

# **Preparing the Gaia connection: An ecological exposition of psychedelic literature 1954-1963**

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## **Abstract**

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This paper investigates the extent to which psychiatrically-mediated drug texts, published in the mid-twentieth century, reveal an ecological awareness in their form and content. Primarily, this exposition extrapolates how the understanding of personal interconnectedness with wider systems – culture, nature, or the universe, for example – is provided by the ingestion of psychedelics under the auspices of psychiatry and psychoanalysis. It argues that this allowed a territory for the recognition of both the dangers that humanity pose to our ecological systems, and the understanding that one is very much a part of said system, and not an isolated or alienated unit.

**Keywords:** psychedelic, literature, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, ecology

## **Introduction**

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Broadly speaking, the intention of this article is to expose any ecological ideas, explicitly stated or otherwise, in pharmacographical texts published between 1954-1963, specifically medical monographs and texts that appeared as a direct result of psychiatric research with hallucinogens. Although various other contexts for hallucinogen use existed at the time – Native American use of peyote, for example – it was largely through the proliferation of psychiatric researches that the substances in question made the largest socio-cultural impact.

It has often been remarked that the use of certain hallucinogenic plants and chemicals, such as d-Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), Psilocybe mushrooms and mescaline, determine a state of ‘ecological awareness’ in those that use them. Ecological awareness is defined here as being a state-of-consciousness wherein an individual understands themselves to be merely one part of a wider environmental system — one in which the environment takes an ethical and ontological priority over the said individual. For example, recently, the writer and interviewer David Jay

Brown has written: “I suspect that psychedelic chemicals are messages from the plant world designed to help elevate our environmental awareness and sense of interconnectedness” (Brown, 2013: 17). Ecological awareness, therefore, is understood to be facilitated by psychedelics, which is achieved through the recognition and experience of the interconnectedness of life during the psychedelic experience.

In order to historically contextualize this connection, therefore, it is necessary to return to the socio-medical milieu that gave rise to the descriptive and conceptual term *psychedelic*, by way of examining its primary texts. For the purposes of this essay, I am defining *psychedelic literature* as a period of pharmacography that proliferated during the 1950s and early 1960s, which was directly related to a number of psychiatric research methods, concerned with the psychological action and efficacy of hallucinogens (largely semi-/synthetic drugs or isolated alkaloids such as LSD and mescaline) over the same period – namely, the *psychotomimetic*, *psycholytic* and *psychedelic* (Grof, 2010; Dickins, 2012). This is specifically due to the word *psychedelic* being originally termed within a psychiatric context, any discussion of the term *psychedelic* as a broadly cultural term is beyond the scope of this essay – especially in the case of the indigenous use of psychoactive sacraments.

The objective of this exposition is to determine the extent to which *psychedelic literature* reveals an essential ecological awareness within its discourse or, indeed, whether the formulations for such an awareness even existed in the psychiatric context. This will be done by examining the narrative content of the texts in regard to the idea of *interconnectedness*, so far as the *psychedelic experience* has been reported as endowing the user with a deepened or expanded awareness, and, moreover, examining the extent to which there is *ecological* and *naturalistic motif* in the content as evidence of ecological concern.

## **The exposition**

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The opening scene of Aldous Huxley’s first mescaline experience, described in his seminal text *The Doors of Perception* (1954), is the vision of a flower arrangement; a full-blown Belle of Portugal rose, a carnation and an iris. However, for the author, this vision was neither “agreeable nor disagreeable [...] It just is” (Huxley, 1994: 7). While he saw them as ‘heightened beauty’ and with ‘deeper meaning’, this was true of his vision generally, no matter what object he perceived. In other words, for Huxley on mescaline, his external sensual perception was imbued with a deeper ontological connection.

However, while Huxley begins with his exterior, visual perceptions, he quickly turns to the inner landscape of the mind; the visionary. In his follow-up text, *Heaven and Hell* (1956), he even describes a new landscape, one in which he uses geographical, nature-based metaphors, but which is only that, a metaphor for an immaterial, conscious landscape. This approach was perhaps necessitated by the theoretical rigours of his psychiatrically-facilitated experience. Moreover, Huxley's disdain for the exterior, 'ordinary' world, is explicit in his texts, and while it is the social world he is particularly finding a problem with, the natural world is conspicuous by its absence from his discourse. He wrote:

Familiarity breeds contempt, and how to survive is a problem in urgency from the chronically tedious to the excruciating. The outer world is what we wake up to everyday of our lives, is the place where, willy-nilly, we must try to make our living. In the inner world there is neither work nor monotony (Huxley, 1994: 30)

Later, in his final novel *Island* (1962), Huxley exults the potential for personal, inner salvation, yet is pessimistic about the potential for society to achieve such values itself. Human society, and the environment that it inhabits, is limited, material, and ultimately biologically utilitarian. The living planet, Earth, appears to be cast out with the ordinary, everyday existence, in favour of the 'mind-at-large' simply because, as in *Island*, the oil-hungry world will simply destroy it. Therefore, while Huxley implicitly recognizes that the natural world is under threat, any ecological concern in the text is undermined by his pessimism; green awareness fades into the background of a pure white light of mystical experience and his darkly-coloured perception of the social world that threatens it.

