

## The Road to Eleusis

R. Gordon Wasson

### I. □ The Wasson Road to Eleusis

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With this little book we begin a new chapter in the history of the fifty-year-old discipline of ethnomycology, a chapter that for the first time takes within its purview, and in a big way, our own cultural past, our legacy from ancient Greece. Ethnomycology is simply the study of the role of mushrooms, in the broadest sense, in the past of the human race; and it is a branch of ethnobotany.

The English language lacks a word to designate the higher fungi. "Toadstool" is an epithet, a pejorative designation embracing all those fungal growths that the user distrusts, whether rightly or wrongly. "Mushroom" is ambiguous, covering different areas of the fungal world for different persons. In this little book we will use "mushroom" for all the higher fungi. Now that at long last the world is coming to know these fungal growths in all their myriad shapes and colors and smells and textures, perhaps this novel usage will answer to a need and come to be generally accepted.

We are three who have enlisted for this presentation. Dr. Albert Hofmann is the Swiss chemist renowned for his discovery in 1943 of LSD, but his familiarity with the plant alkaloids is encyclopaedic and he will draw our attention to attributes of some of them relevant to the Eleusinian Mysteries.

As we are dealing with a central theme of Greek civilization in antiquity, it was obvious that we needed the cooperation of a Greek scholar. At the appropriate moment I learned of Professor Carl A. P. Ruck, of Boston University, who for some years has been making notable discoveries in the recalcitrant area of Greek ethnobotany. For many months we three have been studying the proposal that we are making and his paper will be the third and concluding one. The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*

is the source for the myth that underlies Eleusis and we offer a new English rendering of it by Danny Staples.

It will be my function, in this first of three papers, to stress certain attributes of the cult of inebriating mushrooms in Mexico.

Early Man in Greece, in the second millennium before Christ, founded the Mysteries of Eleusis and they held spellbound the initiates who each year attended the rite. Silence as to what took place there was obligatory: the laws of Athens were extreme in the penalties that were imposed on any who infringed the secret, but throughout the Greek world, far beyond the reach of Athens' laws, the secret was kept spontaneously throughout Antiquity, and since the suspension of the Mysteries in the 4th century A. D. that Secret has become a built-in element in the lore of Ancient Greece. I would not be surprised if some classical scholars would even feel that we are guilty of a sacrilegious outrage at now prying open the secret. On 15 November 1956 I read a brief paper before the American Philosophical Society describing the Mexican mushroom cult and in the ensuing oral discussion I intimated that this cult might lead us to the solution of the

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Eleusinian Mysteries. A famous English archaeologist specializing in the archaeology of Greece, with whom I had had the friendliest relations for about thirty-five years, wrote me in a letter a little later the following:

I do not think that Mycenae had anything to do with the divine mushroom or the Eleusinian mysteries either. May I add a word of warning? Stick to your Mexican mushroom cult and beware of seeing mushrooms everywhere. We much enjoyed your Philadelphia paper and would recommend you keep as close to that as you can. Forgive the frankness of an old friend.

I am sorry that he has now joined the shades in Hades, or perhaps I should be happy that he will not be pained by my brashness in disregarding his well-meant advice.

My late wife Valentina Pavlovna and I were the first to use the term ethnomycology and we have been closely identified with the progress in this discipline over the past fifty years. That the reader may sense the drama of this our latest discovery I will begin by retelling the story of our mushroomic adventure. It covers precisely the last fifty years. It constitutes in large measure the autobiography of the Wasson family, and it has now led us directly to Eleusis.

Late in August 1927 my bride, as she then was, and I took our delayed honeymoon in the chalet lent to us by the publisher Adam Dingwall at Big Indian in the Catskills. She was a Russian born in Moscow of a family of the intelligentsia. Tina had fled from Russia with her family in the summer of 1918, she being then 17 years old. She qualified as a physician at the University of London and had been working hard to establish her pediatric practice in New York. I was a newspaper man in the financial department of the *Herald Tribune*. On that first beautiful afternoon of our holiday in the Catskills, we went sauntering down the path for a walk, hand in hand, happy as larks, both of us abounding in the joy of life. There was a clearing on the right, a mountain forest on our left.

