

traditions.

**BARB DAVY:** I've recently changed my position on transcendence, mostly due to reading Emmanuel Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*. I used to associate transcendent views exclusively with world denying or world rejecting philosophies/beliefs. For Levinas, the idea of infinity is transcendence: the idea that there is more to the other than the categories the self might apply to it. This is transcendence that is found only in the particular, in actual lived reality. For Levinas, a person only finds God in relating with other people in this metaphysical relation of perceiving the infinite in the other. There's nothing world denying about this. In my own work, I discuss this sort of relation between humans and other than human persons, developing it into an environmental ethic.

In my view, neither reality nor nature can be transcended in actual physical terms. This is all there is, but reality/nature is far more complex than human ideas of it. Transcendence is in recognizing that there is more to know about the world, not in escaping the world.

**VIVIANNE:** As an aside, I'd never heard of panentheism until around ten years ago when the recently retired Canon of Durham Cathedral, who came around to thinking we were OK people, told me that this is what Wiccans are. I thought being theologically defined by a Christian theologian had its amusing/ironic side.

**ADRIAN:** I find it amusing/ironic as well, but also find it useful as a way of delineating a potential common ground between some pagans' views and some Christians' (and other monotheists') views. At the same time, I'm not convinced of that attribution for Wicca. The term 'pan-en-theism' suggests a kind of all-in-one-God-ism, where God is seen as both immanent and transcendent, but where there is no questioning of the oneness (monology) or personal nature of God. Most forms of (at least

British Traditional) Wicca, to me, do seem duotheistic—a term I find quite satisfactory. Duotheism can take a Manichean dualist form according to which one of the two deities is valorized over the other (because they are seen as locked in opposition), or a complementarian form (that of 'partnership', to use Riane Eisler's term), and the latter, I would say, describes Wicca rather well.

**GUS:** Several people here apparently consider English Traditional Wicca as duotheistic... but this argument ignores the Dryghton. And that is a central tenet of English Traditional practice as I have experienced it both within Gardnerian and King Stone contexts.

If we take the entire Gardnerian liturgy seriously we can say something like this: From the Dryghton all things come, including the God and Goddess. From them come all aspects of Gods and Goddesses. But just as we do not try contacting the Dryghton as a means of contacting all deities, so often we do not try and contact The Goddess, but rather focus in good polytheistic fashion on Bridget, Hekate, and so on. Other times we do the generic invocation. At the level of practice, it sure seems polytheistic to me.

The Dryghton is *not* personal. It is the Source. It is acknowledged, regarded as important, honored, and then the work focuses on the Goddess and the God, either as a duo or polytheistically.

*This discussion took place on an email list maintained by the Nature Religions Scholars' Network, whose members study religious traditions that regard nature as a source of spiritual authority. The group meets and hears research presentations each year during the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. For more information, visit <http://www.uscolo.edu/natrel>*

## If Witches No Longer Fly: Today's Pagans and the Solanaceous Plants

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On the summer solstice of 1966, Robert Cochrane (magical name of Roy Bowers), an important figure in the British Witchcraft revival, died from a self-inflicted combination of sleeping pills, whisky, and *Atropa belladonna* or deadly nightshade. Although a subsequent inquest returned a verdict of "suicide while the balance of the mind was disturbed," some of Cochrane's friends and coveners believed his act had been one of ritual communion with the gods, while others leaned towards a deliberate self-sacrifice on the model of the Divine King.<sup>1</sup> The people who knew him most closely, however, viewed his death as suicide resulting from a marital break-up and a failed love affair.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the motivation for Cochrane's death, his influence has persisted. His correspondence during the years just before his death with a young American Air Force enlisted man heavily influenced, through a typically tortuous chain of transmission, several American Witchcraft traditions, including "1734," the Roebuck, and the Mohsian tradition, and he is remembered by one of his former coveners, the English writer Doreen Valiente, as "perhaps the most powerful and gifted personality to have appeared in modern witchcraft."<sup>3</sup>

In one sense, Cochrane carried on an

unfortunate tradition of misadventure attached to modern users of solanaceous entheogens. As well as the edible tomato, potato, chile and sweet peppers, and tomatillo, the botanical family of Solanaceae includes that global drug of choice, tobacco. In addition, the Solanaceae include several plants with extensive associations with magic and shamanism, associations that spread from Asia to the Americas. Notable among these are the several species of *Datura* ("thorn apple" or "jimson weed"), *Atropa* ("deadly nightshade"), *Mandragora* ("mandrake"), and *Hyoscyamus* ("henbane").<sup>4</sup> None of these plants is an illegal "narcotic" in America; in fact, some are grown as ornamental garden plants as well as for pharmaceutical use and genetic research.

