

LIFE & LETTERS:

THE DIVINE RITE OF MUSHROOMS

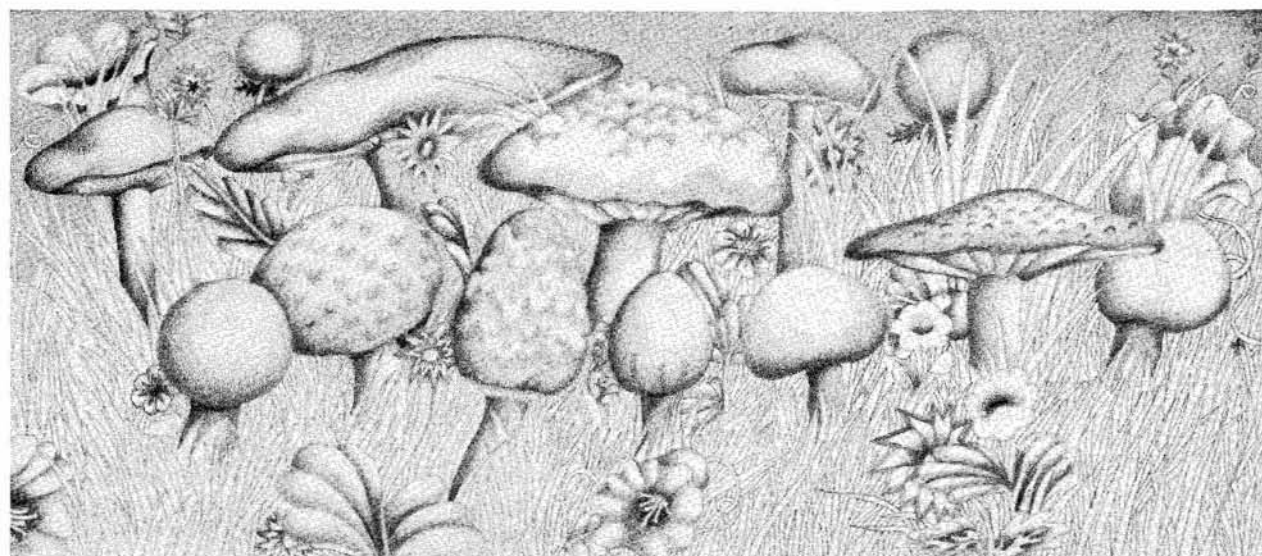
by Robert Graves

Scholars have for centuries disputed the physical identity of Soma, the legendary divine drink celebrated in Vedic poems by the Aryans who invaded India from the North in the middle of the second millennium B.C. Some supposed Soma to have been alcoholic, suggesting that it was barley beer, or mead or wine pressed from Afghan grapes; however, the *Rig Veda* allusions to its manufacture do not allow enough time between the pressing and drinking of its juice for fermentation to have taken place. Other scholars have even more impossibly suggested a sort of brandy or whiskey, forgetting that the art of distillation had nowhere been invented at that date.

A modern Indian view is that Soma was bhang, which means "cannabis" or hemp. Taking cannabis is indeed an ancient enough practice: *cannabeizein*, "to smoke pot," appears in the ordinary Classical Greek dictionary. Presumably its fumes were absorbed through the pores of the skin when the cannabis itself was smoked over a low fire—the pot-taker crouching over it clad only in a poncho. This at least seems to have been how the Ashera priestesses of the pre-Reformation Temple at Jerusalem impregnated their skins with the holy incense, which was mixed with other perfumes. But there is no reference in the *Rig Veda* to any smoking. Nor is there any reference to Soma's root, blossoms, leaves, or seeds. Yet all scholars have hitherto been searching for a plant, despite the *Rig Veda's* insistence that it had no root, being divinely born on the high Himalayan mountains. Their favorite choice for Soma has been an asclepias, or milkweed, said to be mildly intoxicating, which grows in the lowlands, not in the high Himalayas. Other guesses are mountain rue, swallowwort, moon plant, moly, and silphium.

Gordon Wasson in his book *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality* (Harcourt, Brace & World) has now made a breakthrough by identifying Soma, without any possibility of scientific or scholarly doubt, as a mushroom: the white-spotted scarlet *Amanita muscaria*, or "fly-agaric," of which the host tree is the birch, though in low-lying regions below the fortieth parallel it uses pine as its host tree and is of a foxy-red color. Wasson's argument rests on a stark verse in the *Rig Veda* that makes no sense except to botanists, anthropologists, and others who have read about the properties of this *Amanita*—which he has shown, by the way, to be the hallucinatory one that Alice nibbled in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll having read about it in a review of M. C. Cooke's *British Fungi* from the *Gardener's Chronicle and Agricultural Gazette* of October, 1862.