Suddenly Tina threw down my hand and darted up into the forest. She had seen mushrooms, a host of mushrooms, mushrooms of many kinds that peopled the forest floor. She cried out in delight at their beauty. She addressed each kind with an affectionate Russian name. Such a display she had not seen since she left her family's *dacha* near Moscow, almost a decade before. She knelt before those toadstools in poses of adoration like the Virgin hearkening to the Angel of the Annunciation. She began gathering some of the fungi in her apron. I called to her: "Come back, come back to me! They are poisonous, putrid. They are toadstools. Come back to me!" She only laughed the more: her merry laughter will ring forever in my ears. That evening she seasoned the soup with the fungi, she garnished the meat with other fungi. Yet others she threaded together and strung up to dry, for winter use as she said. My discomfiture was complete. That night I ate nothing with mushrooms in it. Frantic and deeply hurt, I was led to wild ideas: I told her that I would wake up a widower.

She proved right and I wrong.

The particular circumstances of this episode seem to have shaped the course of our lives. We began checking with our compatriots, she with Russians and I with Anglo-Saxons. We quickly found that our individual attitudes characterized our respective peoples. Then we began gathering information, at first slowly, haphazardly, intermittently. We assembled our respective vocabularies for mushrooms: the Russian was endless, never to this day exhausted; the

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English, essentially confined to three words, two of them ill-defined— toadstool, mushroom, fungus. The Russian poets and novelists filled their writings with mushrooms, always in a loving context. It would seem to a stranger that every Russian poet composes verses on mushroom-gathering almost as a rite of passage to qualify for mature rating! In English the silence of many writers about mushrooms is deafening: Chaucer and Milton never mention them, the others seldom. For Shakespeare, Spenser, William Penn, Laurence Sterne (extensively), Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, for Edgar Allan Poe and D. H. Lawrence and Emily Dickinson, "mushroom" and "toadstool" are unpleasant, even disgusting epithets. Our poets when they do mention them link them to decay and death. We began to cast our net wider and to study all the peoples of Europe, not only the German and French and Italians, but more especially the peripheral cultures, out of the main stream, where archaic forms and beliefs survive longest—the Albanian, Frisian, Lappish, Basque, Catalonian and Sardinian, Icelandic and Faroese, and of course the Hungarian and the Finnish. In all our inquiries and travels we looked, not to the erudite, but to the humble and illiterate peasants as our most cherished informants. We explored their knowledge of mushrooms and the uses to which they put them. We were careful also to take the flavor of the scabrous and erotic vocabularies often neglected by lexicographers. We examined the common names for mushrooms in all these cultures, seeking the fossil metaphors hiding in their etymologies, to discover what those metaphors expressed, whether a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward our earthy creatures.

A little thing, some of you may say, this difference in emotional attitude toward wild mushrooms. But my wife and I did not think so, and we devoted most of our leisure hours for decades to dissecting it, defining it, and tracing it to its origin. Such discoveries as we have made, including the rediscovery of the religious role for 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 that we devised for our 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 borne the fruit that it has. But it is not wrong. Thanks to the immense strides made in the study of the human psyche in this century, we are all now 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, 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 deepest cultural implications, whose primal cause is to be discovered only in the well-springs of cultural history.

Our card files and correspondence kept expanding and in the end, sometime in the early 1940's, we sat down, Tina and I, and asked ourselves what we were going to do with all our data. We decided to write a book, but there were so many lacunae in our evidence that it would be years before we could put words to paper. In our conversations at that time we found that we had been thinking along the same lines, afraid to express our thoughts even to each other: they were too fantastic. We had both come to discern a period long long ago, long before our ancestors knew how to write, when those ancestors must have regarded a mushroom as a divinity or quasi-divinity. We knew not which mushroom(s) nor why. In the days of Early Man his whole world was shot through with religious feeling and the unseen powers held him in thrall. Our sacred "mushroom" must have been wondrous indeed, evoking awe and adoration, fear, yes, even terror. When that early cult gave way to new religions and to novel ways emerging with a literate culture, the emotions aroused by the old cult would survive, truncated from their

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roots. In one area the fear and terror would live on, either of a particular mushroom (as in the case of *A. muscaria*); or else, as the emotional focus through tabu became vague, of "toadstools" in general; and in another area, for a reason that we cannot now tell, it was the spirit of love and adoration that survived. Here would lie the explanation of the mycophobia vs. mycophilia that we had discovered. ("Toadstool", incidentally, was originally the specific name of *A. muscaria*, the divine mushroom, of a beauty befitting its divinity. Through tabu, "toadstool" lost its focus and came to hover over the whole of the mushroom tribe that the mycophobe shuns.)

