

Introduction to:

DRUGS AND THE "BEATS"

The role of drugs in the lives and
writings of Kerouac, Burroughs, and
Ginsberg

JOHN LONG

Novels by the same author:

Johnny Barleycorn.

Johnny Begoode.

Johnny Who?

The author can be contacted at www.johnlong.com

"Drugs and the 'Beats': The Role of Drugs in the Lives and Writings of Kerouac, Burroughs and Ginsberg," by John Long. ISBN 1-58939-783-5.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

**My thanks to André Le Vot for his help and
encouragement in realizing this endeavor**

For Veronica LaPorte Long

The urge to transcend self-conscious selfhood is . . . a principal appetite of the soul. When, for whatever reason, men and women fail to transcend themselves by means of worship, good works, and spiritual exercises, they are apt to resort to religion's chemical surrogates, i.e. alcohol and pills.

Aldous Huxley
The Doors of Perception

Come, drunks and drug-takers; come, perverts unnerved!
Receive the laurel, given, though late, on merit; to whom
and wherever deserved.
Parochial punks, trimmers, nice people, joiners true-blue,
Get the hell out of the way of the laurel. It is deathless
And it isn't for you.

Louise Bogan

INTRODUCTION

*Nous voulons . . .
Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel,
qu'importe ?
Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau !**
Charles Baudelaire

* We desire . . .
To plunge to the bottom of the pit, Heaven or Hell,
what does it matter ?
To the bottom of the Unknown to find the new!

Man's desire to change his state of consciousness

To change consciousness† is one of man's fundamental desires. From time to time, everyone feels like modifying in one way or another, to some degree, his or her mental processes, or way of perceiving reality. The child spinning around, the old lady lost in prayer in the back of the church, the worker having a few beers at the end of the day, the music-lover listening to Beethoven, the young people gathering together to smoke marijuana, or the family leaving for holiday to "get away from it all" -- all these people are looking for something which will change, for them, the reality of their everyday existence.

Where does this desire come from, this urge to transcend what the celebrated British philosopher Aldous Huxley termed "selfconscious selfhood?" In an early book written about hallucinogenic drugs, the well-known nutritionist and researcher Dr. Andrew Weil wrote: "It is my belief that the desire to alter consciousness periodically is an innate, normal drive analogous to hunger or the sexual drive."¹

Weil developed this hypothesis in his book The Natural Mind, and concluded that this desire is not a social or cultural phenomenon but a biological characteristic of the species.

Another explanation was given by Huxley himself, who, by the way, ended his experiments with hallucinogenic drugs by taking a massive dose of LSD a few hours before his death from cancer in 1963. In his book The Doors of Perception, a classic in drug literature, Huxley wrote:

That humanity at large will ever be able to dispense with Artificial Paradises seems very unlikely. Most men and women lead lives at the worst so painful, at the best so monotonous, poor and limited that the urge to escape, the longing to transcend themselves if only for a few moments, is and always has been one of the principal appetites of the soul. Art and religion, carnivals and saturnalia, dancing and listening to oratory – all these have served, in H. G. Wells' phrase, as Doors in the Wall.

† For present purposes, the word "consciousness" is used in the psychological sense of "field of consciousness" or man's awareness of his own psychic activity.

Using drugs to change consciousness

Whatever the reasons for their use, drugs go way back in the history of mankind, probably to the very origins. Fermented beverages, for example, were among the most ancient and interesting discoveries of primitive man who was always on the lookout for something nourishing or diverting. Today, alcohol is by far the preferred drug in the western world. Another example is cannabis, the most important psychodysleptic drug in ancient times. It has been used for two thousand five hundred years and its consumption in the form of marijuana and hashish continues to increase at present.

In fact, all civilizations have discovered some form of intoxicant, the only exception being, according to Dr. Weil, the Inuit peoples of the north.

