

Sea of Radiance: An Interview with William Leonard Pickard

BY HENRIK DAHL Posted on [April 16, 2017](#)

The following long-form interview is the first extended Q&A with Harvard and UCLA drug policy researcher turned writer William Leonard Pickard dedicated to the topic of altered states of consciousness. Published on the anniversary of Swiss scientist Albert Hofmann's discovery of the psychedelic properties of LSD on 16 April 1943, this rare interview touches upon alchemy, psychedelic literature, and the challenging art of describing altered states via literary prose. Also discussed are altruistic motives for making LSD, memory in relation to the psychedelic experience, and the recent appearance of potentially lethal research chemicals that have reportedly been sold as LSD to unwitting users.

In case one is not familiar with his biographical data, William Leonard Pickard (born 1945) is serving two life sentences without the possibility of parole for purportedly manufacturing astronomical amounts of LSD. Imprisoned since 2000, the alleged psychedelic chemist was arrested for his involvement in the Wamego bust, aka the Kansas missile silo bust, in November of that year. According to the DEA, the bust is the largest LSD case in history. While drug information site Erowid has pointed out that the lab's production appears to be vastly exaggerated,[1] DEA has continued as recently as October 2016 in an American national media broadcast to assert the immensity of the lab's production. Retired DEA Special Agent Guy Hargreaves claims in the documentary that the lab had the capability to make 2.8 billion dosage units of LSD.[2]

Pickard, who at trial denied any criminal activity in relation to the case, is currently serving his sentence at USP Tucson, a high-security prison in Arizona that houses over 1,800 prisoners.

Already a voracious reader, Pickard turned to writing. Using only a pencil and paper, the former academic embarked on a literary project that took him several years – and one complete rewrite – to finalise. Thanks to the help of friends and supporters, his manuscript was designed into a book, and in late 2015 Pickard debuted as an author with *The Rose of Paracelsus: On Secrets & Sacraments* (Sub Rosa Press). Although some readers have remarked on the book's length and complexity, as well as the somewhat challenging language, others have expressed admiration for its esoteric narrative and Victorian-styled prose. And while the current version is an "Advance Reader's Copy," the book has already gained a small but dedicated following.

Since its release, there has been some confusion among readers whether *The Rose* is a work of fiction or nonfiction. Clearly, the book's literary style and larger than life story makes it appear more like a novel than a memoir of a former scientific researcher. In fact, it would not be out of place to call *The Rose* a prose poem. That said, some events in the story are probably biographical. Although a cause for irritation to some, this interplay of fact and fiction is an important part of the book. (The author, for legal reasons at this time, cannot comment on the fact/fiction controversy.)

The Rose centers on supposedly fictionalised interviews with a group of altruistic psychedelic chemists known as "the Six." The reader soon learns that the Six produce colossal batches of LSD, a substance that in its early days, to quote the words of underground chemist Indigo, "spread from person to person like a sea of radiance".[3] Only five of the six of the chemists are interviewed in the book, and it is speculated that the author himself is the sixth chemist. Another suggested interpretation is that the chemists portrayed in the book are in fact different facets of one single character. However, seeing that reality can sometimes be stranger than fiction, one should not rule out the possibility that the Six existed in real life. Either way, the portrayal of the esoteric group is valuable for understanding the LSD spirituality that has long been practised by various psychonauts since Hofmann's potion became their medicine of choice.

As for the following interview, it is not necessary for the readers of this Q&A to have read Pickard's book to appreciate the discussions below, for our exchanges contain several references to – and quotes from – *The Rose*. Yet the reader should know that the book is probably what enabled the interview to take place the way it did. Obviously, like most interesting literature,

The Rose functions as a portal into the mind and ideas of its author, and given that Pickard is presently residing in, to use his own words, a “narrow iron crypt,” the strong focus on *The Rose* was a necessity, albeit an enjoyable one.