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It was in Mexico that our pursuit of a hypothetical sacred mushroom first achieved its goal. On 19 September 1952 we received in the post two letters from Europe: one from Robert Graves enclosing a cutting from a pharmaceutical journal in which there were quotations from Richard Evans Schultes, who in turn cited a number of 16th century Spanish friars telling of a strange mushroom cult among the Indians of Mesoamerica; the second from Giovanni Mardersteig, our printer in Verona, sending us his sketch of a curious archaeological artifact from Mesoamerica. It was exhibited in the Rietberg Museum of Zurich. The artifact was of stone, about a foot high, obviously a mushroom, with a radiant being carved on the stem or what mycologists call the stipe. Here was perhaps the very cult we were seeking, well within our reach. Earlier we had resolved that we would avoid the New World and Africa in our inquiries: the world was too large and our hands were full with Eurasia. But in a trice we changed our minds and the course of our studies, and we concentrated on Mexico and Guatemala. We had been postulating a wild mushroom as a focus of religious devotion, a fantastic surmise. Now here it was on our doorstep. All that winter we went racing through the texts of the 16th century Spanish friars, and what extraordinary narratives they give us! We flew down to Mexico in that summer of 1953 and for many rainy seasons thereafter. With wonderful cooperation from everyone in that country, on the night of 29-30 June 1955 we finally made our breakthrough: my photographer and friend Allan Richardson and I participated with our Indian friends in a midnight *agape* conducted by a shaman of extraordinary quality. This was the first time on record that anyone of the alien race had shared in such a communion. It was a soul-shattering experience. The wild surmise that we had dared to postulate in a whisper to each other years before was at last vindicated. And now, nearly a quarter of a century later, we are prepared to offer another mushroom, *Claviceps purpurea*, as holding the secret to the Eleusinian Mysteries.

That there might be a common denominator between the Mexican mushroom Mystery and the Mystery of Eleusis had struck me at once. They both aroused an overwhelming sense of awe, of wonder. I will leave to Professor Ruck the discussion of Eleusis but will quote one ancient author, Aristides the Rhetor, who in the 2nd century A. D. pulled aside the curtain for an instant when he said that what the initiate experienced was "new, astonishing, inaccessible to rational cognition", and he went on:

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

[Italics mine.]

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

This description point by point tallies with the effect on the initiate of the Mesoamerican mushroom rite, even to the "rivalry" between seeing and hearing. For the sights that one sees assume rhythmical contours, and the singing of the shaman seems to take on visible and colorful shapes.

There seems to have been a saying among the Greeks that mushrooms were the "food of the Gods", *broma theon*, and Porphyrius is quoted as having called them "nurslings of the Gods", *th eotrophos*

. The Greeks of the classic period were mycophobes. Was this not because their ancestors had felt that the whole fungal tribe was infected "by attraction" with the holiness of the sacred mushroom, and that mushrooms were therefore to be avoided by mortal men? Are we not dealing with what was in origin a religious tabu?

I would not be understood as contending that only these alkaloids (wherever found in nature) bring about visions and ecstasy. Clearly some poets and prophets and many mystics and ascetics seem to have enjoyed ecstatic visions that answer the requirements of the ancient Mysteries and that duplicate the mushroom agape 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 but 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 vapour, 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.*

[Italics mine. From The Writings of William Blake, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes, vol. III, p. 108]

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 everyone, within reach of this state without having 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 backwards and forwards 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 with you in the sacred agape. 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 to you freighted with significance, beside which the humdrum events of everyday 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, there is another Ideal world of Archetypes, where the original, the true, the beautiful Pattern of things exists for

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evermore. 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 those who were initiated into the Mysteries among 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 in Mexico sings, not loud, but with authority. The Indians are notoriously not given to displays of inner feelings—except on these occasions. 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 sherd. It is still, for the thatched hut is apt to be 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 drum beats. Likewise, in Mexico, I have heard a shaman engage in a most complicated percussive beat: with her hands she hits her chest, her thighs, her forehead, her arms, each giving a different resonance, keeping a complicated 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, 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: 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 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 the person, utterly passive, becomes a pure receptor, infinitely delicate, of sensations.

