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# Through the Floors of Perception: Huxley, Benjamin, and Drugs

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0 nobly-born, listen with full attention, without being distracted: There are six states of *Bardo*, namely: the natural state of *Bardo* while in the womb; the *Bardo* of the dream-state; the *Bardo* of ecstatic equilibrium, while in deep meditation; the *Bardo* of the moment of death; the *Bardo* of Reality, the *Bardo* of the inverse process of *samsaric* existence. These are the six.

*(The Tibetan Book of the Dead)*

In recent times, drugs have acquired a specific kind of topicality. For example: *The Scotsman* for July 23, 2002 features a report entitled "Call to Legalise Drugs" in which the comedian and writer Ben Elton, a parent of two children, urges the government to legalise all class-A drugs with the argument that "criminalisation did nothing but lead to organised crime."<sup>1</sup> It is easy to find a plethora of analogues to this report, and from many other countries. The "Call" is symptomatic of a social lobby exhorting legislators to reconsider the role of the law in relation to the use of drugs in contemporary societies. It emphasizes the need for a more radical, or liberal, approach to drug control. In doing so, it reopens the question of how different social systems might be affected by the legitimated use of certain mind-affecting drugs, and the question that follows, which goes far beyond the issue of any revised legislation: what kinds of society would result that would be premised on a rela-

tively free access to what Aldous Huxley referred to as “psychedelic” drugs?

This essay hopes to cast an oblique light on these issues by dwelling on the significance of a comparison between two intellectuals, born in different circumstances but around the same time – the last decade of the nineteenth century – who experimented with drugs with minds open to what the experience might have to offer, at a time even more settled in its opposition to their use than our own. The comparison hopes to achieve several related aims: it will illustrate the difficulty experienced by the drug supporter in distinguishing between its role as means to an end, and as an end in itself; it will show that in a social climate unsympathetic to the use of drugs, the intellectual argument for their legitimization relied on the qualified – and problematic – hope that they might enhance ordinary or average consciousness; and it will also show that this hope for the ameliorative use of drugs has to struggle with a riddling ambivalence about whether it is possible to distinguish between how drugs might enhance consciousness and how they might diminish experience.

The excursus into the past has a present application precisely because the contemporary focus on the efficacy or failure of legislation deflects attention towards drug control or the medicinal uses of specific drugs, without returning to the rationalising arguments for how they are supposed to modify human consciousness and culture. The essay is neither a simple apologia for the use of psychedelic drugs, nor an attack on the practice. Its aim is to examine two representative intellectual attitudes as a way of fostering resistance to the habit of mind which is liable to suppose, assume or imply that the only issues pertinent to such drugs are their control or legitimization.

The two intellectuals I propose to consider here are Aldous Huxley and Walter Benjamin. They did not come to the experimental use of drugs lightly or easily. Each had a set of reservations to overcome before he was willing to experiment with drugs. And each wrote eloquently and cogently about his experiences and the practice, in a manner which makes it possible to treat their cases as illustrative of larger representative positions.

Born in 1894, Huxley came to drugs only in middle age, when he began to argue for their use as a means to a perception of a reality more profound than that familiar to us as our everyday consciousness, bound by time, space, and our need for self-preservation as individuated biological creatures. But as June Deery points out:

Huxley had not always been a proponent of mind-altering drugs. He portrayed sordid addiction to heroin and cocaine in the 1920s . . . . Just before his own experience with mescaline he still regarded drugs as a means for a false or downward transcendence only, as in the portrayal of Soma in *Brave New World*.

(Deery 191)<sup>2</sup>

Huxley's views changed after his move to California in the early 1930s. Subsequent to his growing interest in mysticism and comparative religion, he wrote in fictional and discursive prose with a qualified measure of optimism about the advantages of a regulative use of drugs in society. Unlike contemporaries such as Allen Ginsberg and Alan Watts, who wanted to see psychedelic drugs freely accessible in a democratized manner, Huxley seems to have preferred to think of such access as a matter for careful scientific study and selective dissemination. This creates an obvious contradiction: if the capacity for experience can be enhanced in each and any human consciousness by the use of psychedelic drugs, who is to decide the limits of that access, and how are such limits to be justified?

