Then they were ground up into a fine powder by an ordinary wheat-grinding mill. The powder was then put into size 00 capsules. Twelve capsules makes a good dose. Fortunately, it takes a while to down 12 double-0 capsules, and you get a chance to decide whether you want to go through with it or not. I went through with it.

Nothing happened for about an hour.

Then anxiety began to creep over me. I began trembling and I felt nauseous. The wild idea that I had taken the wrong stuff and that I had been poisoned sent a chill through me. At the time I was in a farmhouse in a Midwestern state, and I walked outside to calm myself and get some fresh air. When I came back inside, a group of faces appeared at the window looking in at me. They were so patently sinister that I laughed at them. The laugh shifted the nature of the experience; the faces disappeared and I had no further anxiety. In a few moments I had my “marijuana symptoms”: bright colors and sexual excitement. For another hour or so these symptoms continued and gradually increased until I was in a state far “higher” than anything I had reached on pot. The beauty of every object I turned to was now so great that I was in a continuous mood of childish awe and joy. I believe that a 2-year-old toddler who comes into a room and smiles softly at everything it sees has the kind of vision I had then. I was smiling and laughing continuously, and could only say, “It’s all so goddam beautiful. ...” A friend who had agreed to stay with me during this experiment says I looked exactly like one of the smiling Buddhas of China.

This was just after Christmas, and my friend suggested that, since ordinary objects were giving me such a charge, I ought to try looking at the Christmas tree in the next room. Neither of us had any idea of what that suggestion would produce.

I went into the living room and looked at the most beautiful Christmas tree I had ever seen. It was so lustrous, so multicolored, so lovely, that I could not tear my eyes away from it. As I stood, literally stunned on the spot, the beauty began to focus and increase. This is, of course, impossible to verbalize. Crudely, let me say that marijuana-beauty is one foot above earth-level. In the past hour I had moved from that to about 10 feet high. Now, in about 2 or 3 minutes, I shot up dizzily to the height of Mount Everest. To express it another way, the words “transcendental,” “supernatural,” “more than human,” “divine,” “holy,” etc., now have meaning for me. They mean precisely and exactly the millionfold beauty of that Christmas tree during those minutes.

I wept with joy. Yes, even that ridiculous cliché came true: I literally shook with sobs, and tears poured down my face, and I was happier than I have ever been before or since.

With the unleashing of the tears, something else happened. I know of no words that can describe that “something else,” but I will try another analogy. I have been loved by two women in my lifetime, and that experience is something different in quality from the experience of being liked by the broad you happen to be sleeping with at the time. By an even greater degree than love transcends sexual fondness, this experience transcended love. I am, as I said, a bit of a mystic, but I am a Buddhist mystic, not a Christian. Nevertheless, after this experience I can, almost, believe in a personal and very personalized god who loves and needs mankind maybe even more than mankind loves and needs him. The Catholic saint (I forget her name) who rolled around on the ground screaming, “Oh, the love, the love,” was probably feeling what I felt then.

Bartolomeo Vanzetti wrote of how he once had a mystic experience looking at the night sky and felt “my soul go out from my body up.” He was a very hard-headed, atheistical anarchist, and yet he needed this language to describe that experience.

For several hours thereafter I was in what I have come to call the Magic World. In that world, not only are colors supernaturally lovely, but *space is full*. I no longer saw beautiful objects: I saw one continuous beautiful unity.

Twelve hours after I had taken the capsules – that is, at 8 o’clock the next morning – I was back down to merely the marijuana level of beauty, and I finally began to feel sleepy. I slept most of the day and most of the next night, except for a few intervals of waking again in the Magic World. The next morning, Monday, I went into my regular job at the advertising agency where I work. Several people commented that I seemed happier than usual, but nobody thought I was acting crazy. I was well-oriented in space and time and had no bad after-effects.

For several weeks all colors were a little brighter than usual, and I was a little happier than usual.

Then another unexpected thing happened.

I fell in love, sexually, with a young boy.

I have never been homosexual in my life, and I am 34. In spite of that, and in spite of common sense and convention, I did not fear or reject my feelings. I let them develop and watched them with the fond tolerance I have for my children’s carryings-on.