As your body lies there in its sleeping bag, your soul is free, loses all sense of time, alert as it never was 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. I am certain that this word came into being to describe the effect of the Mystery of Eleusis. Can you find a better word than that to describe the bemushroomed state? In common parlance, among the many who have not experienced ecstasy, ecstasy is fun, and I am frequently asked why I do not reach for mushrooms every night. But ecstasy is not fun. Your very soul is seized and shaken until it tingles. 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 terrifying sense.... A few hours later, the next morning, you are fit to go to work. But how

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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, with those who lived through that night, compare notes, and utter ejaculations of amazement.

I will convey to you the overwhelming impression of awe that the sacred mushrooms arouse in the native population of the Mexican highlands. In the Mazatec tribe where I ingested them for the first time these particular mushrooms are not "mushrooms": they stand apart. One word—*thain3*

—embraces the whole fungal tribe, edible, innocuous but inedible, and toxic, —the whole fungal world except the sacred species. The sacred species are known by a name that in itself is a euphemism for some other name now lost: they are

*7nti1xi3tho3*

. (In Mazatec each syllable must be pronounced in one of four tones or in slides from one tone to another, 1 being the highest. The initial

7

is a glottal stop.) The first element,

*7nti1*

, is a diminutive of affection and respect. The second element,

*xi3tho3*,

means "that which leaps forth". The whole word is thus: "the dear little things that leap forth".

But this word is holy: you do not hear it uttered in the market place or where numbers of people are assembled. It is best to bring up the subject at night, by the light of a fire or a

*vela*

(votive candle), when you are alone with your hosts. Then they will dilate endlessly on the wonders of these wondrous mushrooms. For this euphemistic name they will probably use yet others, a further degree of euphemism, the

*santitos*,

the "little saints", or again the "little things" in Mazatec. When we were leaving the Mazatec mountains on horseback after our first visit there, we asked our muleteer Victor Hernandez how it came about that the sacred mushrooms were called "the dear little ones that leap forth". He had traveled the mountain trails all his life and spoke Spanish although he could neither read nor write nor even tell time by the clock's face. His answer, breathtaking in sincerity and feeling, breathed the poetry of religion and I quote it word for word as he uttered it and as I put it down in my notebook at the time:

El honguillo viene por si mismo, no se sabe de donde, como el viento que viene sin saber de donde ni porque. The little mushroom comes of itself, no one knows whence, like the wind that comes we know not whence nor why.

Victor was referring to the genesis of the sacred mushrooms: they leap forth seedless and rootless, a mystery from the beginning. Aurelio Carreras, town slaughterer in Huautla, when we asked him where the mushrooms take you, said simply: *Le llevan alli donde dios esta*, "They carry you there where God is". According to Ricardo Garcia Gonzalez of Rio Santiago, "To eat the mushrooms you must be clean: they are the blood of our Lord the Eternal Father."

*Hay que ser muy limpio, es la sangre de Nuestro Senor Padre Eterno.*

These are Spanish-speaking villagers picked at random. They express religion in its purest essence, without intellectual content. Aristotle said of the Eleusinian Mysteries precisely the same: the initiates were to suffer, to feel, to experience certain impressions and moods. They were not to learn anything.

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As man emerged from his brutish past, thousands of years 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, and gentleness and love, to the highest pitch of which mankind is capable, all those sentiments and virtues that mankind has ever since regarded as the highest attribute of his kind. It made him see what this perishing mortal eye cannot see. How right the Greeks were 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 him a prodigious miracle, inspiring in him 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 that comes we know not whence nor why." Out of a mere drug comes the ineffable, comes ecstasy. It 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.

