

Journey to Paradise

Of Toadstools and Toxins, and A Vivid Tour Of The Heaven (And Hell) That Lies Within Us All

by

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Robert Graves at a cafe in Palma de Majorca, 1954. Photograph: Daniel Farson

Of all the priests and Sunday-school teachers who taught me about Paradise when I was a child, none claimed to have been there. I never dreamed that I would one day enter that Garden of Delights myself, confirm their account in general outline, and return to tell the tale. No: I am not talking in metaphors, nor am I a mystic. Paradise is where I went.

The point of departure was New York City, on an evening late in January. Four friends had gathered in an apartment overlooking the East River, prepared to set out with me under the guidance of our host. The Greeks had a word for his function, namely "mystagogue", meaning a priest who took charge of initiates at the sacred Mysteries of Eleusis, Corinth, or Samothrace. Our mystagogue tonight had advised us to fast beforehand, drink no liquor, avoid sexual congress, clear our consciences and, in fact, try to achieve what the Catholics call "a state of grace". At seven-thirty he prepared us for our journey by giving us a preparation made from the *psilocybe* mushroom. At eight, he began turning out the lights one by one, while we settled down in easy chairs and awaited the revelation. Soon no sound was heard except the swish-swish of cars passing along the Drive: a noise not unlike the sound of waves on a beach.

I felt a numbness in my arms and a pricking at the nape of my neck. In the half-light that filtered through the

shutters, colored dots appeared on the ceiling; they shone more when I closed my eyes. We all began to shiver, our pulses slowed down, and a young woman (the mystagogue's daughter) brought in blankets. Since she had already made this journey, we welcomed her reassuring smile and the pressure of her hand. We remembered the mystagogue's warning: "You are going where God dwells, and will be granted all knowledge. ... Whoever nurses evil in his heart sees hideous demons and nameless horrors, more proper to Hell than to Paradise, and wishes he had never been born". I anxiously considered my own motives. Would I see demons? Though not a saint, I was at least a dedicated historian and mythologist; with luck I might be spared punishment.

Since even the half-light had become uncomfortably strong for my eyes, I kept them closed. I knew from a study of Celtic and Middle Eastern religion that the road to Paradise often begins under the sea or from a lake bottom, so the greenish water now lapping around me came as no surprise. I entered a marble grotto, passing a pile of massive sunken statuary, and found myself in a high-roofed tunnel lit by brilliantly colored lamps. The sea lay behind.

This was perfect schizophrenia. My corporeal self reclined in a chair, fully conscious, exchanging occasional confidences with friends; but another "I" had entered the tunnel. Could it be the same tunnel through which, four thousand years before, the epic hero Gilgamesh made his approach to the Babylonian Paradise of the goddess Siduri?

Still worrying about the demons, I glanced up at the roof. Thousands of pink, green or yellow faces, like carnival masks, grimaced horribly down; but I dismissed them with a wave of my hand, and they obediently vanished. A turn in the tunnel brought me to the domed Treasury without which no Paradise is complete, whether Hindu, Babylonian, Hebrew, Icelandic, Irish, Greek or Chinese.

Here Majesty's Crown Jewels at the Tower of London would have looked tawdry by comparison with the fantastic treasure now heaped before me: diadems, tiaras, necklaces, crosses, breast-plates, goblets, cups, platters, scepters, blazing or twinkling. But even richer than these jewels were the royal silks spread out for my inspection in blue, mulberry and white: vast lengths miraculously brocaded with birds, beasts, flowers.

My closest experience to this had been in early childhood when, after waiting endlessly in the cold, dark hall, my sisters and I saw the drawing-room door suddenly flung open, and there blazed the Christmas tree: all its candles lighted, its branches glistening with many-colored tinsel.