Use of drugs by writers

If humans have always known what Dr. Weil refers to as a person's "desire to get outside himself," meaning to transcend or attenuate the pain, unpleasantness or just plain boredom that life can bring, it is expected that one would find traces of drugs in literature. And, granted that this wish to change consciousness is present to a greater or lesser degree in every individual, it is often highly developed in artists, whatever their calling: music, theatre, literature, etcetera. In just the last five hundred years, the list of drug addicts and alcoholics among writers would fill many pages and would include some of the most illustrious names: Baudelaire, DeQuincy, Poe, Verlaine, O'Neill, Fitzgerald, Joyce, and so on. In fact, the majority of the American Nobel Prize winners for literature were alcoholic. As Yves Florenne remarked in the book Paradis Artificiels: "On voit que la bibliographie de la drogue, au milieu du dix-neuvième siècle, n'était déjà pas négligeable."³ Of course, Florenne was speaking of the Pimodan Hotel in Paris and its famous "Club des Haschischins" where artists, scientists, and the greatest names of romanticism met to taste the pleasures of hashish. Théophile Gautier, the founder of the club, and Baudelaire, too, discovered much material for their pens there. A little later, Rimbaud, who knew well the pleasures and dramas of alcoholic states, seemed to incorporate a sort of prescription for the use of drugs in his "théorie du voyant" (seer theory). In 1871 he said in a letter: "le poète se fait voyant par un long, immense, et raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens."⁴

The influence of drugs on life

Because the use of drugs by writers is well known at the present time, what is missing is a study of the effects of drugs on the life or lifestyle of authors and on their capacity to write. It is easier to see the impact of drugs on an addicted writer's life than in his writing, especially if he is hooked on narcotics or alcohol. The fate of the morphine addict is described by Varenne in his book L'abus des Drogues:

C'est . . . la déchéance finale. Le comportement du morphinomane est devenu véritablement dramatique: sa vie n'est plus qu'une lutte désespérée pour la rendre encore quelque peu supportable. Tous les moyens sont bons

pour ne pas sombrer. C'est la catastrophe humaine. L'individu n'est plus qu'un pantin, vidé et tirailé par les ficelles de la drogue. Le temps est loin où les raffinements de l'intelligence pouvaient encore masquer l'affaiblissement de la volonté, et la tyrannie que s'installait sournoisement; maintenant elle règne en maître. On a capitulé.⁵

In the same vein, here is the way the unfortunate Thomas DeQuincy described himself in Confessions of an English Opium-Eater:

. . . opium had long ceased to found its empire on spells of pleasure; it was solely by the tortures connected with the attempt to abjure it, that it kept its hold. Think of me as one . . . agitated, writhing, throbbing, palpitating, shattered . . .⁶

And, of course, anyone meeting Burroughs in Tangiers at the height of his dependence on morphine would have seen the mark of the drug. Of this period he wrote:

I lived in one room in the Native Quarter of Tangiers. I had not taken a bath in a year nor changed my clothes or removed them except to stick a needle every hour in the fibrous grey wooden flesh of terminal addiction. I never cleaned or dusted the room. Empty ampoule boxes and garbage piled to the ceiling. I did absolutely nothing. I could look at the end of my shoe for eight hours.⁷

As Burroughs shows so dramatically, narcotics bring the addict to total dependence. Obviously, it is difficult to hide such a state. The deleterious effects of alcohol, for the alcoholic, are similar. The dramas caused by this particular drug are often spectacular: arrests, hospitalizations for detoxification, scenes of domestic trauma, accidents or fatal illnesses such as cirrhosis are fairly common occurrences for the alcoholic. One only has to consider the tormented lives of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Dylan Thomas, Brendan Behan or Kerouac himself to realize the price that alcoholism demands and how the abuse of alcohol becomes evident in the life of the drinker.

The influence of drugs in writing

As for the influence of drugs in writing, there are two aspects to consider. First is the obvious influence where the author describes his experiences with the drug. This is the thematic aspect and we can term it "writing *about* drugs." The second influence is more subtle and concerns the psychopharmacological effects of the drugs and their impact on the act of writing. This aspect can be termed "writing *on* drugs." We shall examine both aspects.

Writing *about* drugs.