If our classical scholars were given the opportunity to attend the rite at Eleusis, to talk with the priestess, what would they not exchange for that chance? They would approach the precincts, enter the hallowed chamber, with the reverence born of the texts venerated by scholars for millennia. How propitious would their frame of mind be, if they were invited to partake of the potion! Well, those rites take place now, unbeknownst to the classical scholars, 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 or the braying of an ass. Or, since we are in the rainy season, perhaps the Mystery is accompanied by torrential rains and punctuated by terrifying thunderbolts. Then, indeed, as you lie there bemushroomed, listening to the music and seeing the visions, you know a soul-shattering experience, recalling as you do the belief of some early peoples that mushrooms, the sacred mushrooms, are divinely engendered by Parjanya, the Aryan God of the Lightning-bolt, in the Soft Mother Earth.

Someone has called mycology the step-child of the sciences. Is it not now 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 ask you now to contemplate our lowly mushroom—what patents of ancient lineage and nobility are coming its way!

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pejorative designation embracing all those fungal growths that the user distrusts, whether rightly or wrongly. "Mushroom" is ambiguous, covering different areas of the fungal world for different persons. In this little book we will use "mushroom" for all the higher fungi. Now that at long last the world is coming to know these fungal growths in all their myriad shapes and colors and smells and textures, perhaps this novel usage will answer to a need and come to be generally accepted.

We are three who have enlisted for this presentation. Dr. Albert Hofmann is the Swiss chemist renowned for his discovery in 1943 of LSD, but his familiarity with the plant alkaloids is encyclopaedic and he will draw our attention to attributes of some of them relevant to the Eleusinian Mysteries.

As we are dealing with a central theme of Greek civilization in antiquity, it was obvious that we needed the cooperation of a Greek scholar. At the appropriate moment I learned of Professor Carl A. P. Ruck, of Boston University, who for some years has been making notable discoveries in the recalcitrant area of Greek ethnobotany. For many months we three have been studying the proposal that we are making and his paper will be the third and concluding one. The *Homeri c Hymn to*

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Early Man in Greece, in the second millennium before Christ, founded the Mysteries of Eleusis and they held spellbound the initiates who each year attended the rite. Silence as to what took place there was obligatory: the laws of Athens were extreme in the penalties that were imposed on any who infringed the secret, but throughout the Greek world, far beyond the reach of Athens' laws, the secret was kept spontaneously throughout Antiquity, and since the suspension of the Mysteries in the 4th century A. D. that Secret has become a built-in element in the lore of Ancient Greece. I would not be surprised if some classical scholars would even feel that we are guilty of a sacrilegious outrage at now prying open the secret. On 15 November 1956 I read a brief paper before the American Philosophical Society describing the Mexican mushroom cult and in the ensuing oral discussion I intimated that this cult might lead us to the solution of the Eleusinian Mysteries. A famous English archaeologist specializing in the archaeology of Greece, with whom I had had the friendliest relations for about thirty-five years, wrote me in a letter a little later the following:

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mushroomic adventure. It covers precisely the last fifty years. It constitutes in large measure the autobiography of the Wasson family, and it has now led us directly to Eleusis.

Late in August 1927 my bride, as she then was, and I took our delayed honeymoon in the chalet lent to us by the publisher Adam Dingwall at Big Indian in the Catskills. She was a Russian born in Moscow of a family of the intelligentsia. Tina had fled from Russia with her family in the summer of 1918, she being then 17 years old. She qualified as a physician at the University of London and had been working hard to establish her pediatric practice in New York. I was a newspaper man in the financial department of the *Herald Tribune*. On that first beautiful afternoon of our holiday in the Catskills, we went sauntering down the path for a walk, hand in hand, happy as larks, both of us abounding in the joy of life. There was a clearing on the right, a mountain forest on our left.

Suddenly Tina threw down my hand and darted up into the forest. She had seen mushrooms, a host of mushrooms, mushrooms of many kinds that peopled the forest floor. She cried out in delight at their beauty. She addressed each kind with an affectionate Russian name. Such a display she had not seen since she left her family's *dacha* near Moscow, almost a decade before. She knelt before those toadstools in poses of adoration like the Virgin hearkening to the Angel of the Annunciation. She began gathering some of the fungi in her apron. I called to her: "Come back, come back to me! They are poisonous, putrid. They are toadstools. Come back to me!" She only laughed the more: her merry laughter will ring forever in my ears. That evening she seasoned the soup with the fungi, she garnished the meat with other fungi. Yet others she threaded together and strung up to dry, for winter use as she said. My discomfiture was complete. That night I ate nothing with mushrooms in it. Frantic and deeply hurt, I was led to wild ideas: I told her that I would wake up a widower.