Still in a trance, I reached for a notebook and wrote: "9 p.m. Visions of ..." but got no further: things were happening too fast. Besides, the pen felt strange in my hand, and its scratch on paper sounded offensively loud. I remember saying: "I have seen enough treasure for a lifetime. Is there no human beauty in Paradise?" At once the diadems, tiaras, necklaces, crosses and scepters vanished. Instead, a row of lovely, live, naked Caryatids appeared, lined along the wall, as if supporting the dome. Their faces were shrouded. Yet I hesitated to indulge in erotic fancies, lest the Caryatids should turn into filthy, deformed devilkens like the ones in Flemish pictures of St. Anthony's Temptations. Blushing, I dismissed them, too, and emerged from the tunnel into daylight.

What I had been taught at school and in church proved true enough, though the truth enormously transcended the account. Around me lay a mountain-top Eden, with its jewel-bright trees, its flowers and its pellucid streams. And I experienced not only the bliss of innocence, but also the "knowledge of good and evil". Most Christians understand this phrase as meaning the power to distinguish right from wrong; in Hebrew, however, it signifies a universal understanding of all things, whether good or evil. Indeed, my mind suddenly became so agile and unfettered that I felt capable of solving any problem in the world; it was as if I had immediate access to all knowledge everywhere. Put the sensation of wisdom sufficed - why should I trouble to exploit it?

An unseen voice began singing. I rejoiced that it was a woman's, not a man's. Every original Paradise belongs to a goddess. Eden once belonged to the Great Goddess of Syria. Mother of All Living; but as soon as the Israelites became monotheistic and transferred their allegiance to Jehovah, she was expelled.

The hidden woman, singing in an unintelligible language, scolded, entreated, commanded, coaxed. Every now and then she would change her mood and song; would mourn, triumph or laugh. I fell wholly under her spell and presently enjoyed the curious experience of *seeing* sound. The song-notes became intricate links of a solid golden chain that coiled and looped in serpentine fashion among jade-green bushes: the only serpent I saw in

Eden.

Each song was followed by a pause, and always I waited in a lover's agony for her to begin again, tears stinging at my eyelids. Once she seemed to sing off-key. Perhaps this was quarter-tone music; at any rate, I understood what she meant when I saw one edge of the golden chain formed by the sound spread out into a spectrum, and laughed for pleasure. Toward the end came a quick, breathless cheerful song of creation and growth. The notes fell to earth but rose once more in green shoots which soared swiftly up, putting out branches, leaves, flowers - until this musical plant dominated the sky like the beanstalk in the fairy tale. My spirit followed after into the clear blue air, gazing down on cornfields, fields of poppies and the spires of a heavenly city.

At last the music ended. The visions were fading now. My corporeal self sighed, stretched luxuriously and looked around. Most of the company had left the room. Only one remained. I asked him: "So the journey seems to be over?"

"Ah, but close your eyes, and you can get back at once", he said.

"How do you feel?"

"My mind has never been so clear! Did you ever hear such music in your life?"

We joined the others in the kitchen, ate cold turkey sandwiches and compared notes. "I saw huge slow-moving fish in the sea; did you?" "The demons scared me nearly to death! I wept and sobbed; maybe I wasn't in a state of grace". "Weren't those building *enormous*? But I couldn't place their architectural style." "Me, I'd take the journey all over again - this minute, if I could!"

A girl from the Metropolitan Museum had seen a different Paradise: "I don't know exactly where I went", she said. "It certainly wasn't a garden. But I did see my own kind of visions: blueprints of a simple joy - all difficulties and perplexities unraveled as I watched."

A curious bond of affection had been established between us, so strong that I felt nothing could ever break it. At two o'clock in the morning we said good-bye. By eight I was on my way to Idlewild, headed for Europe, profoundly refreshed and (in Wordsworth's phrase) "trailing clouds of glory" - wisps of celestial memory which persisted nearly a month.