Huxley's primary concern, then, is the failure of Western, human society, and the damage to the ecology of the planet is of secondary concern to him as a symptom of that failure – ecological awareness is not, in itself, the explicit realization of his experiences or literary discourse. However, he does embed an important feature: namely, *interconnectedness*. He does this, mainly, through the employment of Henri Bergson's brain-filter metaphor, by arguing that the distinction between himself and his environment, which is created through a perception governed by biological utility, is broken down by the use of mescaline. The result, according to this apprehension of the experience, is an interconnectedness between the self and the other, wherein the separation between an autonomous I and the environment becomes increasingly indistinct.

Huxley's belief, certainly by the time of writing *Island*, is that the distinction can be completely destroyed, leading to an immaterial, universal, mystical oneness that is

understood within the matrix of consciousness i.e. universal consciousness. The experience reaches higher than an ecological, or planetary, awareness, and although it may encompass this level, Huxley does not deal with this point of trajectory, instead jumping from the personal to the universal in a single bound (although in his earlier works he examines a 'visionary' level in regard of the aesthetic appreciation.) Interconnectedness, therefore, from isolated ego to universal being, is the element that Huxley introduces at this point in psychedelic literature.

Richard Heron Ward, writing in the medical monograph *A Drug-Taker's Notes* (1957), responds to Huxley's mystical and visionary discourse by claiming that LSD was unable to bring one to this level of experience. However, in terms of starting to apply interconnectedness to ecological awareness, he takes a very important step; he applies it more thoroughly to his surroundings, dwelling more on 'setting' rather than 'set'. He begins to experience a mutuality in effect between himself and his surroundings: a relationship between his self and his environment that breaks down the simple utilitarian perception:

The wall moved continually – swaying, bulging, exaggerating its own bumps, scratches, blemishes – doing things with them. Part of the time I felt that I was the artist bringing all this into being. At other times it was something done to me (Ward, 1957: 86)

It is, perhaps, a shame, but also a feature of psychedelic literature, that Ward was largely kept cooped up in an office for his experiences. Had he been allowed to roam the wilderness, then perhaps an ecological awareness dependent on interconnectedness may have arisen at this point in the literature. Instead, understandably, by his final experience, he is simply bored of his surroundings – perhaps more in tune with Huxley's dislike of the 'ordinary' world than Ward would care to admit in his text. Regardless, setting (environment) and interconnectedness was described through particulars, not universals.

Furthermore, Ward argues that there are levels of consciousness and he uses the metaphor of a scale of musical notes to describe it. So with his *particular* identification of interconnectedness, he also postulates that this is also possible on numerous levels. Therefore, the possibility for levels of connection that exist between the personal and universal, are created within psychedelic literature.

Humphry Osmond (1917-2004), the psychiatrist who facilitated Huxley's experience, was examining the potential of hallucinogens as *psychotomimetics* (meaning 'to mimic psychosis'). However, as a result of their idea sharing, the term 'psychedelic' (meaning 'mind manifesting') was coined by Humphry, and later developed into a therapeutic method that centred on a high dose session with LSD. The therapy aimed

at providing the client/patient with a numinous, mystical, or otherwise ontologically-significant experience, as a form of therapy and furthered conscious experience.

The exemplar text of the psychedelic therapy genre is Malden Grange Bishop's *The Discovery of Love: A Psychedelic Experience with LSD-25* (1963). Bishop was a technical writer who, initially, believed he "didn't need" to undergo psychedelic therapy; he felt himself to be a seemingly content person. Yet the LSD experience, which he had facilitated, purportedly led to a realization that God and Love were the same thing. The result, after the event, is that he finds a more profound recognition of his love for his family; a topic initially given to him in the preparatory questionnaire. Nature, the natural world, is again conspicuously absent from his narrative and is instead rooted in his personal life and higher emotional states such as Love, which he equates with God. In one sense, he is simply reiterating Huxley's approach yet, in another, the spiritual awareness gives rise to feelings of love and connection. Emotional connection is relatively absent from Huxley's discourse.