Before going any further with the argument, I should remind my readers that the August, 1957, *Atlantic* published a wholly unscientific piece about hallucinogenic mushrooms written by myself. It was titled "Mushrooms, Food of the Gods" and gave my reasons for supposing that Dionysus, the Greek God of Intoxication, and the only male god who had a part in the Eleusinian and other Mysteries in company with the Earth Goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone, Goddess of the Underworld, was (like his pre-Columbian Mexican counterpart Tlaloc, with whom he shares almost every divine attribute, including the toad emblem) the God of the Inspiratory Mushroom. I pointed out in that piece that ambrosia ("tabooed food"), the food reserved for gods, gave its name to Dionysus' October festival, celebrated in the mushroom season; and that the initials of the six supposed ingredients of ambrosia (as listed by the



Drawing by Pat Maloney

grammarian Athenaeus) spelled out (on the cipher principle of Celtic ogham, which seems to have originated in Anatolia) the Greek word for mushroom, *myketa*; as also did the initials of the supposed ingredients of nectar, and of *kykeon*, the drink given to Demeter at Eleusis while mourning for her lost daughter.

The original sacred Greek mushroom was, clearly, the same *Amanita muscaria*. Nero quoted the ancient Greek proverb that "mushrooms are the food of the gods" as a heartless joke about his royal stepfather, Claudius, who had been murdered with *Amanita phalloides* and then deified by the Senate. Yet the proverb referred to a mushroom reserved only for divine consumption, which originally had been *Amanita muscaria*. Its sacredness explains, I suggested, the taboo among the early Greeks against the eating of any red foods whatsoever, including the wild strawberry and crustaceans that turned red when boiled.

The secret which Demeter sent around the world from Eleusis in charge of her protégé Triptolemus is said to have been the art of sowing and harvesting corn: he drove around revealing the secret from country to country in a chariot drawn by serpents. Something is wrong here. Triptolemus belongs to the late second millennium B.C.; and corn, we now know, had been cultivated at Jericho and elsewhere since around 7000 B.C. So Triptolemus' news would have been no news. He was in fact, I believe, announcing a discovery and a consequent change of ritual. It is Paradise to which mushroom intoxication takes one—I have myself visited Tlaloc's Mexican paradise under *Psilocybe*, in Wasson's company—but all paradises, Greek, Sumerian, Mexican, Andean, and Polynesian, are much the same the world over, except that the Indian paradise admits elephants. And each invariably contains a serpent, often appearing in the form of an intricately linked golden chain, supposedly because a bright serpentine apparition is one of the brain's natural reactions to the cutting off of its full oxygen supply, whether by drugs, drowning, or stifling. The serpent may be glorious or terrifying according to one's state of mind: the

advanced alcoholic also sees snakes; so do certain sufferers from meningitis.

Triptolemus' secret seems therefore concerned with hallucinogenic mushrooms, and my guess is that the priesthood at Eleusis had discovered an alternative hallucinogenic mushroom easier to handle than the *Amanita muscaria*: one that could be baked in sacrificial cakes shaped like pigs or phalli, without losing its hallucinogenic powers, and one that did not produce a long hangover. That the medieval Mexicans had made a similar change is suggested by very early Central American mushroom statues which resemble the *Amanita muscaria* rather than the *Psilocybe*. Tlaloc's toad emblem confirms this for me: the hallucinatory poison secreted in the warts of a toad is also found in the white warts of the *Amanita muscaria*.

A few years ago, having learned that certain Portuguese witches were using another variety of mushroom for magical enchantments, I arranged to have an example sent to the great mycologist, my friend Dr. Roger Heim, director of the Musée de L'Homme at Paris. It proved, so far as I recall, to have been *Panaeolus papilionaceus*. Wasson has the record. His famous earlier book *Mushrooms, Russia and History*, written in collaboration with his Russian wife, had made me aware that *Stropharia*, a white mushroom growing on cow dung, possessed much the same properties; and it came to me that this was used for sacred purposes in India, where it grew on the dung of sacred cows.

Lately I asked a Brahman from South India why the cow was sacred. He answered, "Oh, because each part of the cow is dedicated to one or other of the gods."

"Yes," I said, "I am aware of that. But do Brahmans on certain solemn occasions not rely on another product of the cow?"

Being a Brahman he remained silent; which reminded me of a Greek philosophic question whether an initiate of the Mysteries when asked about a certain feature of them by a man to whom it had been revealed in a dream should answer "yes" or "no."