Let me repeat: I am no mystic. Nor were any of my friends. We had visited Paradise by what orthodox Christians, Jews, Hindus and Moslems would call "the back stairs". The sole legitimate approach, they hold, is by humility, asceticism and meditation - a long rigorous discipline for taming one's bodily appetites and intellectual ambitions. Many mystics have visited Paradise, but as a rule, church authorities suspect the humble member who, after severe mortification of his flesh, claims to have seen sights denied his superiors. Mystics attached to no particular church are ignored, unless their ecstasies have caused a breach of the peace; then they are arrested, hospitalized and given shock therapy as schizophrenics. This is their punishment for living simultaneously in two worlds and failing to distinguish between them. Only when mystics write poems or paint pictures in which the paradisaic illumination cannot easily be denied - St. John of the Cross, Vaughan, Blake, van Gogh, for example - are they valued as great souls.

While not denying that Paradise can be attained by spiritual discipline (though when this fails the mystic often sees complementary visions of Hell), I suggest that the so-called back stairs to Paradise must one have been its main portal. Others must have found the entrance as my friends and I had done, by taking an ambrosial drug which conveys mortals to the Otherworld.

Our host and mystagogue that evening was R. G. Wasson, a vice president of Morgan Guaranty Trust and an internationally known expert on mushrooms. He and I had corresponded for some years on the mycophobia, or unreasoning fear of mushrooms. He and I had corresponded for some years on the mycophobia, or unreasoning fear of mushrooms, which affects whole populations in Europe, Asia and Africa. Granted, a few mushrooms, easily distinguishable from edible varieties, do contain a mortal poison; but most are palatable if not delicious. Why, we asked each other, when wholesome fruit and vegetables are freely eaten with a sensible disregard for the poisonous or the inedible, should this selectivity be denied to mushrooms? Why were they

given disgusting and often obscene names? Why do toads and serpents figure in mushroom folklore? And why, at the same time, should the mycophobic Greeks have had a proverb (quoted by the Emperor Nero) that "Mushrooms are the food of the gods". Were the "nectar" and "ambrosia" of Greek legend perhaps a hallucinogenic mushroom reserved for royalty or priests who, after being granted ecstatic visions by eating it, ranked as living gods? And were *all* mushrooms given disgusting names in order to protect a particular sacred variety from being eaten by the unauthorized?

In 1952, I sent Wasson a cutting from an American pharmaceutical journal which seemed to clinch the matter. It referred to 16th Century Spanish reports of an "inebriatory" mushroom eaten by the Aztecs and other Indians of Mexico for oracular purposes. These reports so impressed Wasson that he and his wife, a physician, visited Oaxaca state, where mushroom oracles were rumored to be still operating among the Mazatec Indians. By good fortune they contrived to witness the secret ritual, of which they have published full accounts. During the next five years, Wasson traced the cult in different parts of Mexico, brought back several varieties of sacred mushroom, had them botanically identified by Prof. Roger Heim of Paris and chemically analyzed by Dr. Albert Hofmann of Basle.

That a particular variety of spotted toadstool, the handsome *Amanita muscaria* - in English called "fly-cap" - was used by the primitive Korjaks of Eastern Siberia for inducing hallucinations, we already knew. (So did Lewis Carroll, who made Alice eat it in Wonderland.) Although fly-cap grows freely throughout the American continent, none of the sacred Mexican mushrooms proved to be an *amanita* or to have the same toxic effect. Fly-cap produces a drunken delirium in the eater, accompanied by extraordinary physical strength, erotic energy, and insensitivity to pain; he speaks wildly and loses all sense of time or space. Mexican *psilocybe*, on the other hand - small, bitter and disagreeably rancid - conveys him to Paradise without dulling his wits or turning him into a beast. *Psilocybe* had been our sacred food that evening, though we did not eat the mushrooms themselves; instead, Wasson gave us the last of a small supply of crystals containing their active principle, *psilocybin*, that had been extracted by Doctor Hofmann from a few pounds of mushrooms flown out of Oaxaca. The music which so enchanted us was an invocation to the Mushroom god sung in Old Mazatec by the famous *curandera* (healing woman), María Sabina, which Wasson had recorded on tape.