Simultaneously to the development and research of the psychotomimetic and psychedelic approaches, was the development of *psycholytic therapy*. Dr Ronald Sandison, the first person to introduce LSD into Britain, coined the term 'psycholytic' (meaning 'soul dissolving'.) The term described his own therapeutic approach, which was based on Freudian and Jungian theory, and aimed at surfacing unconscious imagery in the visionary aspect of the LSD experience, with the intention of allowing the patient to recollect forgotten memories and integrate them (Sandison, 1997; Roberts, 2008; Grof, 2010).

Sandison's psycholytic therapy also became popular in the United States, and he wrote the introduction to Thelma Moss's *My Self and I: The intimate and completely frank record of one woman's courageous experiment with psychiatry's newest drug LSD-25* (1962). The monograph, published pseudonymously under the name Constance A. Newland, is notable for its segmentation of Freudian and Jungian spaces within the psyche/text. The vast majority of the book deals with Moss' personal, sexual neurosis and focuses largely on a series of interpreted images that bring a painful memory back to her consciousness. However, the much shorter, final section is concerned with the Jungian space, and which elicits archetypal imagery and the potential for a collective unconscious.

Although the book, like Bishop's, is almost totally free of ecological and naturalistic imagery, it does introduce the potential for such experiences, as Jungian theory understands sections of the psyche in terms of collectiveness. Thus, like Ward, the

potential space for an interconnected ecological awareness is posited, but not explored – remaining firmly fixed within the personal therapeutic sphere.

Published a year before *My Self and I*, Adelle Davis' *Exploring Inner Space: Personal experiences under LSD-25* (1961), which was also published pseudonymously under the name Jane Dunlap, is arguably the first book of psychedelic literature that begins to develop an ecological awareness within its narrative content. Davis underwent psychedelic therapy with Dr. Oscar Janiger who was investigating how LSD intersected the creative process by giving the drug to artists and writers (Dobkin de Rios & Janiger, 2003). Davis, a nutrition writer by trade, was one of these subjects. In her narrative, she describes the experience of going through the whole cosmological and biological evolutionary process. She becomes the millions of creatures, experiences the great extinctions, and the developing forms. More importantly, however, is her recognition of humanity's role on the planet, which is given terrifying treatment in the descriptions of her LSD experience:

In a flash my mood changed from one of being stunned by awe and beauty to one of horror and helplessness. "They've blown up our planet!" I cried. "How unutterably dreadful!

There's nothing dreadful about it," Pegasus replied calmly. "That silly little planet needed to be blown up. All they've ever thought about was war, war, war. They've been fighting wars for hundreds of years. They've tried to use their brains too much and failed to use their hearts. They forgot how to seek God. (Dunlap, 1961: 71)

The spiritual connection between God, in this case in a Christian sense, and the evolutionary process is demarcated by Davis as being fundamentally linked i.e. the evolutionary process is the work of God. The interconnectedness of life is ever-present in Davis' narrative, judged to be levelled by God as creator, and she begins to describe all life as a single process (God). However, like Huxley, she seems to be relatively pessimistic about humanity's ability to correct its ways of behaviour. Perhaps, in line with Christian traditions, this is the result of man's state of fallenness. Nevertheless, through metaphor and imagery, she describes a deep appreciation of the interconnectedness of biological life as a totalizing, ecological, force.

Aside from the simple metaphorical use of naturalistic imagery, it is possible to identify two reasons why evolution, ecology and the natural world begin to play a larger part in psychedelic literature generally when it enters the 1960s, and in *Exploring Inner Space* specifically. The first is Davis' use of the Jungian perspective on the psyche. Unlike Moss, who only utilized Jungian ideas of archetypes in order to describe a fusion, or integration of the self, Davis uses the 'collective' as a narrative perspective. As such, she is shown the damage and utility-based attitude humanity has wreaked on planet Earth, where Earth's destruction becomes the image

representing this scar. The perception is not linked to a personal pathology, but instead to a much wider, interconnected, perspective – a social pathology.

Secondly is the influence of R. Gordon Wasson, who Davis specifically cites in her text. Wasson discovered the use of psilocybin containing mushrooms within a religious context in Mexico, and wrote about it in a Life magazine article entitled *Seeking the Magic Mushroom* (1957). While it has been effectively argued (Letcher, 2006; Dickins, 2012) that Wasson deterritorialized the animistic construct of their use toward a Christian construct, the very fact that a naturally-occurring hallucinogen, used within a nature-based cosmology, must have had some influence over Davis' understanding. Moreover, in other works of literature and culture generally, knowledge of the indigenous use of psychoactives was becoming increasingly known in the West.