The term *entheogen*, meaning "becoming divine within", was developed by three leading writers in the field: the late R. Gordon Wasson, Carl A.P. Ruck, and Jonathan Ott. Ott, for instance, writes that he uses entheogen as "etymologically and culturally appropriate [and] non-prejudicial," compared to such terms as "narcotic" and "psychedelic."<sup>5</sup>

Cochrane's death, while intentional, also reflected just one of a series of experiments with solanaceous entheogens that historically have been associated with European witchcraft, according to records left by prosecutors and witnesses of the witch trials from the 15th to 17th centuries.<sup>6</sup> According to his contemporaries, he had earlier conducted less-lethal experiments using old "flying ointment" recipes. Although I would claim that the "flying ointments" (and other herbal preparations) represent a significant, verifiable link to an ancient European shamanic practice—perhaps the nearest

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thing to Margaret Murray's "Old Religion,"—my research suggests that North American and British Neopagans today largely avoid them. The exceptions, however, tend to insist—along with some historians of religion such as Huston Smith—that the ritual use of these substances is to some degree essential, placing the users in touch with the "sacred wildness" at the heart of these modern nature-based traditions. Sharon Devlin, a California Witch, told writer Margot Adler in the 1970s, "Flying ointments were used in ancient times. Our ancestors definitely used drugs. Frankly, most Pagans and Witches are stumbling around in the dark ... I want people to start getting off. Drugs ... are an essential part of magical rites."<sup>7</sup>

As Devlin rightly noted, solanaceous entheogens are ancient as well as geographically widespread. Commenting on portrayals of *Datura* in the art of pharaonic Egypt, the ethnobotanist William A. Emboden, Jr., writes: "Its psychoactive properties are extraordinary, and one of the usual modalities in the *Datura* experience is that of mystical flight, an out-of-the-body sensation."<sup>8</sup> Emboden's mention of flight leads to the famous employment of the Solanaceae in the "flying ointments" of the witch-trial period. During the 16th century, several skeptical physicians conducted experiments with ointments seized from

accused witches. These men, such as the often-quoted physician Andres de Laguna, offered an essentially materialist counter-argument against the theological arguments of both secular and religious courts. Against the belief that the "witchcraft" being prosecuted involved actual gatherings of devil-worshippers, the skeptics pointed out that the flying ointments merely produced a stupor from which the "deluded" user awoke, claiming to have experienced nocturnal flight, orgies of food and sex, and so forth. Therefore, prosecuting them for "witchcraft" was a waste of time.

What Andres de Laguna and other "rationalist" critics of the witch-trial process apparently failed—or did not wish—to do was to see the theological content of entheogen use. Given these preparations' risky nature, the person seeking recreational "highs" would have more likely turned to alcohol. As the Dutch botanist Peter A. G. M. de Smet wrote by analogy, "The essence of the Catholic mass for the churchgoer is certainly missed by saying that mass wine is prepared from *Vitis vinifera* L. (Vitaceae) and that it contains about 13 percent of the inebriating substance ethyl alcohol before it is diluted by the priest."<sup>9</sup>

Various fragmentary recipes for flying ointments survive: in the 1970s, the Danish botanical writer Harold A. Hansen announced that only sixteen

recipes were "comparatively reliable."<sup>10</sup> Reliability does not imply safety; among the historians and occultists who themselves tested these recipes, at least one other besides Cochrane, Karl Kiesewetter, died from an overdose. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, I would argue that the danger of these recipes, combined with the centuries-long tradition of their use, is the best argument for any "Old Religion" surviving from pre-Christian times. Without some sort of oral tradition of preparation and dosage, similar to that of the *ayahuasca* shamans of South America, the risks would be too great. Medical journals contain occasional descriptions of emergency-room visits and occasional deaths from the casual use of *Datura* and other solanaceous plants.