The practice of what Huxley preached did not follow immediately. He first took mescaline in 1953, and his first allegedly mystical experience was indebted to the drug. Over the next decade he took mescaline and LSD each four times, and psilocybin twice (M 188n). His writings were more venturesome than his practice, and provide one of the most sustained efforts to contextualize drug use in terms of cultural practice rather than individual predilection. In his belief system, pharmacological and physiological means serve metaphysical and mystical ends. In this strategic preference Huxley is unlike his nineteenth century laudanum-consuming English literary predecessors. His position illustrates a more modern form of Orientalism, one which projects Western preoccupations onto other cultural systems, and, like many of his contemporaries, uses the practices of Eastern religions as a way of providing the Occidental a matrix for the use of drugs. That his association of drug use with the cultures of mysticism was attacked by the Oxford scholar R.C. Zaehner in *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* (1957) and *Drugs, Mysticism and Make-Believe* (1972) and defended by theologians like Walter Houston Clark and Huston Smith shows that the strategy of aligning drugs with religion is as prone to controversy as their current association with medicinal practices.

Regardless of his disagreement with friends like Timothy Leary and Alan Watts about the advisability of a wider dissemination of drugs in the 1950s, he would claim in 1962 that "LSD and the mushrooms shd [sic] be used . . . in the context of . . . the yoga of total awareness, leading to enlightenment within the world of everyday experience" (L 929). In 1963, a few months before his death, he recommended LSD among the resources that could be used, together with hypnosis, time distortion, and formal teaching "for control of autonomic processes and heightening of physical and psychological resistance to disease and trauma . . ." (L 955). In a characteristically contradictory way, the utopian dimension to his thought reserved for psychedelic drugs a secure place in the future, even if the present had to be cautious about their use: "Mescaline . . . and the odder aspects of mind are matters to be written about for a small public, not discussed on TV" (Deery 193, L 801). As

the culture of drugs that sprang up shortly after Huxley's death has shown, in retrospect, this kind of cautious elitism can seem naïve, and might even be open to the charge of disingenuity. For that to be avoided, he would have had to provide a rationale for how and why the dissemination of drugs should be selective. It is not surprising that he never did so, and if he had, he might have had some difficulty, since every argument for selection comes up against a democratising call for the right to equal access.

The point remains: Huxley supported the use of psychedelic drugs, but not their rapid or wide dissemination. He distinguished between drugs that were relatively easy to procure and synthesize, with what he insisted were minor or innocuous long-term consequences (like mescaline and psilocybin), and the addictive ones, which he conceded had harmful consequences for mind and body. In order to support the argument for the taking of drugs as a desire that is both natural and universal, he liked to cite the historical evidence of cultures that had since times immemorial used natural substances with hallucinogenic properties for religious purposes as a way of establishing the need for what he called "self-transcendence" (D 44) or "deindividuation" (D 100). In *Island* (1962), "The Yogin and the Stoic" are described as "righteous egos who achieve their very considerable results by pretending, systematically, to be somebody else" (39). In contrast, Huxley found the more modern addiction to alcohol, sedatives, and barbiturates, with their mixed role as stimulants and depressants, a mistake for which society paid a heavy price both at the individual and the collective level. This part of Huxley's polemics is both trenchant and persuasive, even if it fails to shed an aspect of the quixotic in its attack on vices that society is evidently loath or unlikely to abandon.

In his utopian fiction, Huxley envisaged a society more enlightened to the beneficial functions of drugs, habitually using them in the form of tablets with "euphoric, hallucinant, or sedative" (M 179) functions, depending on the strength of the dosage. In the more extravagant pages of *Heaven and Hell* (1956), he compared drugs favourably with the practices of traditional religion – fasting, flagellation, sleep deprivation, breath-control. He argued – with charming reductiveness – that all these practices basically led to the brain being deprived of chemicals that in its ordinary mode of functioning kept it attentive to what we regard as the normal business of getting on with our self-preservation as individuals. Consciousness could then be freed of its narrow and pathetic attachment to self, opening itself to a more unified perception of the relatedness of all existing things, in a gestalt that dissolved the split pair of subject and object, which is so precious to our tenuous everyday grasp of living.