In Oaxaca, the secret ritual takes place at night, on the mud floor of an Indian hut. Sentries are posted outside against interruption. An altar table is adorned with a crucifix, pictures of saints, and beeswax candles, as well as sacred accessories dating from pagan times - parrot feathers, red flowers, turkey eggs, bark paper, maize kernels, and a pot of charcoal for heating *copal*, a resinous incense. Though the ritual varies between villages, the *curandero* or *curandera* never fails to officiate with profound solemnity, first calling upon God and His saints and passing the mushrooms over the sacred *copal*. They are always eaten raw, in pairs - male and female, originally perhaps representing Tlalóc and his wife - and cups of chocolate or honey-water are served beforehand to keep the empty stomach from nausea. The devotees act with the greatest propriety and must not leave the hut until dawn. Each dose is calculated according to the strength of the mushrooms used, and to the eater's size or known capacity for the drug. No pregnant women or people who have been heard mocking at the mushroom rite may partake of it.

In the Aztec city of Tepantitla there is a fresco dated between the 4th and 7th Centuries A.D. It shows a soul visiting Tlalócán, or Paradise. The expected elements are there: a river (stocked with fish). Bordered with flowers and bejeweled trees, haunted by brightly colored butterflies and a spectacular sky serpent. A blue figure crouches beneath one tree. The soul stands open-mouthed, weeping tears of joy and wonder, his body connected to the river by a thread of water. This river is shaped like a mushroom and, at its source - the center of the mushroom head - lurks Tlalóc, god of mysteries, in toad shape, water issuing from his mouth. The name Tlalóc means "pulp of earth", presumably mushrooms; and Tlalóc, like his mushrooms, was engendered by lightning. He used a seashell as another emblem and owned an underwater grotto. This grotto appears at the bottom of the fresco, marked with a cross, the four head of which are mushrooms. The serpent is Tlalóc again, who wore a serpent headdress Spanish missionaries reported infant sacrifices at Tlalóc's annual rain-making rites.

Mazatec Indians now eat the sacred mushrooms as though they were the Christian Host; I even recognized a mention of Christ's name in the invocation. Yet Tlalóc of the Mushrooms still delivers the oracles. The figure crouched beneath the paradisaical tree is an *hombrecito* - one of the blue mushroom-spirits who are said to drive thunderclouds through the sky with whips of lightning. Indians describe them as the souls of infants who died

before baptism - that is to say, unredeemed pagans.

May we assume that the similarities between Tlalócan and the Old World Paradises are due to cultural contact, however ancient it may have been, and to a common hallucinogenic food? If so, had Tlalóc a European counterpart who delivered oracles when his flesh was symbolically eaten; who was engendered by lightning; who possessed an underwater retreat; who had toad and serpent as his emblems; who tolerated infanticide? Yes, indeed: Thracian Dionysus, the Thunderer, may be called Tlalóc's twin. He could transform himself at will and cause extraordinary illusions: as when, captured by pirates, he made a vine sprout from their vessels' deck and twine about the mast, while ivy gripped the rigging, and the oars turned into serpents.

The Eleusinian Mysteries near Athens, in which Dionysus figured, were preceded by fasting and a ceremonial cleansing in the sea. Initiates then entered a temple, drank mint-water, ate pastries baked in magical shapes, and saw celestial visions never to be forgotten. According to the myths, King Perseus of Argos, founder of Mycenae, at first resisted Dionysus. Punished for his obstinacy with an outbreak of madness among the Argive women - they ate their own babies raw, as also happened at Thebes when Pentheus tried to resist the cult - Perseus underwent a conversion and dedicated a temple to Dionysus at Mycenae. Argos had a toad as its badge; and Perseus is said to have named Mycenae after a mushroom found on the site "from which proceeded a stream of water". Perseus even claimed the same sort of nativity as Dionysus: having been engendered by Zeus in a shower of gold. Infanticide is a practice not associated with any Greek myth except that of Dionysus; perhaps both in Greece and Mexico the "babies" eaten in sacred pictures were really mushrooms.

If such mushrooms were, as I suppose, sacred food at the Great Mysteries, they can hardly have been fly caps; though I believe that the primitive Maenads, Centaurs and Satyrs ate these at rowdy autumnal orgies. The Great Mysteries were nothing if not decorous. Nor is any hallucinogenic variety of *psilocybe* known outside Mexico.