In autumn 2015, I emailed Pickard asking him if he would be interested in doing an interview. While his reply was friendly and inviting, he did not immediately accept my proposition. Instead, he suggested I should read his forthcoming book first, which seemed like a reasonable counterproposal. Due to various circumstances and delays, it would take until February 2017 before I sent Pickard my first formal interview question. In the intervening time, we communicated via email, regular mail and also spoke on the phone on two occasions. Since we first got in touch hundreds of messages of various length have been sent between the high-walled desert prison in Arizona and my home in Malmö, Sweden. And due to the eight hour time difference between these two locations, my beeping phone has awakened me in the middle of the night on more than one occasion (to the slight annoyance of my wife).

Every single message has been monitored. Naturally, this also goes for the following interview.

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HENRIK DAHL: *The Rose of Paracelsus: On Secrets & Sacraments* takes the first part of its title from an alchemical short story by Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges. Its metaphysical narrative is also an important element of your book. What inspired you to bring the topic of alchemy into a psychedelic context?

WILLIAM LEONARD PICKARD: Borges’s widow Maria Kodama and the Borges estate kindly permitted the title; Borges himself derived it from Thomas DeQuincey in his *Suspiria de Profundis*:

“Insolent vaunt of Paracelsus, that he would restore the original rose or violet out of the ashes settling from its combustion...”

Some readers have discerned *The Rose* as appearing from the ashes of captivity, through the difficult yet exquisite alchemy of prose. Alchemists sought – and still seek – not the transformation of base matter into the precious, but transfiguration of the self. All the world then becomes priceless, and one lacks nothing.

As Sasha [Shulgin] wrote in his journal after a profound night:

“I feel I have come home. I am complete.”

The act of writing *The Rose* was a way of caressing the world in these final cold decades of imprisonment. Of singing a song quietly from this distant world, for the far listener.

A relevant story: For many years I possessed a 1569 volume of Queen Mary’s alchemist John Dee’s revelations during his experiments, his records of the visitations of angels. The last page was in some unknown tongue, which may have been the esoteric Enochian language. Bound in leather, with large plates of alchemical symbols and red printing banned by the Papacy, it was signed by the Duke of Lauderdale while in his prison cell at Windsor. He wrote on the flyleaf “Durate” and other Latin phrases, meaning “Persevere to the end of the path.” Given the brutal circumstances under which *The Rose* was written, how resounding is that inscription.

HENRIK DAHL: The front cover of *The Rose* contains various symbols and a liquid “spill,” the latter presumably a reference to the broken flask that led to chemist Indigo’s massive exposure to LSD. What was the main idea behind the cover design?

WILLIAM LEONARD PICKARD: To invite the reader’s perception of mystery, elegance, and beauty – to prepare for the erotic, the medieval, the infinite. The cover is not casual or blaring, but carefully done to engage higher sensibilities. Its symbology often is overlooked in haste. Let’s examine it more closely.

The patterns and puzzles of the cover are only the surface of the work it embraces. The liquid spill is best seen under direct sunlight or a strong lamp. Some have thought it a printing error, but it is an aesthetic device crafted by the artist. The colors range from indigo to magenta to crimson, only obvious in retrospect as one meets the Six. The spill ranges outward to a cascade of stars. The central image is an adaptation of a painting by Giorgio Perich of Trieste, Italy, titled “Alchimia.” Look closely: the semi-circle with ambiguous symbols at the edges alludes to religious invocations radiating in all directions. The

semi-circle may be a navigator's chart from the 16th Century, with ships and their wakes and geometers' lines to shore, and yet the ships comprise the eyes of a face. Some have concluded the nadir represents vertical labia, an irresistible gateway to consciousness.

Becoming aware of such purposeful subtleties, one may discover the alchemical symbols embedded underneath the spill, and at the edges of things, and the hermetic writings in medieval French on the back cover. Even each of these has meaning for the devoted reader, while they also point to clandestine laboratory spiritual practices described in the writing. Multiple readings of *The Rose* frequently yield relationships not realized at first.

Readers now are reporting sudden comprehension of intricacies and omens in the narrative: of crows, tartans, silver rings. Of unheralded cognitive leaps. Of unimagined sensual freedoms. Of ancient liturgies to address addictions. Some think the writing a memoir of an elite and devoted group with a charter beyond sovereign governments: to birth the next altruistic species.