There are three basic premises in all these persuasions: that in our ordinary lives we lack access to the "antipodes" (D 63) of our inner being; that we give away our sense of the connectedness of all things; and that we lose our sense of the reality of objects and percepts in all

their sensuous reality. The first two predicaments arise from the necessity to cope with the world of action as solitary individuals who are intent on survival and self-preservation, without the meaningful opportunity and discipline needed for contemplation. The last is the result of how language and other symbolic systems that enable the business of daily living also entail that objects and percepts are ruled and overruled by concepts. The drug-experience loosens the hold of the dominative concept and the necessitous will-to-survive, freeing the self to access the door which opens up a world – or an entirely different perspective on our world—which, without recourse to drugs, is already familiar, in rather different ways, to the schizophrenic and the mystic.

This, you might say, is the official version of what goes on in Huxley. Before we move on to a comparison with how Benjamin came to drugs, and what he made of the experience, I would like to experiment a little with ironicizing some part of what Huxley does, or how he does it. The intent is not to trivialize the obvious sincerity, coherence, and even practicability of what he has to offer, but in the interests of separating out what seem to me the issues of permanent and abiding concern to all of us, for which drugs become an occasion or pretext for the opening out, or up, of a related but somewhat different text.

For 1954, in *The Doors of Perception*, there is something utterly disarming about the notion that the practice of taking drugs might recommend itself to society as a better “escape from selfhood” (D 43) than the habitual abuse of alcohol, at least for those “who come to the drug with a sound liver and an untroubled mind” (D 14). What keeps the charm of the idea from being altogether persuasive is that while one could well have a sound liver and still feel the need to “escape from selfhood”; it is difficult to reconcile the notion of the need for escape with “an untroubled mind”. Many a sixties person, armed with a copy of *The Doors of Perception*, may have come to the drug of her or his choice with a tranquil mind, only to prove that “a craving” for “release or sedation” (D 44) can be readily fused or confused with transcendence. Those who suffer from jaundice or depression or chronic anxiety (D 36) – just the people you might suppose in need of a little escape from self – are warned by Huxley that they are likely to find that mescaline opens the doors of perception only onto hell, or at best purgatory. That still leaves out the occasional Blake or Boehme, and the more frequent schizophrenic, who share with the others the minor premise of a heightened awareness of reality, but differ on the major premise of how this awareness comes about.

“The urge to transcend self-conscious self-hood” (D 46) may be a genuine and universal one, as in the litany in *Brave New World* (1932): “I drink to my annihilation” (72). Moreover, opium, marijuana, hashish, and all their cousins may indeed have a time-honoured role as “natural modifiers of consciousness” (D 43) in their respective cultures of original use, in and outside religion. But the equation of their hallucinogenic qualities with synthetic drugs of more recent Western provenance is

based on the lowest common factor, that is, on the chemical means of affecting consciousness, whose economy of exchange between dosage and effect is assessed solely in terms of duration, addictiveness, and toxicity (D 36).

There may be something cheerily evangelical and egalitarian about the suggestion that the common mass of humanity – tired, bored or fed up with the sameness of work and routine – can share a part of what the mystic and the saint enjoy (and the schizophrenic or the mad suffer), even if we have to take a drug to do so. That the enhanced perception induced by the drug can become unbearably intense only adds to the irony. Huxley is not to blame for the cynicism of those who embrace the principle of diminishing dividends to prick their jaded appetites with drugs to postpone, if not cheat, monotony. But there remains the uneasy feeling that revelation ought not to be so simply at hand, like water from a tap, even if what is revealed by drugs like mescaline is the truth of the “Suchness” (D 16) and “is-ness” (D 20) of things. It is also worrying to have the imaginative art of someone like Max Ernst attributed casually to “the vantage point of LSD or mushrooms” (L 909), thus blithely and casually sweeping both imagination and fancy under the carpet of a chemical haze.