A good example of this aspect is the one to which Huxley refers in the above quotation taken from Baudelaire's Paradis Artificiels. In fact, this book owes its existence to three drugs: alcohol, hashish, and opium. "Profondes joies du vin, qui ne vous a connus ?" Baudelaire wrote with ardor, and a little further on we find a discourse lauding hashish:

. . . cet état charmant et singulier où toutes les forces s'équilibrent, où l'imagination, quoique merveilleusement puissante, n'entraîne pas à sa suite le sens moral dans de périlleuses aventures, où une sensibilité exquise n'est plus torturée par des nerfs malades, ces conseillers ordinaires du crime ou du désespoir, cet état merveilleux. . .⁹

The third part of the book, more important than the first two parts together which treated wine and hashish respectively, is consecrated to

"Un mangeur d'Opium" and consists of translations from and commentaries on DeQuincy's book. This latter work is another example of writing about drugs and it owes its existence to the experiences of the author with opium. Just as he tells us in the book:

The interest of the judicious reader will not attach itself chiefly to the subject of the fascinating spells, but to the fascinating power. Not the opium-eater, but the opium, is the true hero of the tale, and the legitimate centre on which the interest revolves. The object was to display the marvellous agency of opium, whether for pleasure or for pain; if that is done the action of the piece has closed. ¹⁰

A more contemporary example of writing about drugs is Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas by Hunter Thompson. Here the atmosphere is completely different from that of DeQuincy's book. In an effort to be amusing, Thompson employs satire, exaggeration and absurdity to parody what has been termed the "dope decade" in the USA, that is, the sixties. Here is a typical passage where the author describes the quantity of drugs necessary for a short trip to Las Vegas:

We had two bags of grass, seventy-five pellets of mescaline, five sheets of high powered blotter acid, a salt shaker half full of cocaine, and a whole galaxy of multi-colored uppers, downers, screamers, laughers . . . and also a quart of tequila, a quart of rum, a case of Budweiser, a pint of raw ether and two dozen amyls. ¹¹

Thompson writes of the effects of these drugs from one end of the book to the other, always with the intention of amusing or shocking the reader. It is effective, but far from being a serious treatise as one finds with DeQuincy or Henri Michaux, for example.

Writing *on* drugs

With Michaux we have a first example of writing on drugs. During the years 1956-1960 he explored interior space with his experiments involving hallucinogenic drugs and most notably with mescaline. Michaux wrote about drugs but also sometimes under the influence of drugs in order to study their effects. He always took the drug conscientiously, and even under conditions of strict medical control. These experiments were not exactly scientific, but they did differ from those of our "beat" authors who took drugs under social or psychological pressures, or simply for amusement, or even in order to stay awake all night to write.

In any case, with Connaissance par les Gouffres, Michaux was way ahead of our authors in this area. He was always very careful not to develop a psychological or physiological dependency on the drug in question, and he always wanted to keep his lucidity in order to report with the greatest precision the colors, rhythms and forms that the drug evoked.

We can see then that even if the influence of drugs on the content or material of the writer is generally evident, the influence on style or manner of writing is much more problematic and difficult to discern. That requires a good understanding of the physiological and psychological effects of the drugs and it has not been until relatively recently that science has undertaken to study seriously these drugs, probably due to their rising popularity. In 1975, after having extensively studied the subject, Dr. Weil wrote:

Although thousands of articles were available on hemp (including hundreds written in English over the past century), almost none of this material had anything to say. It was a vast collection of rumour, anecdote, and secondhand accounts. Many writers had strong opinions about the drugs, but whenever I tried to trace these opinions back to any sort of basis in experimental observation, there was none to be found. ¹²

It is certain that at the time of Baudelaire there were mainly subjective anecdotal accounts about the effects of drugs. And serious researchers such as Moreau de Tours and later Alexandre Rouhier did not have the tools of modern science at their disposal.

Today we can better analyze these drugs, and the study of their psychopharmacology will help us to understand more thoroughly the writers who habitually used them. We know, for example, that Kerouac was so impressed by the injection ritual that he immortalized it in a poem, but can we interpret with as much certitude the influence of amphetamine in the writing of On the Road? This drug is barely mentioned in the text, but we know by his own admission that it was often freely circulating in his brain when he was writing the book. By the same token, how can we analyze with precision Ginsberg's famous work "Howl" without taking account of the fact that the author was experiencing the ecstasies and the horrors of mescaline at the time of writing?

As for Burroughs, could not one attribute his obsession with authority and power to the fact that he spent so many years under the yoke of the absolute power of the opiates? And even his literary innovations, the "cutup" and "fold-in" processes, are they not also related to drugs?

This study will attempt to answer these varied questions, as well as others related to them. We shall use the following criteria to examine the effects of drugs on the "beats": first, how the drugs influenced their lives, then how they influenced their writing, and this latter point will be considered according to two aspects: writing *about* drugs (content) and writing *on* drugs (style).