The philosopher and populariser of Eastern spiritual traditions, Alan Watts, was a friend of Huxley's and a number of psychiatrists working with hallucinogens. His work *The Joyous Cosmology* (1962) is his attempt, following and expanding on Huxley's mystical discourse, to explain the psychedelic experience. The main thrust of his text is a discussion of interconnectedness as his awareness expands beyond the limits of his 'skin-encapsulated ego' and he experiences his self as being part of the wider cosmos. Moreover, he wishes to move beyond the distinctions of inner and outer experience – beyond the simple 'set and setting' mantra and, unlike Huxley's dualistic approach, collapse them into one another. Unlike previously described works, then, Watts takes an interest in the natural world, and his appreciation of it moves beyond the abstract and metaphorical. Not only does he describe experiences set in gardens, as opposed clinical offices and social buildings, but his appreciation for nature becomes a concrete perception:

A journey into this new mode of consciousness gives one a marvellously enhanced appreciation of patterning in nature, a fascination deeper than ever with the structure of ferns, the formation of crystals, the markings upon sea shells, the incredible jewelry [sic] of such unicellular creatures of the ocean as the radiolarian, the fairy architecture of seeds and pods, the engineering of bones and skeletons, the aerodynamics of feathers, and the astonishing profusion of eye-forms upon the wings of butterflies and birds (Watts, 2013: 55)

While the majority of other descriptions found in psychedelic literature set their discourse on the plain of consciousness, a plain that appears to be distinct from the material, natural world, Watts more aptly describes them as being two sides of the same coin. For him, the interconnected experience provided by psychedelics, on a certain level, gives one an appreciation for the natural form, and the objects that make it up. In other words, there resides an ecological awareness in the so-called

'expansion' of one's consciousness. Furthermore, it is interesting to note, that it is the setting of his experiences that seemingly allows this to be perceived, meaning ultimately such an awareness rested upon the move of psychedelics out from the psychiatrist's office and into the natural world.

## Conclusion

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What does psychedelic literature tell us about the capacity for psychedelic substances to endow one with an ecological awareness? Firstly, following Huxley and, moreover, his conflation of psychological and mystical discourse, there is a capacity for one to experience a new level of connectedness outside of one's individuated, or isolated, self. Subsequent literature explored this idea and increasingly identified other levels of awareness, such as the cultural and universal, and one of which was an increasingly ecologically-tempered level.

Secondly, the ecological awareness that did exist partially functioned by being a recognition of the human capacity to destroy our planet (Huxley and Dunlap,) but also one's ability to appreciate the beauty of the natural world (Watts.) However, to move beyond the intellectual and metaphorical experience of ecological awareness, clinically-facilitated psychedelic-users apparently needed to be undertaking their session in an outside setting – something not typically used by the ethically-minded psychiatric researcher. Studies on shamanic cultures, for example, which employed psychoactive substances outside urban settings, tended to reveal a more engrained ecological awareness and their influence, therefore, could arguably have been much greater. The psychiatric mode, however, provided the theoretical approach to the mind, which served as an important explanatory/descriptive model i.e. the expansion of consciousness.

It would seem, therefore, that ecological awareness is not inherent in the psychedelic experience, and although dependent on the old mantra of set and setting, it does appear to potentialize the experience. A number of other forces, I would argue, were also taking effect in the 1960s that created a cultural condition (or set) that would later allow writers, like Brown, to postulate speculative theories concerning the endowment of ecological awareness, certainly in regard to over-coming human devastation of their natural habitats, by psychedelics.

In terms of literary influence, the shamanic and animistic paradigms for contextualizing drug use were beginning to enter popular awareness. Not only through Davis, but with works such as *The Yage Letters* (1961) by William S Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, and Carlos Castaneda's *Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of*

*Knowledge* (1968) for example. In a slightly earlier period, Beat poets, such as Gary Snyder and Michael McClure, were also popularizing ideas from both Eastern and Native American traditions that also incorporated stronger ecological ideas. And, moreover, popular works of science journalism like Margaret B. Kreig's *Green Medicine: The Search for Plants that Heal* (1964) also began demonstrating the importance of botany and plant life in the drug revolutions of the Twentieth century – all of which served to raise the popular cultural awareness of a connection between ecology and psychedelics.

In conclusion then, the conceptual framework was certainly there in psychedelic literature for the substances to be more thoroughly entwined with ecological awareness through the theoretical, and psychiatrically-contingent, model of an expanding and interconnected consciousness. But, as with so much to do with the psychedelic experience, it was the conditioning of other, no less important, socio-cultural factors that likely gave it an ecological flavour.

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