Huxley assures his listeners of his lecture, “Visionary Experience” (1961) that “With such drugs as psilocybin it is possible for the majority of people to go into this other world with very little trouble and almost no harm to themselves” (M 200). The worrying thing about this comforting news is that the “other world” is hypostatized and taken for granted as pretty much the same for all humanity, as if it were like a trip to Tasmania, instead of being a function of the affect we bring to what gets constituted as this “other” world. Huxley emphasizes that what a drug will produce as an effect depends a good deal on the frame of mind and the general temperament one brings to the drug. But he ignores the implication: that the alterity of any kind of transcendence would have to differ from person to person. Likewise, the reassurance that the mystical experience brings about a sense “of what may be called the ultimate All-Rightness of the universe . . . in spite of all the horrors which go on all around us” (M 201) has difficulty convincing us that it is not subsidized by a wish-fulfilling solipsism. The reassurance may come from the well-intentioned sincerity of a compassionate man, but it has difficulty in distinguishing itself from the Victorian blandness of the piety that God is indeed in His Heaven and everything is after all right with the world, despite Huxley’s own acknowledgement of evidence to the contrary.

Time and space are too much with us, late and soon. Work and self-preservation shut us out from contemplation of the Not-self in the world that is Not-self (D 11). So to have “a corner of Eden before the Fall” (D 25) as our virtual estate can feel like a gift we hardly dare look in the mouth for the few hours it is vouchsafed us. Nevertheless, no part of deserving, or earning, or preparing for the right to the cleansing of per-

ception is entailed when all we have to do is find somewhere to buy or steal a drug. H.G. Wells' phrase "Doors in the Wall" (D 42) has too much of the suggestion about it of persons able to walk in and out of rooms, more or less free in their choice of door, if not altogether in their need to get out. The claustrophobia built into the metaphor does not really permit the suggestion of a door opening out onto a space that is not a room, except as an Escherian fantasy whose wish to shock is the measure of its incapacity to convince. The door in Blake represents a profound liminality. In Huxley's convivial desire to distribute at least a small measure of Nirvana to everybody, the door starts revolving for every applicant to the House of Mary who was rejected at the House of Martha (D 26). But perception is not something you leave behind or close after you for a better option. Perception is like a floor. It is what you walk on, or crash through.

Drugs might well bring about a heightened awareness of the facticity of things. They might also make it feel as if percepts had been released from the exorbitance of concepts (D 35). Nevertheless, schizophrenia is *not* epiphany, and a drug-haze or blaze is neither. The persistent invocation of the mystical or the transcendental indicates a predisposition in Huxley that is benign, but it leaves out a consideration of the means, as if the ends were justification enough. It is precisely here that a remark from Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" (c.1921) applies: "If justice is the criterion of ends, legality is that of means" (I 237). Huxley's equation of the drug-induced hallucinatory experience with the experience of an Eckhart or a William Law can be justified to the degree to which both types acquire an intensified perception of "*Istigkeit*" (D 20) or proximity to something like the Kantian *Ding an Sich* (D 16). But insofar as dissimilar contexts, regimens, and pathologies are ignored in order to equate the sedative and narcotic properties of chemical substances with the disciplines of transcendence, the means lack legitimacy.

When Huxley returns to the theme of drugs as an aid to the would-be visionary, in *Heaven and Hell* (1956), he is intent on minimizing the difference between the transcendental in traditional experience, and the hallucinatory, as induced by modern drugs. He had speculated in *The Doors of Perception* that the reduction in supply of sugar to the brain created by a drug like mescaline might make the brain more conducive to modes of perception not directly linked to the individual drive toward self-preservation. His next step, two years later, is to elaborate on how most kinds of traditional religious experience were accompanied by physical practices that involved assorted ways of mortifying the body (D 110, M 154), all of which interfered with its normal chemical activity, making it more likely for the hallucinatory to take hold. To whip oneself into religious frenzy, to poison one's bloodstream with controlled breathing, to starve one's body of food and sleep to the point where one gets more mindful of the spirit, are all treated by Huxley as necessitous ways of crossing the doors of ordinary perception. The only difference,



for him, between them and a trip to pharmacology is that the latter is more sensible and practical. Thus, in *Brave New World Revisited* (1956), Huxley speaks solemnly of how

In The Brave New World of my fable . . . People neither smoked, nor drank, nor sniffed, nor gave themselves injections . . . . The soma of *Brave New World* had none of the drawbacks of its Indian original. In small doses it brought a sense of bliss, in larger doses it made you see visions and, if you took three tablets, you would sink in a few minutes into refreshing sleep.

(BNWR 99; M 133-35)

Once again, the charm of the argument lies in the complete lack of disingenuousness with which the comparison is laid out. Once again, a small difference is elided, which Huxley's physicalism countenances blandly. The notion of "gratuitous grace" (D 51, M 154) is reiterated completely without irony, of something that is at once "euphoric, hallucinant, or sedative" (M 179). The luminous is close to what it cannot be, the numinous (D 79).