Neopaganism's growth period commenced with the "Psychedelic Sixties" (and Seventies) when fascination with entheogens zoomed upwards, following a period during the 1950s when mescaline, LSD, and other substances were restricted to a few adventurous psychotherapists and selected patients, plus certain medical researchers and intelligence agencies.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, partly due to the popularity of the books of Carlos Castaneda (which in turn followed Allen Ginsburg's and William Burroughs's writings about ayahuasca), some would-be "psychonauts" developed an interest in "natural highs," leading to an observation made in the mid-Seventies by a North Carolina emergency-room doctor: "The return to nature advocated by the counter culture has been characterized by a lack of oral discrimination. Besides drugs, glue, and a number of non-medical organic compounds [i.e., LSD and other synthetic entheogens], nutmeg, catnip,

cherry bark, and a host of seeds and weeds have been used, often with disastrous results, by a new generation of experimentalists."<sup>12</sup>

Further discussion of contemporary entheogen use has been complicated by the "war on drugs" waged at various levels in Western countries, which has complicated both academic and practitioner-based discussion of any entheogen. That attitude may now be changing, for as Dr. Albert Hofmann, the nonagenarian Swiss discoverer of LSD, remarked in a recent interview, "After years of silence, there have recently been some investigations [of scientific research on "psychedelic" drugs] in Switzerland and Germany and also in the United States."<sup>13</sup>

Given contemporary Pagans' extensive mining of earlier Pagan cultures, complete with study of dead or marginal languages (for example, Old Norse or Irish), archaeological sites and artifacts, texts, and imaginative reconstructions of the past, the omission of ancient ritual entheogens from this looking backwards seems noteworthy. Gerald Gardner, who published the first significant book on revived Witchcraft, *Witchcraft Today*, in 1954, begins his second chapter, "There Have Been Witches in All Ages," with a description of the Craft as, in effect, the Oldest Religion, rooted firmly in Paleolithic times. Yet neither there nor subsequently did Gardner assert that entheogens played any significant part in the religion.

Gardner could not overlook the "flying ointments," well-attested in the historical record, and consequently asserted in *Witchcraft Today* that medieval witches knew "certain incenses" that aided clairvoyance and spiritual vision. "In medieval times many ingredients came from the

Near East, but originally the most potent herbs seem to have been local ones, and among these some were poisonous... . To use [poisons] to gain a trance state harms no one except yourself.”<sup>14</sup>

Within Gardner’s initiatory lineage, still active today, ritual entheogens play little part. One of the senior members, born in Wales and now living in Canada, said, “one of the distinguishing marks of Gardnerian Craft is that there is a *lack* of herbal knowledge ... What little is being done nowadays is more in the nature of general experimentation ... Bowers [Robert Cochrane] was the one who did the ground-breaking experiments in this area.”<sup>15</sup> The University of Bristol historian Ronald Hutton, author of *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*,<sup>16</sup> has said that the only evidence of Gardner and his associates using mushrooms or any other entheogens came from Louis Wilkinson’s claims about Gardner’s New Forest coven, reported by Francis King in *Ritual Magic in England*. Against that claim, Hutton said, “I must set the personal hostility to drug-taking as a path to the centre expressed by Gardner in 1950s recensions of the Book of Shadows—the ‘Eight Paths’ section. It might, of course, reflect disillusion rather than lifelong opposition, but it stands with the dislike of drink which he records in his ghosted autobiography, *Gerald Gardner: Witch*, having seen its effects in the colonies. Cochrane and ‘Taliesin’ were much wilder characters.”<sup>17</sup>

As revealed by his letters and the memories of those who knew him, Robert Cochrane’s view of the Craft was less dogmatic than Gerald Gardner’s. As Cochrane himself said, he taught by “poetic inference,” and proclaimed him-

self heir to gypsies, horse-whisperers, and lineages of rural English magic workers. His rituals were performed in caves and on hilltops, and his letters contain oblique references to *Amanita muscaria* and “nightshade wine.” According to those who knew him, his death left the remaining coveners less than enthusiastic about carrying on research on traditional entheogens, turning instead to physical methods of trance-induction through ritual, dance, and masking.<sup>18</sup>

North American Pagans tend to shy away from the traditional Eurasian entheogens (including *Amanita muscaria*). Pagans dispute whether this disapproval is based on the overall societal disapproval of “illicit drugs” (even though the plant-based entheogens are mostly legal), or whether it comes from seeing other people suffer the consequences of untutored use.<sup>19</sup> The Pagan writers (here I would include Asatrú and Heathen as well as Craft) discussing traditional entheogens tend to borrow language (“plant allies”) and concepts from anthropologists such as Carlos Castaneda or Peter Furst rather than from the medieval-to-early modern users of flying ointments, wanting no doubt to reject the Christian imagery of the last. As one contributor to the “Pagan Leaders” email list wrote, “Working with a plant ally is probably more dangerous than just taking the drug experimentally. Regardless, I don’t think that the prejudices against drugs [within the Pagan community] are based strictly on a misunderstanding ... It seems more likely to me to be a manifestation of the ‘tribal consciousness’ and that sense of interconnectedness, realizing that if connected, there is a responsibility to all, and that a person taking drugs affects the rest.”<sup>20</sup>

## GIVEN CONTEMPORARY PAGANS’ EXTENSIVE MINING OF EARLIER PAGAN CULTURES ... THE OMISSION OF ANCIENT RITUAL ENTHEOGENS FROM THIS LOOKING BACKWARDS SEEMS NOTEWORTHY.