She proved right and I wrong.

The particular circumstances of this episode seem to have shaped the course of our lives. We began checking with our compatriots, she with Russians and I with Anglo-Saxons. We quickly found that our individual attitudes characterized our respective peoples. Then we began gathering information, at first slowly, haphazardly, intermittently. We assembled our respective vocabularies for mushrooms: the Russian was endless, never to this day exhausted; the English, essentially confined to three words, two of them ill-defined— toadstool, mushroom, fungus. The Russian poets and novelists filled their writings with mushrooms, always in a loving context. It would seem to a stranger that every Russian poet composes verses on mushroom-gathering almost as a rite of passage to qualify for mature rating! In English the silence of many writers about mushrooms is deafening: Chaucer and Milton never mention them, the others seldom. For Shakespeare, Spenser, William Penn, Laurence Sterne (extensively), Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, for Edgar Allan Poe and D. H. Lawrence and Emily Dickinson, "mushroom" and "toadstool" are unpleasant, even disgusting epithets. Our poets when they do mention them link them to decay and death. We began to cast our net wider and to study all the peoples of Europe, not only the German and French and Italians, but more especially the peripheral cultures, out of the main stream, where archaic forms and beliefs survive longest—the Albanian, Frisian, Lappish, Basque, Catalonian and Sardinian, Icelandic and Faroese, and of course the Hungarian and the Finnish. In all our inquiries and travels we looked, not to the erudite, but to the humble and illiterate peasants as our most cherished informants. We explored their knowledge of mushrooms and the uses to which they put them. We were careful also to take the flavor of the scabrous and erotic vocabularies often neglected by lexicographers. We examined the common names for mushrooms in all these cultures,

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seeking the fossil metaphors hiding in their etymologies, to discover what those metaphors expressed, whether a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward our earthy creatures.

A little thing, some of you may say, this difference in emotional attitude toward wild mushrooms. But my wife and I did not think so, and we devoted most of our leisure hours for decades to dissecting it, defining it, and tracing it to its origin. Such discoveries as we have made, including the rediscovery of the religious role for 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 that we devised for our 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 borne the fruit that it has. But it is not wrong. Thanks to the immense strides made in the study of the human psyche in this century, we are all now 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, 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 deepest cultural implications, whose primal cause is to be discovered only in the well-springs of cultural history.

Our card files and correspondence kept expanding and in the end, sometime in the early 1940's, we sat down, Tina and I, and asked ourselves what we were going to do with all our data. We decided to write a book, but there were so many lacunae in our evidence that it would be years before we could put words to paper. In our conversations at that time we found that we had been thinking along the same lines, afraid to express our thoughts even to each other: they were too fantastic. We had both come to discern a period long long ago, long before our ancestors knew how to write, when those ancestors must have regarded a mushroom as a divinity or quasi-divinity. We knew not which mushroom(s) nor why. In the days of Early Man his whole world was shot through with religious feeling and the unseen powers held him in thrall. Our sacred "mushroom" must have been wondrous indeed, evoking awe and adoration, fear, yes, even terror. When that early cult gave way to new religions and to novel ways emerging with a literate culture, the emotions aroused by the old cult would survive, truncated from their roots. In one area the fear and terror would live on, either of a particular mushroom (as in the case of *A. muscaria*); or else, as the emotional focus through tabu became vague, of "toadstools" in general; and in another area, for a reason that we cannot now tell, it was the spirit of love and adoration that survived. Here would lie the explanation of the mycophobia vs. mycophilia that we had discovered. ("Toadstool", incidentally, was originally the specific name of *A. muscaria*, the divine mushroom, of a beauty befitting its divinity. Through tabu, "toadstool" lost its focus and came to hover over the whole of the mushroom tribe that the mycophobe shuns.)