There is no denying the limiting but limited sense of the claim that "all our experiences are chemically conditioned" (D 112), including the intellectual, the aesthetic, and the visionary. Nevertheless, roughly similar physiological changes in the body, brought about by different means, because they produce results that are cognate in physiological terms, cannot be taken as a sufficiency condition for an equation between the hallucinatory and the visionary. Little consideration is given in such an equation to what might be contained within the experiences to which we apply the broad concepts of the visionary and the mystical, beyond the rearrangement of ordinary perception. Certainly, with mescaline, LSD, cocaine, *bhanga*, or any of their cousins, we will have varying degrees of derangement of the senses. It might be refreshing in so far as it will have shaken us out of our jaded ordinariness. To come back to that ordinariness slightly revived, will also prevent the overpowering effects of the drug from becoming anything more than an interlude, a precaution already enforced by the fact that the effect produced by the drug wears off after a few hours. This is less a matter of opening a door, and more a case of taking off from the ground of our normal being, in order to come back to it, but with an intervening flight (in both senses) which will give us a new purchase on the old ground of the familiar. Thus, one will have had the salutary opportunity of becoming a tourist of one's own inner antipodes (D 63). One will also have enjoyed, for a while, a rejuvenated sense of the visual surplus of colour and intensity that we are so lucky to be endowed with (D 15, 66).

The massive difference staring one in the face, however, as one looks at the schizophrenic is that he has neither choice, nor alternative, nor respite from his derangement, unlike the weekend druggist postulated by Huxley. To compare such disparates is like your modern young per-

son, with many studs and other hard metal objects embedded in various softer parts of the body (by choice), comparing the experience to someone having nails driven forcibly into his palms and feet as a consecration of the faith of the body in the spirit. The mystic does not shake off his trance, nor does he treat it as a good lay for a jaded appetite. To him, it is not a door to open and close. It is the floor on which he stands, regardless of whether others see it so or not. In the spirit of a line from Empson: "The heart of standing is, you cannot fly". In that sense Huxley's utopianism lacks credibility. Good intentions are proffered as if they would suffice to bridge the gap between hallucination and vision, and between ordinary vision and the visionary.

A more interesting way in which the influence of drugs can bring about a change in consciousness is in Huxley's report that "the subject-object relation is transcended" (M 201). The freedom of object from concept is also the fusing of subject and object. It is allied to how feeling and thought are "free of language, outside the system of conceptual thought" (D 67). An even more useful part of Huxley's enterprise, in *The Doors of Perception*, to which I would like to come back, is when he stops being enthusiastic about placebos as panaceas for society, sets aside the notion mentioned in *Brave New World Revisited* (1956), of *Soma* "as an instrument of statecraft" (M 97), and thinks of the specific way in which drugs do not suffice: "Mescaline can never solve the problem: it can only pose it, apocalyptically" (D 26). The desire to escape and the desire to transcend intersect, but only in the contemplative. It was from the outer world of individuation, separateness, responsibility, and duty that we fled to the inner world opened up by drugs like mescaline. The insight now offered by way of the drug is that we have to reconcile the two worlds, and resolve the problem of "a contemplation that is incompatible with action" (D 26). The beatitude of the quietist, the tranquillity of the *arhat*, the stillness of the painter of landscapes, draperies, and still-lives are as nought before "the Bodhisattva for whom the world of Suchness and the world of contingencies are one" (D 26-7). But the nearer we approach this realization – one initiated by the drug experience – the farther we move from drugs to ethics. Thus the experimental, the permissive, and the ameliorative aspects of Huxley still find their ground in a balance that is proper conduct, such that one notion of escape from the self finds its resolution in commitment and compassion. That is another way of breaking the bounds of the self through a re-cognition of what is owed to everything that is not-I.