The colophon on the spine and back cover is a pair of crossed retorts used by alchemists for distillation, or purification, and thereby are white. As you observed early on, they are imposed upon a hexagon, the elemental symbol in organic chemistry. They reflect the early psychedelic experiments at Edgewood Arsenal – Fort Detrick – where the United States attempted to weaponize what many consider a gift. An insignia, as it were, of the first and failed attempt to control a highly-advanced technology.

And here we are discussing only the cover. Designed by Matthew Morse, the front cover of *The Rose of Paracelsus: On Secrets and Sacraments* contains several alchemical symbols and a mysterious liquid "spill."

HENRIK DAHL: Let us for a moment consider the activities of the Six. A striking feature of the group is their spiritual outlook. For instance, during LSD synthesis they believe it is essential to have the purest intent and a reverence for the clarity of mind and heart.[4] This outlook stands in stark contrast to the murky motives of the unknown chemists of the 2010s who produce potentially lethal NBOMe compounds in order to counterfeit LSD.

In your mind, what mechanisms made it possible for altruistic groups such as the Six to appear and become a culture shaping force in the second half of the twentieth century?

WILLIAM LEONARD PICKARD: In Delft, Holland on a moonlit evening, chemist Indigo and I drew near a 16th Century stone church, gazing at a scattering of bluebells in the graveyard. I asked what would occur if the Six withdrew their entheogen worldwide. His reply was prescient:

"Our fear is that – in the absence of the sacrament – toxic alternatives will proliferate, with addiction and loss of lives. Opiates, stimulants, bizarre lethal hallucinogens will enter the void. Governments would be wise to permit a certain availability of classical psychedelics, lest chemical horrors abound." [5]

And so we see in the absence of the parent compound LSD in the last decade or so – which was one of the few non-addictive, non-lethal psychoactives – a substitution effect: the rapid emergence of highly troubling drugs. As one unfortunate example, the NBOMe series you mentioned: microgram-range substances with an unerring lethality, but with facile syntheses and commonly available precursors. Dark/Deep Web commerce of custom-synthesized novel research chemicals also is proliferating from 1000's of Asian sources, without the restrictions imposed by personal expertise or clandestine settings, and with earnest curiosity often overcome by carelessness about medical outcomes – or by simple greed. It is a frightening prospect: the toll on human life will continue unchecked, long after any useful subjective data from the 10,000 or more compounds yet to be explored becomes marginal.

Confounding this phenomenon is the tragic fentanyl analogue epidemic now proliferating. *The Rose* describes my early studies in Russia on an outbreak in Moscow, and the prediction that exotic opioids such as fentanyl, 3- methyl-fentanyl and car-fentanyl would become endemic in society.

Yet, intriguing as the psychedelic pharmacopeia is to many, its evolution may be entering a cul-de-sac (with the important recent work on LSD binding an exception). Rather, the future may be the province of Big Pharma's initiatives on memory and learning drugs, and libido-enhancing erotogenics. These will not be confined to a narrow range of society as are psychedelics. They will confer selective advantages of cognitive enhancement to users in the former instance, and deleterious syndromes of chronic indulgence and unwitting exposure of victims in the latter. In *The Rose*, these concerns are central to the directives of the Six.

But you asked of the mechanisms making it possible for altruistic groups to shape culture in the latter half of the 20th Century. Perhaps these are not limited to that time-frame, for altruism long ago gathered the first tribes, and now is evolving the next benevolent human forms. The advent of religions, the breeding out of aggression, the aggregation of universities and gifted youth, the flowering of compassion in the long peace in which we are privileged to live – all of these factors have yielded enduring blessings.

One fanciful conjecture often entertained by psychedelic novitiates has origins in the narrow temporal distance between the 1943 discovery of subjective effects [of LSD] in Basel and the Trinity nuclear detonation in 1945. A balancing of karma, it is theorized, a fortuitous pharmacology leading to our better natures.