More simply, however, contemporary Pagans’ avoidance of the traditional entheogens reflects a modern split between medical-culinary herbalism and shamanic herbalism, a split displayed in the works of literate herbalists since the Renaissance. Modern herbals follow a tradition established by the 16th century English herbalist John Gerard, who crusaded against the nightshades and urged his readers, “Banish therefore these pernicious plants out of your gardens, and all places neere to your houses, where children or women with child do resort, which do often times long and lust after things most vile and filthie; & more after a berries of a bright shining black colour, and of such great beautie, as it were able to allure any such to eate thereof.”<sup>21</sup> In the words of “Jack Prairiewolf,” a contemporary Witch from Indiana who claims a special affinity for the spirits of nightshade and mandrake, “Not everyone knows about plants in general or poisonous plants in particular, given the (perhaps lamentable) urbanization of Pagans today. Those folks who go out of their way to learn about plants usually focus on the herbs, flowers, edible plants, trees, etc, instead of the poisonous power plants.”<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, works on so-called “magical herbalism” by such popular Wiccan writers as Scott Cunningham and Paul Beyerl tend to recommend *against* plant-based

entheogens.<sup>23</sup> A long-time Berkeley, California, practitioner who attended a class on making flying ointments reported to me that while solanaceous plants were discussed, the main recipe given out was based on essential herb and flower oils with henbane optional. Another recipe circulated contained no solanaceous plants at all, but did contain mugwort, a traditional herbal aid to dreaming, as well as the sedatives skullcap and wild lettuce.<sup>24</sup>

Interest in traditional entheogens is highest among that minority, both within the revived Norse and Witchcraft groups, who consider themselves to be “shamanic.” According to Asatrú follower Susan Granquist of Seattle, entheogen discussions are not infrequent on her tradition’s email list, ASATRU-L. But this group is a minority both within “Heathen” and Craft communities, where, in Jack Prairiewolf’s words,

[T]he type of power we’re discussing here really does not appeal to most of the contemporary Neopagan movement. A majority of the Neo crowd ... well, they don’t like the Wild or else they’re afraid of it, and the same can be said of anything ‘dark’ at all.... You get to talking about the magical application of poisonous plants, and the Bambi Wiccans & Co. are going to squick in very short order. They prefer to deal with a sweetness & light world and its attendant powers. Show them a glimpse of the Ancient Wild and they freak out. They will howl that working with any poten-

tially poisonous plant is inherently evil (never mind that *most* medicinals are poisonous if improperly used). I think that part of that is cultural upbringing, and part of it is wariness of anything unfamiliar, and much is fear of anything so mighty and awesome. I mean, these plants have been around for millions of years, some of them; their collective history quite outstrips the entire human race .... Some of the Neopagans just can't get comfortable with that.<sup>25</sup>

Yet another reason why plant entheogens are little used among North American Pagans is that a higher-than-average number, in my informal perception, claim to be unusually sensitive to all inebriants, as well as displaying a high frequency of environmental sensitivity to perfumes, tobacco smoke, and the like. "Hypoallergenic" ritual gatherings, where participants pass an alcohol-free chalice, are not uncommon.

A division can be made between those Witches and other Pagans who speak of plant "allies," "spirits," or "faeries" and those for whom, as one herbalist put it, "the plant spirit issue isn't much considered; much more commonly there is a formulaic attitude towards the plants. For example, 'Mandrake is good for x, y, and z'; 'Myrrh is a purifier'; 'Mugwort is for visions,' and so on and so forth."<sup>26</sup> Both this writer (Robert Brown) and "Jack Prairiewolf" suggest that urban Pagan herbalists are more likely not to encounter the plants that they use as living beings throughout their life cycles, and consequently more likely to regard them as processed products "used for \_\_\_\_\_," the very attitude taken by Cunningham and Beyerl, mentioned above.

Based on these and other interviews, I suggest that contemporary Pagan entheogen users prefer a "shamanic"

model to a "clerical" model for their place in the community, and, as Robert Brown comments, describe themselves as more oriented to "wildness" rather than to human society.<sup>27</sup> This group is perhaps more likely to read ethnographic and anthropological literature than the fantasy novels and historic reconstructions that seem to inform much of North American Neopaganism.