Drugs, Huxley concluded towards the end of his life, were a way of coping with tension: "The problem of tension will be completely solved only when we have a perfect society – that is to say, never" (M 126). The hope within this pessimism provides a link between Huxley and Benjamin. Drugs link the two in curious ways. Both looked to them for alternatives to how the world had gone wrong. Both were willing to take chances, and both were impatient of the kind of Enlightenment rationality that would be only too willing to demonise drugs as evil

incarnate. Both read Louis Lewin's massive tome on pharmacological research – *Phantastika* (1931) – from cover to cover, at about the same time. Suffering from cancer in his last years, Huxley was to request LSD and readings from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* in his dying moments (M 257-66). Benjamin committed suicide in a mood of dejection in 1940 with an overdose of morphine. (The Dr. Fränkel who was one of the two friends whose experiments with hashish introduced Benjamin to the drug, was himself an addict, and later committed suicide.) Baudelaire's *Paradis artificiels* (1860), and Herman Hesse's *Steppenwolf* (1927) were the literary models that paved the way for Benjamin (II 389, Protocol IV). The moroseness conjured up in his world has no counterpart in the *Island*-like tranquillity with which Huxley came to his drugs for solace. Almost a decade before he ended up committing suicide, Benjamin had written in one of his drug-trances: "No one will be able to understand this intoxication, the will to awaken has died." (Witte 132). With characteristic ambivalence he had not only dejection on his mind, but the notion that the coming alive that occurred within him under the influence of the drug was like an aura that he worried might not survive after the drug's physiological effect had worn off.

Born in 1892, Walter Benjamin was two years older than Huxley, and came to drugs more than a quarter century before the slightly younger man. The drugs of his choice – or at any rate, access – were hashish, opium, and mescaline, with which he experimented intermittently over a period ranging from late 1927 to the summer of 1934. Several aspects of the culture of the intellectual's experience of drugs become evident in the comparison between Huxley and Benjamin. As Scott Thompson – the scholar who has done most to foreground Benjamin's texts on drugs – remarks:

While Benjamin's concept of "Profane Illumination" stands in marked contrast to Huxley's semi-theosophical "Mind-at-Large" there are indeed some striking similarities in their observations while under the influence of psychopharmaka.  
 ("From 'Rausch' to Rebellion")

Huxley reiterates the relative lack of importance of the dimensions of space and time while under the effect of the drug. Benjamin's "protocols" (a term probably borrowed, as Thompson suggests, from Kurt Beringer's *Der Meskalin-Rausch*, 1927) report his fascination with the many distortions undergone by the sense of space. Drugs only accentuated Huxley's innate benevolence. Benjamin confesses in "Protocol II," that his benevolence slopes over into the "inability to listen," and then into complete self-absorption. While both Huxley and Benjamin confirm the general sense of an enormously heightened visual sensibility, the effects a drug can produce clearly vary according to who comes to the drug, and how. While "Protocol IV" speaks of "Rausch" in terms of the dilatory pleasures of "unwinding a skein," the heightened sensi-

tivity to sight and touch becomes, in "Protocol V", "a source of suffering." There is no sense, in Benjamin, of the kind vouchsafed in Huxley's trances, of an "other world" simply waiting out there to enter. The notion of an "other world" becomes, in Benjamin, a pure function of temperament and mood. His word for the effect of hashish, opium and mescaline, "Rausch" is translated variously as "high," "rush," and "trance." Its connotations evoke confusion, excitement, and "a virtually tumultuous production of images" ("Protocol V"), rather than the steady flame of Huxleyan revelation.

If there is any revelation in Benjamin, it is the elegiac exhilaration with which hashish recaptures for him a sense of "the great squandering of one's own existence," as when one was in love ("Protocol IV"). Objects and persons, including the self, are more clearly wrapped in aura when in "Rausch." "Protocol V" describes it as "an ornamental periphery", a sense "as if confined in a sheath." "Protocol IX" from 1931 returns to this sense of something both proffered and withheld, near and yet distant: "the apparition of that veiled face which was itself a veil." "Protocol IX" and "XI" speak of "the veil that hangs motionless and longs after an exhalation that will lift it." The curious metaphor thus emblematises "Rausch" itself as a veil, and that which is revealed in "Rausch" also as a veil. The revelation is not, as in Huxley, of a truth, but of an immanence whose truth is that it is veiled. Benjamin's inscape thus both visits a mystery, and allows it a mysteriousness that is never unveiled.