The Six, though, see the mechanism shaping culture as arising not from exposure to substances but from the simplest of human emotions, from our innate yearning for light, from our most sublime feelings as children of the Godhead. In *The Rose*, as our little group danced under starlight in Harvard Yard, we reflected on how we first recognized ourselves as one:

“The pulse of the world followed us that night, we the moon keepers ... We sang in the scented air in these precious moments, for soon we would be elders, recollecting the magic of the time when we, from our lonely childhoods, finally found each other.”[6]

HENRIK DAHL: Psychedelic literature differs from many other genres in that it deals with psychedelically induced altered states of consciousness (ASC). Naturally, these states are very hard to describe in words. The late writer and orator Terence McKenna once said (in a conversation with Ram Dass) that, “There is a transcendental dimension beyond language, it's just hard as hell to talk about it.”[7]

The linguistic dilemma of psychedelic literature can, for instance, make it somewhat difficult to classify books in the genre in terms of fiction or non-fiction. On the positive side though, the limits of language leave room for more artistic expressions.

The Rose of Paracelsus: On Secrets & Sacraments includes several descriptions of non-ordinary states of consciousness. What was your approach when it came to portraying these states?

WILLIAM LEONARD PICKARD: Terence kindly wrote to me in prison before his untimely death. Ram Dass was the last researcher with whom I spoke before the loss of freedom.

Describing altered states through wordcraft, while difficult, can be at once exhilarating, sorrowful, reverent, joyous, poignant. One must honor the reader, and inspire gently. Transmitting prisms of mind from captivity in concrete and steel, with only a pencil to transmute feelings and perceptions, is no simple task.

My approach in recollecting the intense visionary scenes of *The Rose* perhaps is best described by a fragment of Milton, sent by the most promising interpreter of psychedelic literature: Nese Devenot. While reading *The Rose*, she instantly comprehended the sensory isolation of high-security imprisonment, and suggested that long-term deprivation may heighten sensitivity. She recalled Milton's blindness and his passage in *Paradise Lost*:

Thus with the Year,
Seasons return, but not to me returns
But cloud instead, and ever-during dark
Cut-off, shut-out
So much thou Celestial light

Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
Irradiate, all mist from thence
That I may see and tell
Of things invisible to mortal sight.

In the only silences, when we are locked overnight in our narrow iron crypts, and after years when not a flower or tree or river is seen, there occurs by grace a wellspring of aesthetics, of lost sensations: the majesty of the wild, the softness of lover's hair, the sunrise in children's eyes. In the moment before it all disappears, I write a few words – carved into a crude notebook – to be sent out as a present for others: the only thing one has left to give.

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HENRIK DAHL: How would you say the subject of ASC is dealt with in psychedelic literature in general?

WILLIAM LEONARD PICKARD: My modern reading stops about 1941, with the death of Virginia Woolf. Of current psychedelic literature I have no experience whatsoever (drug-related books are prohibited). Having read in past decades only writings of the ages, references to which occur in *The Rose*, I hope careful younger readers will find in them a special delight.

The classical language of *The Rose* may be unexpected, certainly when applied to a worldwide psychedelic organization. Yet we realize from poetry, invocation and liturgies that even ancient words and phrases themselves may be psychoactive, reprogramming neural systems and accessing cortical regions otherwise unreachable. The transcendence of words rather than substances. So we must read carefully, and listen. Consider Shelley's *Witch of Atlas* as a written hallucinogen:

And wondrous works of substances unknown
From the enchantment of her father's power ...
Their glorious dreams must weep
Their tears all wonder and delight
She in her vials did closely keep
If men could drink of those vials, 'tis said
The living were not envied of the dead.

While psychedelic literature inevitably may accord visionary phenomena to chemicals, readers of *The Rose* may observe that the altered states described are not drug-dependent, but arise in the proximity of other evolved beings. While writing, I recall for others a world which is now, to me, vanished.