Two years ago, however, looking for a clue to the mushroom of the Mysteries, I heard from friends in Portugal that a local witch used a small dung-mushroom to produce visions. I asked them to send a sample to Professor Heim. He identified it as a *Panaeolus papilionaceus*, which grows freely in Europe and North America, and which I had noticed on an ancient Greek vase, shown between the hooves of Nessus the Centaur. I had also read a report on its hallucinogenic properties, published by the American journal *Science* of September, 1914. Fly cap is said to lose its toxic qualities when cooked - I do not guarantee this - but the liquor of *papilionaceus* could have been introduced without detection or loss of potency into the mint-water and sacred pastries at Eleusis.

Fly cap is shown on an Etruscan mirror at the feet of Ixion, ancestor of the Centaurs; and occurs in Guatemalan stone effigies of Tlalóc as toad. It may have been the original "food of the gods" in both hemispheres. My guess is that its properties were first stumbled on in time of famine; and that experiments with smaller, less tempting mushrooms led to the discovery of *psilocybe*, *Panaeolus papilionaceus*, and perhaps other varieties, which also became dedicated to the Toad-god or Serpent-god. Toads excrete a poisonous sweat when ill-treated; serpents have a venomous bite. Both creatures may have served as warning emblems to guard the mushroom taboo.

Any use of hallucinogenic drugs, except for medical purposes, goes against civilized conscience. In this Christian world, only visions won by prayer and piety are ascribed to God; all others are likely to be attributed to the Devil. Because of my Protestant conditioning, I would never take cocaine, heroin, hashish or marijuana, even experimentally; but the Mexican mushroom does not belong to this range of drugs, nor is it habit-forming. So far from stupefying the senses, it quickens them; though the body may be relaxed, the mind stays conscious throughout - indeed, supra-conscious. Since *psilocybe* intensifies and lays bare mental conflicts, an experimentalist is likely to get visions evoked by an uneasy conscience: weeping for grief, not joy, or shuddering aghast. This peculiar virtue of enhancing reality turns the Greek command "Know thyself!" into a practical precept; *psilocybe* illuminates the mind, re-educates sight and hearing.

Paradise thus seems to be a subjective vision. (As Jesus said: "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you". He might have added: "Likewise the Kingdom of Hell".) But the jeweled garden can be attained by the relatively pure of heart without undergoing so austere a discipline as might alienate them from their more worldly friends. The Mexican mushroom feast, for those who attend it in a state of grace and with complete mutual trust - by no

means a simple condition - both strengthens human friendship and bestows spiritual enlightenment: the twin purposes of most religions. Yet I should, myself, refuse to enroll in any cult, pagan or Christian, where the mushroom was used as a sacrament - which has happened to *mescaline*, the hallucinogenic drug extracted from cactus buds, now sanctified by a large Christian sect extending from Central America to Canada. Such a cult would not only imply ecclesiastical discipline and theological dogma, but force me into intimacy with people who were not my sort. At school and in the Army I had my share of that.

The fact is that a poetic trance, as I have experienced it on different levels - sometimes light, sometimes so deep that the slightest disturbance caused acute distress - means far more to me than any trance induced by a drug. I understand Coleridge's depreciation of *Kubla Khan*, written almost automatically under the influence of laudanum; he had earned his other poems by active poetic thought. This is not to put an opiate vision, of which one is the dazed victim, in the same class with a mushroom vision, which can be consciously assessed and even controlled; I am aware that under the influence of *psilocybe*, certain oracular *curanderos* and *curanderas* often give amazingly accurate answers to questions asked of them. Nevertheless, Tlalócan, despite its marvels, contains no palace of words presided over by the Living Muse; and no small whitewashed cell (furnished with a table, a chair, pen, ink and paper) where words come to life and combine rhythmically under a poet's supra-conscious guidance. I feel no urge to revisit paradise.