While Benjamin fancied himself in the role of a Satanic Baudelairean when under the influence of drugs, he also acknowledged, or recognized, that the "profane illumination" of thinking lit up the experience of hashish, and not the other way round. Benjamin had none of Huxley's zeal for disseminating the practice of taking drugs as a social good. On the contrary, there is every sense of skirting the dangerous, in what appears, at times, a steady desperation for yet one more avenue to be explored. "Things are only mannequins," he laments in "Protocol II." Silence, withdrawal, and "non-existence" become "the ambiguous winking of nirvana across the way." In that sense, Benjamin's reservations make of drugs a covert practice that has no pretensions to social utility except as premised on singular – almost desperate – need.

Huxley might have been willing to agree with Benjamin's view that

the true, creative overcoming of religious illumination certainly does not lie in narcotics. It resides in a *profane illumination*, a materialist, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson.

(II 209)

Drugs, for Benjamin, were always the outer pellicle of an allegorical intent. In the final section of *One-Way Street* (1928), "To the Planetarium," he uses the idea of "Rausch" in the broadest possible comparison

between the ancients and the moderns: the modern era lacks what the ancients possessed, a cosmic experience, that is to say, an experience of the cosmos that was characterized by "Rausch," translated as "the ecstatic trance" (I 486). In contrast, modern science has lost its sense of astonished mystery in the pursuit of technological mastery over nature, forgetting that "technology is the mastery not of nature but of the relation between nature and man" (I 487). This is Benjamin's version of the theme developed by Max Weber as the disenchantment of magic. "The paroxysm of genuine cosmic experience" is Benjamin's curious expressionist metaphor for "Rausch" distorted into modern violence. The Europe that had just gone through the annihilation of the Great War is likened to the convulsive ecstasy of an epileptic fit. For the late 1920s, as we brood over one of the retrospective ironies of history, the intellectual's hope of a proletariat revolution – which the 1929 essay on "Surrealism" described in terms of the motto "to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution" (II 215) – was the last fantasy of "convalescence" for a body politic soon to be ravaged by Nazism and Fascism. There is something both disheartening and sobering in this shy intellectual's attachment to the metaphorical and transformative powers of "Rausch" which is not, for its more intense and tragic times, all that dissimilar to what Huxley, from a cheerily lit inner world almost incapable of gloom, kept offering as his vision of utopia, not in terms of violence, but as a form of sensible and revolutionary peace.

Huxley and Benjamin both showed curiosity and a sustained willingness to take risks, intellectual and physical, in respect of the possibility offered by drugs. Each was remarkably free of cant and unimpressed by social prejudice. Each surrounded his use of drugs with a subjective mythology: Huxley in a sanguine spirit, Benjamin much more anxiously. Each illustrates a certain frustration with the individual embedded and immured in society, and a utopian impulse to break out of that imprisonment, through drugs, into a solution that might suffice. Huxley sought to expand the horizon of possibility from the individual to the social; Benjamin demonstrated a consistent reserve about any such hope or aspiration. Each is riddled with ambivalence – Benjamin much more than Huxley – about the efficacy of the solution. In Benjamin, despair is too much like an instinct for "Rausch" or its intellect to conjure away; in Huxley, as remarked by June Deery, the "problem was not so much finding reasons for what he believed in instinctively, but finding instincts for what he believed in intellectually" (106). While the writing of each is expressive of a desire to support the enhancing possibilities opened up by drugs, it is also honest enough to reveal gaping disjunctions between desire and affect. The ambivalence bespoken by their writings overhangs the current exhortation for liberalised drug use with a cautionary shadow, all the more compelling for being thrown by individuals who supported the use of drugs, and hoped earnestly – even anxiously – to convince themselves that drugs were legitimate means to just ends. It is an ironic fate that they might

well persuade us, instead, to the notion that neither legitimation nor justice might be adequate terms for the individual problems drugs address and the societal problems they create.

## Notes:

1. <http://www.mapinc.org/drugnews/v02/n1405/a14.html?397>.
2. The following abbreviations are used for quotations in the text of the essay:

- I *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1 1913-1926*,
- II *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927-1934*
- BNW *Brave New World* (1932)
- BNWR *Brave New World Revisited* (1959)
- D *The Door of Perception* (1954)
- L *Letters of Aldous Huxley* (1969)
- M *Moksha: Writings on Psychedelics and the Visionary Experience 1931-1963* (1980)

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