One thus tries to speak of the unspeakable. On a hillside above Salzburg, entering into an altered state while chemist Indigo related tales of his synthesis of ten million doses [of LSD] each month for twenty years, I could do nothing but receive. Some examples:

"His words were of a different order entirely and not for the common ear ..." [8]

"I am crossing dimensions within and subconsciously beyond the limits of human speech ..." [9]

"It seemed as though I were a child only beginning to read, or think, or grasp words from a distant future civilization toward which one inexorably was being swept." [10]

Although unfamiliar with other attempts to describe altered states, I must admire any effort to surround the phenomena with words. As chemist Magenta remarked at a Kathmandu shrine among the Saddhus:

"Our reptilian brain, overlain with stardust, grasps at logic, altruism, oneness with Glory ..." [11]

Performance artist Marina Abramović featured on the film poster for *The Space In Between* (detail).

HENRIK DAHL: The theme of memory is a central thread in your literary work. Obviously, the autobiographical parts of your book were recalled from your memory, and your poetry also appears to rely on recollections of past experiences in nature and

elsewhere. Moreover, you are clearly interested in the science of cognition, and when it comes to *The Rose*, the chemists that you portray therein have advanced memory, and, incidentally, they also anticipate future substances that have the capacity to heighten remembrance.

Memory has a special significance in relation to various ASC. For instance, the so-called trip report was invented so that people could remember at least a portion of an experience. Writing in *The British Medical Journal* in 1896, Dr S. Weir Mitchell stated that, "Were I to take mescal again I should dictate to a stenographer all that I saw and in due order. No one can hope to remember for later record so wild a sequence of colour and of forms." [12] Since the days of Mitchell and others, these reports have become a literary genre, which became especially noticeable after the 1991 publication of *PIHKAL* by Alexander and Ann Shulgin, and the appearance of the Erowid website in the mid-1990s.

In *The Rose* the character known as Hammer paraphrases a popular quote by Arthur Koestler. After having an LSD experience with Timothy Leary, the Hungarian-British author and journalist stated, disapprovingly, "I solved the secret of the universe last night, but this morning I forgot what it was." [13]

I would like to contrast Koestler's quote with a quote by performance artist Marina Abramović, who said in a recent interview that, "In order to get rid of one's fear, it is necessary to alter one's consciousness. The fear is always a huge obstacle." [14]

Why do you think people have such contrasting views on entering non-ordinary states?

WILLIAM LEONARD PICKARD: Most agree that the range of subjective experiences is vast – and unpredictable – although mediated by influences that 70's Harvard researcher Norman Zinberg characterized as "set" (state of mind) and "setting" (social and physical environment). Happily, though – rather than chaos – there are commonly-reported experiences that may be classified.

Put another way – while phenomena may seem limitless, recognizable categories are manifesting in our collective reporting. As you thoughtfully observed, the heritage of American physician Weir Mitchell's 1896 writings on mescal – and those of other early researchers – indeed presently flows from the 1991 seminal work of our beloved Sasha and Ann Shulgin, together with the grand stimulus of Earth and Fire Erowid, and many courageous and unknown individuals now creating coherent and structured online records. There is an honored lineage in the field, as described in *The Rose* while buried in dusty stacks underneath Harvard Medical School:

"Spread about the earth with their medicine for hatred, I felt they had an elementary moral beauty, one worthy of study. The night was spent reading 19th Century medical literature on visionary manifestations and altered states: the work of Alexandre Brierre de Boismont, the records of Charles Bonnet on phenomena among the blind." [15]

Your question, though, is on contrasting experiences: to compare here the widely divergent and exclusive subjective effects encountered by Arthur Koestler and Marina Abramović. Let's consider each.

Koestler had only an ephemeral memory of his luminous night, as did Hammer in his cheerful admission while attempting to seduce a lovely grad student at the Kennedy School of Government. Each had the "secret of the universe" overnight but misplaced it in the morning. [16]

Perhaps it is best that sudden insight into sacred mechanisms – into transcendent connectedness and the unfathomable – elude one with the passage of time. They become evanescent in memory. Essentially lost, but subtly and irrevocably changing our being as well, they recede through grace so that we may continue in society in peace.