My view is that *Amanita muscaria* ceased to be

used as Soma in India not only because its acquisition from the high Himalayas was difficult but because the *Stropharia* was a more effective hallucinogen.

Wasson, with whom I have had a continuous correspondence about mushrooms since 1949, came visiting me in Majorca recently with evidence that our unfounded guess about the identity of Soma and ambrosia had been justified. He had shown conclusively that the complicated farfetched poetic allusions to Soma in the *Rig Veda* could refer to *Amanita muscaria* alone: that in fact, the earliest hallucinogenic agent at the Divine Mysteries will have been *Amanita muscaria*. But my view is that its identity has so long been forgotten because of the *Triptoleman* change.

He consulted me about one *Rig Veda* text that puzzled him, because it did not seem to refer to the *Amanita muscaria*, and suggested that it might be a later insertion, referring to some placebo for Soma. I reassured him that he was thinking scientifically, not poetically, and that for me this text clenched his argument for *Amanita muscaria*. Unfortunately, I kept no notes of our conversation, and Mr. Wasson does not mention this incident in his book.

Wasson began his career as a journalist without any university education (which may account for the preservation of his genius), became a Wall Street reporter, was taken over by J. P. Morgan & Company as their press agent, and was soon elevated to vice president when his extraordinary understanding of business became apparent. Similarly with his second profession: he began as an amateur mycologist and has since become the acknowledged founder of the huge and immensely important new science ethnomycology.

Whenever I pick up strange news of mushrooms, as often happens, I send it to him for filing. It had been a chance piece of information that I passed on to him in the fifties that prompted him to investigate the mushroom oracles of Mexico. Another sent him, in company with Dr. Heim, to examine a mushroom cult, combined with a bird-of-paradise dance, in the New Guinea highlands; Dr. Heim and Mr. Wasson have since published an account of it in

The Leaflets of the Harvard Botanical Museum.

I make no claim to be a scholar. I get, record, and pass on news and intuitions; but any mention of my work in academic books is so suspect as to detract from their sales value and general acceptance. Since, scientifically, I do not exist, I have nothing against Wasson for failing to recall our speculations about Soma at the time that I wrote my piece about ambrosia, Soma's Greek counterpart, in the *Atlantic*; or for recording that his identification of Soma with *Amanita muscaria* was forced on him, to his own great surprise, by a recent reading of Vedic literature. His new book therefore satisfies me completely.

Now to come back to the peculiar properties of *Amanita muscaria*. Wasson writes:

The fly-agaric is unique among the psychotropic plants in one of its properties: it is an inebriant in *Two Forms*.

First Form:

Taken directly, and by "directly" I mean by eating the raw mushroom, or by drinking its juice squeezed out and taken neat, or mixed with water, or with water and milk or curds, and perhaps barley in some form, and honey; also mixed with herbs such as *Epilobium* sp.

Second Form:

Taken in the urine of the person who has ingested the fly-agaric in the *First Form*.

What he is saying here is that when the mushroom juice is squeezed out and drunk, only some of the indoles which induce hallucinations pass from the stomach into the bloodstream; the rest lodge in the kidneys and there mix with the urine. The urine is filtered, as the *Rig Veda* makes clear, through sheep's wool, and then drunk mixed with milk or curds.

Not only the Palaeosiberians and a small Mongol enclave in Afghanistan—which Wasson visited two or three years ago but where he failed to capture the local confidence—use these two methods of taking Soma. So, apparently, do certain Lapps and Finns, who are said to filter and get high on the urine of reindeer that have eaten the *Amanita muscaria*.

Since Soma has a quieting effect on its takers, the reported wildness

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of the Dionysian Maenads' behavior when eating the same mushroom must have been caused by its mixture with barley beer or spruce beer and possibly also with the chewing of laurel and yellow ivy. In Scotland *Amanita* and whiskey are taken together by certain poachers. The mixture is called a "Cathie," supposedly in memory of Catherine the Great of Russia, who fancied it.

The peculiar, and to the civilized world, disgusting, second method of taking Soma has naturally blinded all clean-minded scholars to its nature and use; as it has also blinded them to the meaning of Dionysus' double birth, which, fool that I am, I have myself overlooked these many years!