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It was in Mexico that our pursuit of a hypothetical sacred mushroom first achieved its goal. On 19 September 1952 we received in the post two letters from Europe: one from Robert Graves enclosing a cutting from a pharmaceutical journal in which there were quotations from Richard Evans Schultes, who in turn cited a number of with century Spanish friars telling of a strange mushroom cult among the Indians of Mesoamerica; the second from Giovanni Mardersteig, our printer in Verona, sending us his sketch of a curious archaeological artifact from Mesoamerica. It was exhibited in the Rietberg Museum of Zurich. The artifact was of stone, about a foot high,

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obviously a mushroom, with a radiant being carved on the stem or what mycologists call the stipe. Here was perhaps the very cult we were seeking, well within our reach. Earlier we had resolved that we would avoid the New World and Africa in our inquiries: the world was too large and our hands were full with Eurasia. But in a trice we changed our minds and the course of our studies, and we concentrated on Mexico and Guatemala. We had been postulating a wild mushroom as a focus of religious devotion, a fantastic surmise. Now here it was on our doorstep. All that winter we went racing through the texts of the 16th century Spanish friars, and what extraordinary narratives they give us! We flew down to Mexico in that summer of 1953 and for many rainy seasons thereafter. With wonderful cooperation from everyone in that country, on the night of 29-30 June 1955 we finally made our breakthrough: my photographer and friend Allan Richardson and I participated with our Indian friends in a midnight *agape* conducted by a shaman of extraordinary quality. This was the first time on record that anyone of the alien race had shared in such a communion. It was a soul-shattering experience. The wild surmise that we had dared to postulate in a whisper to each other years before was at last vindicated. And now, nearly a quarter of a century later, we are prepared to offer another mushroom,

*Claviceps purpurea*,

as holding the secret to the Eleusinian Mysteries.

That there might be a common denominator between the Mexican mushroom Mystery and the Mystery of Eleusis had struck me at once. They both aroused an overwhelming sense of awe, of wonder. I will leave to Professor Ruck the discussion of Eleusis but will quote one ancient author, Aristides the Rhetor, who in the 2nd century A. D. pulled aside the curtain for an instant when he said that what the initiate experienced was "new, astonishing, inaccessible to rational cognition", and he went on:

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

[Italics mine.]

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

This description point by point tallies with the effect on the initiate of the Mesoamerican mushroom rite, even to the "rivalry" between seeing and hearing. For the sights that one sees assume rhythmical contours, and the singing of the shaman seems to take on visible and colorful shapes.

There seems to have been a saying among the Greeks that mushrooms were the "food of the Gods", *broma theon*, and Porphyrius is quoted as having called them "nurslings of the Gods", *th eotrophos*

. The Greeks of the classic period were mycophobes. Was this not because their ancestors had felt that the whole fungal tribe was infected "by attraction" with the holiness of the sacred mushroom, and that mushrooms were therefore to be avoided by mortal men? Are we not dealing with what was in origin a religious tabu?

I would not be understood as contending that only these alkaloids (wherever found in nature) bring about visions and ecstasy. Clearly some poets and prophets and many mystics and ascetics seem to have enjoyed ecstatic visions that answer the requirements of the ancient

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Mysteries and that duplicate the mushroom agape 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 but 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 vapour, 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.*

[Italics mine. From The Writings of William Blake, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes, vol. III, p. 108]

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 everyone, within reach of this state without having 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 backwards and forwards 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 with you in the sacred agape. 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 to you freighted with significance, beside which the humdrum events of everyday 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, there is another Ideal world of Archetypes, where the original, the true, the beautiful Pattern of things exists for evermore. 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 those who were initiated into the Mysteries among 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 in Mexico sings, not loud, but with authority. The Indians are notoriously not given to displays of inner feelings—except on these occasions. 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 sherd. It is still, for the thatched hut is apt to be 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

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ventriloquistic drum beats. Likewise, in Mexico, I have heard a shaman engage in a most complicated percussive beat: with her hands she hits her chest, her thighs, her forehead, her arms, each giving a different resonance, keeping a complicated 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, 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: 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 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 the person, utterly passive, becomes a pure receptor, infinitely delicate, of sensations.

As your body lies there in its sleeping bag, your soul is free, loses all sense of time, alert as it never was 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. I am certain that this word came into being to describe the effect of the Mystery of Eleusis. Can you find a better word than that to describe the bemushroomed state? In common parlance, among the many who have not experienced ecstasy, ecstasy is fun, and I am frequently asked why I do not reach for mushrooms every night. But ecstasy is not fun. Your very soul is seized and shaken until it tingles. 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 terrifying 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, with those who lived through that night, compare notes, and utter ejaculations of amazement.