In *The Rose*, upon encountering chemist Crimson on the beaches near Point Reyes, California – a night by a mythic fireside where all the ages passed before one's eyes – I could only let it go:

"I had been permitted a carefully limited glance at the edges of a worldwide system, the existence of which had never been proven. My writings henceforth were but a fitful remembrance, not only of these most uncommon of interviews, but of

complex ephemera barely recordable yet absolute. They were so utterly unforgettable that, in order for the observer to function, they must be forgotten.”[17]

Note “for the observer to function ...” Afterward, the events must dissipate almost in their entirety. Chemist Magenta in *The Rose* advised that the night’s revelations must fold and close, so one thereafter can avoid “a zealot’s light, to not stalk about like some medieval abbé, eyes heavenward ...”[18]

Of your other example of a divergent experience: the fear described by artist Marina Abramović in contrast to Koestler. So often fear is the precursor to a great synthesis of new mind. The moment before comprehension when one may feel incapable, or confused, or quite mad. One might best approach the onset of fear by entering into a sense of reverence or prayer, recalling the essence of mind as indestructible and pure. By these means, fear is replaced with humility. As concluded in *The Rose*, after a cataclysmic afternoon in the British Museum:

“One never grows cavalier at dying, or being born.”[19]

Yet of the surging and retreating of the mountainous ocean of consciousness in psychedelic experience, how blessed it is as well to return at last to normalcy. As chemist Indigo replied when I asked of the extremes of revelatory displays:

“Must we return to the mundane world?”

“Always. To not be lost. To rest for all of our lives in the great gift.”

“And what is that?”

“Our natural mind.”[20]

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HENRIK DAHL: The other day you mentioned that you have entered a new writing phase. What are you working on at the moment?

WILLIAM LEONARD PICKARD: It’s a singular pleasure in this chaotic environment to return to writing. Three new manuscripts are underway, one on memories of the Six that could not be included in *The Rose*, another on the advent of problematic substances, and the third on the promise of novel cognitive agents. Other than admiring and reviewing the accomplishments with psychedelics at NYU, Imperial London, Hopkins, Zurich and North Carolina, I am studying with great interest the works of Nick Bostrom and colleagues at the Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford and the Centre for Existential Risk at Cambridge. When moments arrive, I sometimes am able to look at the sky, and remember loved ones and friends.

HENRIK DAHL: Thank you for your engaging and thought-provoking answers, Leonard.

WILLIAM LEONARD PICKARD: And thank you for your kindness in reaching out, Henrik. It’s always a delight to hear from you. Safe journeys.

Notes

[1] “Erowid Character Vaults: William Leonard Pickard,” Erowid (2012), https://erowid.org/culture/characters/pickard_leonard/pickard_leonard.shtml

[2] In Other News, MSNBC (October, 29 2016), Archive.org, https://archive.org/details/MSNBCW_20161029_210000_In_Other_News/start/1020/end/1080 (“2:17 pm”), https://archive.org/details/MSNBCW_20161029_210000_In_Other_News/start/1080/end/1140 (“2:18 pm”)

[3] Pickard, William Leonard, *The Rose of Paracelsus: On Secrets & Sacraments* (Sub Rosa Press, 2015), p. 108.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 340.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 318.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 173.

[7] "A Conversation with Terence McKenna and Ram Dass," The Terence McKenna Wiki (Wikispaces), <https://terencemckenna.wikispaces.com/A+Conversation+with+Terence+McKenna+and+Ram+Dass>

[8] Pickard, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 107.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 108.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 192.

[12] Mitchell, S. Weir, "Remarks on the Effects of the Mescal Button," Erowid (2005), <https://erowid.org/experiences/exp.php?ID=42614>

[13] Cohen, Patricia, "New York Public Library Buys Timothy Leary's Papers," The New York Times (2011), <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/16/books/new-york-public-library-buys-timothy-learys-papers.html>

[14] Hansson, Cecilia, "Politiska konstnärer är de värsta" (lit. "political artists are the worst ones"), SvD Kultur (19 February, 2017), p. 11.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 97.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 75.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 236.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 271.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 126.