There was no doubting the reality, and the urgency, of the passion. I would get an erection just driving past the boy’s house in a car.

The boy was definitely heterosexual and, I knew, would react to any advance with repugnance or fear. That realization alone – and no “moral” considerations at all – kept me from making a pass at him.

About a month after the “perversion” (if you want to call it that) began, it just as abruptly ended. Four months have passed since the ending of these homosexual impulses, and I have not had similar feelings toward that boy or any other male. I am very glad that I had this experience, though, for it has taught me to understand homosexuals a little better. It has also taught me why Freud was so fond of quoting the old proverb, “Nothing human is alien unto me.”

Some time later I tried peyote again. Within a few hours I was back in the Magic World, and I stayed there, cozy and happy, for about 8 hours. Again, the color-awareness and the happiness lasted, in some degree, for several weeks.

I went back to peyote for the third time. I was in the Magic World for a while, then I went off into a different, nuttier world. I had visions of Donald Duck, of a Teddy bear I had slept with as a child and hadn’t thought of for 30 years, of lollipops dancing, and of similar infantile things. Then I went outside and had the very spooky (but not frightening) experience of having the trees very definitely look back at me as I looked at them.

My wife tried some peyote and had a vision of Peyote Woman, an American Indian goddess. (Indians generally see either Peyote Woman or Jesus Christ during their peyote experiences, and my wife had been reading an anthropological study of these rites.) Peyote Woman spoke to my wife for several hours and made specific prophecies about various friends of ours. Most of the prophecies have come true.

A friend wrote to tell me that he and his girl had taken peyote together and were able to see each other’s skeletons through the skin.

Another friend took peyote, got on the New York subway, and saw the figures in the advertisements acting out little dramas in 3-D.

I have read that biochemists have discovered that peyote, LSD, marijuana, and the other psychedelic substances have the same chemical basis as adrenochrome, a substance found in the blood of schizophrenics and diabetics. It is hypothesized that it is the adrenochrome that produces schizophrenic hallucinations and causes diabetics sometimes to act like schizophrenics. This hypothesis does not fully explain why schizophrenics almost always have frightening hallucinations and peyote users almost always have joyous ones. Could it be that the nature of the hallucination depends upon the body-set before the substance is ingested (peyote) or produced by the body (adrenochrome)? The schizophrenic, before his first hallucination, generally has had several months, or years, of acute anxiety.

I was learning a great deal about religion and insanity, and about myself. I wanted to take more peyote and learn more. At this time, however, the U.S. Narcotics Bureau, after several years of effort, finally succeeded in getting the possession of peyote declared illegal.

If many of my friends might qualify as beatniks, and if I am in the privacy of my thoughts a superbeatnik and an anarchist, I nonetheless, for the sake of my wife and children, find it necessary to “pass” in the square world and hold a square job. I decided not to mess with the law and I decided to leave peyote alone. (You can dispose of marijuana easily, but peyote cacti are cumbersome).

One day I heard that belladonna creates effects similar to peyote and can be purchased legally in any drug store. I investigated and found out that this was true. One dollar will buy you enough for ten experiences – but don’t rush to the drug store until you’ve finished this article.

I took two teaspoons of belladonna at nine o’clock on a Friday night, planning to have the whole weekend to recuperate.

In a few minutes I realized that something bad was happening. I saw a Hollywood monster coming at me across the yard. By the time this image faded, my legs and arms were trembling uncontrollably. I staggered indoors hoping that holding hands with my wife would calm me. Then I truly experienced high terror, for my wife, right in front of me, turned into a malignant, cannibalistic ghoul. And mixed with the terror I felt a profound sense of grief, for I knew that I was locked in the drug world for several hours at least, and it was going to be hideous. No words of comfort or reassurance from my wife would help, so long as they were coming out of that strange and satanic face.

In a few minutes, the words themselves were lost, for I could no longer hear her.

Somehow I found the sink and forced my finger down my throat. Again and again I provoked the vomit reflex. The fifth spasm brought up nothing – my stomach was empty – and the horrors continued. The drug, I knew, was in my bloodstream, and nothing now could stop its effects. I have never known a moment of greater despair.

I staggered around wildly, trying to get away from I-don’t-remember-what. I banged into the wall again and again, and wondered if I’d end up with a concussion.