I will convey to you the overwhelming impression of awe that the sacred mushrooms arouse in the native population of the Mexican highlands. In the Mazatec tribe where I ingested them for the first time these particular mushrooms are not "mushrooms": they stand apart. One word—*thain3*

—embraces the whole fungal tribe, edible, innocuous but inedible, and toxic, —the whole fungal world except the sacred species. The sacred species are known by a name that in itself is a euphemism for some other name now lost: they are

*7nti1xi3tho3*

. (In Mazatec each syllable must be pronounced in one of four tones or in slides from one tone to another, 1 being the highest. The initial

7

is a glottal stop.) The first element,

*7nti1*

, is a diminutive of affection and respect. The second element,

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*xi3tho3,*

means "that which leaps forth". The whole word is thus: "the dear little things that leap forth". But this word is holy: you do not hear it uttered in the market place or where numbers of people are assembled. It is best to bring up the subject at night, by the light of a fire or a

*vela*

(votive candle), when you are alone with your hosts. Then they will dilate endlessly on the wonders of these wondrous mushrooms. For this euphemistic name they will probably use yet others, a further degree of euphemism, the

*santitos,*

the "little saints", or again the "little things" in Mazatec. When we were leaving the Mazatec mountains on horseback after our first visit there, we asked our muleteer Victor Hernandez how it came about that the sacred mushrooms were called "the dear little ones that leap forth". He had traveled the mountain trails all his life and spoke Spanish although he could neither read nor write nor even tell time by the clock's face. His answer, breathtaking in sincerity and feeling, breathed the poetry of religion and I quote it word for word as he uttered it and as I put it down in my notebook at the time:

El honguillo viene por si mismo, no se sabe de donde, como el viento que viene sin saber de donde ni porque. The little mushroom comes of itself, no one knows whence, like the wind that comes we know not whence nor why.

Victor was referring to the genesis of the sacred mushrooms: they leap forth seedless and rootless, a mystery from the beginning. Aurelio Carreras, town slaughterer in Huautla, when we asked him where the mushrooms take you, said simply: *Le llevan alli donde dios esta*, "They carry you there where God is". According to Ricardo Garcia Gonzalez of Rio Santiago, "To eat the mushrooms you must be clean: they are the blood of our Lord the Eternal Father."

*Hay que ser muy limpio, es la sangre de Nuestro Senor Padre Eterno.*

These are Spanish-speaking villagers picked at random. They express religion in its purest essence, without intellectual content. Aristotle said of the Eleusinian Mysteries precisely the same: the initiates were to suffer, to feel, to experience certain impressions and moods. They were not to learn anything.

As man emerged from his brutish past, thousands of years 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, and gentleness and love, to the highest pitch of which mankind is capable, all those sentiments and virtues that mankind has ever since regarded as the highest attribute of his kind. It made him see what this perishing mortal eye cannot see. How right the Greeks were 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 him a prodigious miracle, inspiring in him 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 that comes we know not whence nor why." Out of a mere drug comes the ineffable, comes ecstasy. It 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.

If our classical scholars were given the opportunity to attend the rite at Eleusis, to talk with the

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priestess, what would they not exchange for that chance? They would approach the precincts, enter the hallowed chamber, with the reverence born of the texts venerated by scholars for millennia. How propitious would their frame of mind be, if they were invited to partake of the potion! Well, those rites take place now, unbeknownst to the classical scholars, 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 or the braying of an ass. Or, since we are in the rainy season, perhaps the Mystery is accompanied by torrential rains and punctuated by terrifying thunderbolts. Then, indeed, as you lie there bemushroomed, listening to the music and seeing the visions, you know a soul-shattering experience, recalling as you do the belief of some early peoples that mushrooms, the sacred mushrooms, are divinely engendered by Parjanya, the Aryan God of the Lightning-bolt, in the Soft Mother Earth.

Someone has called mycology the step-child of the sciences. Is it not now 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 ask you now to contemplate our lowly mushroom—what patents of ancient lineage and nobility are coming its way!

R. GORDON WASSON

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