The god Dionysus is the counterpart not only of the Mexican god Tlaloc but of the Vedic god Agni: Agni, as Wasson proves, is Soma, as Soma is the hallucinogenic mushroom. The belief that mushrooms are engendered by lightning is found all over the world. Plutarch is the Classical authority for this belief in early Europe. Indra in the *Rig Veda* is a thunder god, the Lord of all the Heavens; Agni's birth is from lightning or from the fire-swastika. Indra, by the way, has so dwindled in importance that, I am told, he can now claim only a single poor temple. Dionysus' first birth was from Semele, a moon-earth-and-underworld goddess whom Zeus, Indra's counterpart, thunderously impregnated. His lightning destroyed her, but her spirit was later elevated to Olympus under the name of Thyone. The infant Dionysus, untouched by the lightning, had been sewn up in Zeus's thigh. In other words, the Indra-Agni-Ambrosia-Soma cult was brought to Greece by the invading patriarchal Aryans.

Indra, it is related, was once asked by his worshippers for a taste of Soma. He unwillingly promised it to them. Presently he appeared to them in the guise of a stinking and diseased beggar. "Come and drink my piss," he whined. They drove him away with imprecations. When later they reverently asked Indra to keep his promise, he answered, "I offered you Soma and you refused it." In fact, Soma is mythologically first begotten by lightning—there is still no known method of planting a mushroom seed; then it is housed in the thigh of the god, or his representative, who

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has eaten it as juice, and expelled or reborn in the form of hallucinogenic urine. The parallels between Zeus and Indra and between Dionysus and Agni are inescapable.

The argument of Wasson's *Soma* is as lucid as unanswerable; the illustrations are wonderful, the quotations are numerous and telling. I congratulate him on his feat, and thank him gratefully for helping me finally to reveal the meaning of "Merotraphes" (thigh-nursed), Dionysus' hitherto unexplained nickname.

Recently I sent him a short piece explaining Odysseus' use of moly in avoiding Circe's mushroom intoxication of Odysseus' sailors. He has here included a mention of Homeric "moly," as a possible origin of Soma, but failed to explain (as I did in my note) that Homer, or the eighth century B.C. author of the *Odyssey*, has confused a yellow

garlic, which would have had the effect of oxygenating Odysseus' blood and thus would have made him proof against Circe's charm, with wild cyclamen!

Soon after my first experience of hallucination by the Mexican *Psilocybe* at Wasson's apartment in New York City in 1960—Jerome Robbins had also been there—I wrote a poem about it but put it in terms of Dionysian, not Mexican, mythology. During the session, the Mexican *curandera's* litany in praise of the god Tlaloc (disguised as "Christ") and his divine sister had been played to us on a tape. It is unlikely that participants in the Soma rite, so long as they were in a state of grace, as I happened to be at the time—for to have a bad conscience makes the participant wish he had never been born—can have had a very different experience from mine. Here is my poem:

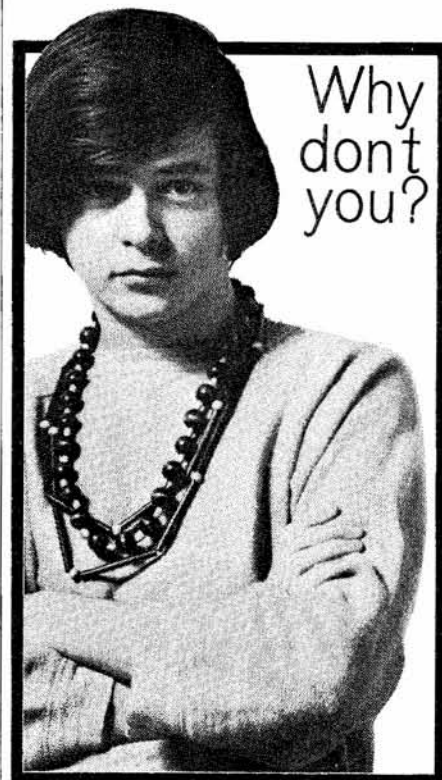
THE AMBROSIA OF DIONYSUS AND SEMELE

Little slender lad, toad-headed,
For whom ages and leagues are dice to throw with,
Smile back to where entranced I wander
Gorged with your bitter flesh,
Drunk with your Virgin Mother's lullaby.

Little slender lad, lightning engendered,
Grand master of magicians:
When pirates stole you at Icaria
Wild ivy gripped their rigging, every oar
Changed to a serpent, panthers held the poop,
A giant vine sprouted from the mast crotch
And overboard they plunged, the whey-faced crew!

Lead us with your song, tall Queen of earth!
Twinned to the god, I follow comradely
Through a first rainbow-limbo, webbed in white,
Through chill Tyrrhenian grottoes, under water,
Where dolphins wallow between marble rocks,
Through sword-bright jungles, tangles of unease,
Through halls of fear ceilinged with incubi,
Through blazing treasure-chambers walled with garnet,
Through domes pillared with naked Caryatids—
Then mount at last on wings into pure air,
Peering down with regal eye upon
Five-fruited orchards of Elysium,
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