These contemporary Pagans using traditional entheogens are cautious about discussing them. Too many of these substances have been publicized as "legal highs", and in a society which is accustomed to seeing "drugs" as neat little pills and capsules, the dangerous and "edgy" use of traditional entheogens with their occasionally messy side effects may not appeal even to self-described Witches. Thus, for all the claims made of connections with the victims of the "Burning Times," the majority of contemporary Witches and other Pagans have chosen to turn their backs on what may indeed be the one connection with an earlier era of shamanic practice—traditional Eurasian entheogens.

#### NOTES:

1. Doreen Valiente, *The Rebirth of Witchcraft* (London: Robert Hale, 1989), 135.
2. Ann Finnin, *The History of the Roebuck* (Los Angeles: Ancient Keltic Church, 1991), 4.
3. Valiente 136.
4. Charles B. Heiser, Jr, *Nightshades: The Paradoxical Plants* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1969), Chapter 7 *passim*.
5. Jonathan Ott, *Pharmacotheon: Entheogenic drugs, their plant sources and history*. (Kennewick, Washington: Natural Products, 1996), 104.
6. Michael J. Harner, "The Role of Hallucinogenic Plants in European Witchcraft,"

in *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, ed. Michael J. Harner (London: Oxford University Press, 1973). See also Hedwig Schlieffer, ed., *Narcotic Plants of the Old World* (Monticello, NY: Lubrecht & Cramer, 1979).

7. Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981 [1979]), 139. In the same interview, Devlin acknowledged that one of her own experiments with belladonna could have proven fatal.
8. William A. Emboden, Jr, "Art and Artifact as Ethnobotanical Tools in the Ancient Near East with Emphasis on Psychoactive Plants," in *Ethnobotany: Evolution of a Discipline*, ed. Richard Evans Schultes and Siri von Reis (Portland, Oregon: Dioscorides Press, 1995), 105.
9. Peter A.G.M. de Smet, "Considerations in the Multidisciplinary Approach to the Study of Ritual Hallucinogenic Plants," in *Ethnobotany: Evolution of a Discipline*, eds. Richard Evans Schultes and Siri von Reis (Portland, Oregon: Dioscorides Press, 1995), 370.
10. Harold A. Hansen, *The Witch's Garden*, trans. Muriel Crofts (Santa Cruz: Unity Press, 1978 [*Hexens Urteggård*, 1976]), 90.
11. Martin Lee, *Acid Dreams: The CIA, LSD, and the Sixties Rebellion* (New York: Grove Press, 1985).
12. Don W. Moore, MD, "The Autumnal High: Jimsonweed in North Carolina," *North Carolina Medical Journal* 37:9 (September 1976), 492.
13. Charles Grob, MD, "A Conversation with Albert Hofmann," *MAPS* (Bulletin of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies) 8:3 (1998), 30.
14. Gerald B. Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* (Secaucus, New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1973 [1954]), 118.
15. Gwyneth Cathyl-Harrow, "GBG & entheogens," email, 29 June 1998. Emphasis in the original.
16. Oxford University Press, 1999.
17. Ronald Hutton, "GBG & entheogens," email, 1 July 1998. "Taliesin" was the pen-name of another active figure in 1960s British Witchcraft.
18. Evan John Jones with Chas S. Clifton, *Sacred Mask, Sacred Dance* (St. Paul: Llewellyn, 1997), in particular the final chapter, "Robert Cochrane: Magician or Tregetour?"
19. I recall how the word went around camp at one of the "Enchanted Mountain" Pagan festivals in New Mexico's Jemez Mountains, in about 1987, that several attendees had attempted ritual use of Datura root and become quite ill.
20. Susan Granquist, "Plant Helpers," Pagan Leaders list, 11 August 1998.
21. John Gerarde, *The Herball or General Historie of Plantes* (London, 1597) quoted in Hedwig Schlieffer, (ed.), *Narcotic Plants of the Old World* (Monticello, New York: Lubrecht & Cramer, 1979), 147.
22. Jack Prairiewolf (pseudonym), "Solanaceous plants," email, 16 October 1998.
23. For example: Paul Beyerl, *A Compendium of Herbal Magic* (Custer, Washington: Phoenix Publishing, 1998); Scott Cunningham, *Encyclopedia of Magical Herbs* (St. Paul: Llewellyn, 1985).
24. Anna Korn, "Datura," email, 27 October 1998.
25. Jack Prairiewolf, "Solanaceous Plants," email, 17 October 1998.
26. Robert Brown, "Solanaceous plants & magic," email, 26 October 1998.
27. Robert Brown, "Solanaceous plants & magic," email, 15 November 1998.

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