This was no ordinary fear. It was a billion-eyed crawling nameless Horror out of H.P. Lovecraft, orchestrated by Berlioz.

The sink was laughing. I knew water was running down the pipes, but I also knew that the sink was definitely laughing.

I was with a dwarf on a long journey through a dark woods. A knight in armor, shining like the Tin Woodman of Oz, attacked me with a lance.

I was crawling on all fours across white-hot coals.

A golden glow got my attention. I was on a bed – what bed? – in a supernaturally golden room. It was the Magic Land of peyote again! I turned my head and saw my wife, miraculously not looking like Lady Dracula anymore. Her face was the pretty, intellectual face I love above all others, but her hair was a new shade of red, lustrous and lovely beyond the vocabulary of a poet or even an ad man. I touched her hair and said, “It was worth all the terror to see you so beautiful ...”

They kept asking the same question over and over. I couldn’t seem to make them understand. I tried again to explain: “We must all drink more milk,” I said clearly and slowly, “for the Kennedy Administration in outer space of the Nuremberg pickle that exploded.” I stopped, embarrassed, realizing I was making a fool of myself. That wasn’t what I meant to say at all. “Where’s the dwarf?” I asked testily.

Marv, a good friend who had suddenly appeared from nowhere, said quietly, “Don’t you mean *The Ticket That Exploded*?”

“William Burroughs,” I said. “Of course. All the literary critics will have to be shot because the cow is going dry again.”

I was sitting in a chair, in my kitchen, talking to my wife and to Marv. “I’ve been off my head, haven’t I?” I asked.

They started to assure me that it was all okay, that I was coming back to normal, don’t worry ... something more about the dwarf ...

Marv-the-Knight (now I knew him!) was walking me around the farm and I tried to show him the naked woman in the corn field. “Oh, of course,” I said, giggling, “she’s not really there.” I wondered why he was smoking a cigarette (Marv never smokes) and asked him for one. He leered cruelly and said he didn’t have any. No, he wasn’t cruel: That was the drug. “But can I have a drag off the one you’re smoking?” As soon as I asked it I realized that he wasn’t smoking – I had hallucinated a cigarette in his mouth.

We were back in the kitchen, drinking coffee with my wife. “How long was I out of my head?”

“Five hours.” They filled me in. Marv dropped by just shortly after I fell to the floor and started crawling. They got me into bed but I kept getting out. I kept lighting an imaginary cigarette and puffing on it with evident enjoyment. Then I regressed to the aimless movements of infancy for an hour or so; I got up once and very carefully urinated into a bushel of tomatoes (which, undoubtedly, looked like a toilet bowl to me); for a few hours I was pushing away imaginary objects. I began to lecture on literature and Marxism, unintelligibly. That was when I began to be me again.

At dawn, we all went to sleep.

The next morning I was normal, but tired. Twice I had hallucinations. Once I saw a polar bear with a black-turtleneck sweater walk past the house, and once I saw a green Pan playing a flute in my vegetable garden.

That night I went to the movies. It was a melodrama. I began hallucinating, pleasantly enough during the black-and-white movie into Technicolor. Then a wave of anxiety swept over me and I had to leave the theater and walk a while to calm down.

The next day I was fine. That evening, however, the panic hit me again and lasted for half an hour. To neutralize it I concentrated on reciting to my wife the plots of old movies. By the time I was through *The Third Man*, *Citizen Kane*, *Odd Man Out*, and *Giant*, the sensation was neutralized ... and then I recognized what it actually was. It was not the onset of the horrors: It was sexual

excitement. Physically, it was the same sensation as sexual excitement! I went off into gales of laughter. The siege had been lifted.

“It’s just like I found out in natural childbirth,” my wife says. “A body-sensation can be felt as either pain or pleasure, depending on the brain’s interpretation.”

And it is just as Buddhism teaches: There is no beauty, no ugliness, no pain, no pleasure. It all depends on the mind.

This is the greatest lesson I have learned from my psychedelic research. It is also the last lesson I will learn, for I am leaving that field of investigation to the experts. I have learned a great deal about insanity, something about homosexuality, a little about Heaven and Hell, and an enormous amount about my own limitations. I think I will leave it at that.

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