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A 1920s Harvard Psychedelic Circle with a Mormon Connection: **Peyote use amongst the 'Harvard Aesthetes'**

In **Don Lattin's** book *The Harvard Psychedelic Club* (Lattin, 2010) he explains how Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, Huston Smith, and Andrew Weil, through a psychedelic revolution, disestablished the Fifties and ushered in a New Age for America, but the members of this psychedelic club may **in fact have been the 'Johnny-come-latelies'** of Harvard psychedelic culture.

In **Alan M. Wald's** book, *The Revolutionary Imagination: The poetry and politics of John Wheelwright and Sherry Mangan* he documents how poet Sherry Mangan (1904-1961), who graduated with honours in Classics at Harvard in 1925, as well as being an "avid participant in the heavy drinking pursued by Harvard undergraduates of the 1920s, he was also part of a group that experimented with hallucinogenic drugs" (Wald, 1983, pp. 76-77). Wald explains how Virgil Thomson (1896 –1989) introduced the group to the effects of the hallucinogenic Peyote cactus (Wald, 1983, p. 77):

"Virgil Thomson, the famous Missouri born composer, in his autobiography *Virgil Thomson* (1966) mentions that he first learned about Peyote, at the end of his World War I service from a minister and that he introduced the drug to S. Foster Damon and others at Harvard. Sherry developed his own system of obtaining mescal caps by mail from New Mexico for the Peyote parties in his room in Weld Hall [a Harvard dormitory]. Ground up and taken in a glass of water, the caps were a very bitter brew; after the students had drunk it, they put their heads out the window to be certain it would stay down. At one of these parties the toilet seat in **Sherry's bathroom was mysteriously burned and the current wise crack was that someone in his hallucinations must have thought he was a comet.**"

Later "on visits to Cambridge and Boston (Sherry) continued the heavy drinking begun at Harvard and further experimented with Peyote" and "One adventure involved Robert Keller, **a close friend of Sherry's who later became a popular song writer. Keller 'took a knife and pressed it against someone's throat and made threats [but] they all said there was nothing to be afraid of'**" (Wald, 1983, p.82). Wald quotes Sherry Mangan from a letter to his friend and High School classmate Richard Haywood that part of his unreserved admiration for Virgil Thomson was that "Thomson insisted always on being in complete control of himself and would not dream of going to a length with the drug or **with alcohol where he could not instantly act as one completely sober'**" (Wald, 1983, p.82). Following graduation from Harvard in 1925 Sherry Mangan went straight to Paris with Virgil Thomson, where through Virgil's contacts he mixed with such expatriate literary luminaries as Gertrude Stein. A charming account of the experience of young aspiring expatriate poets and artists in the Paris of the 1920s can be found in the semi-autobiographical novel by Carl Van Vechten *Peter Whiffle: His Life and Works* (Van Vechten, 1922), the protagonist of which dedicates himself to exploring every experimental literary, political and lifestyle option of the 1920s, including the use of various drugs and exploration of the occult. Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964) bohemian society photographer, writer and supporter of the Harlem Renaissance is said 'to have frequented the transvestite floor shows, sex circuses, and marijuana parlors along 140th street and his lavish parties were said to resemble a speakeasy deluxe, peopled by

literary figures, stage and screen celebrities, prize-fighters, dancers, elegant homosexuals and Lorelei Lee gold diggers' (Hull, 1987, p. 9). **Van Vechten's friend** Mabel Dodge Luhan (1879 - 1962), whose literary salons entertained many eminent modernist authors, **appears in 'Peter Whiffle' as Edith Dale.**

Virgil Thomson's co-experimenter, S. Foster Damon (1893 -1971), born in Newton, Massachusetts, was later to become an American academic, a specialist in William Blake, a critic and a poet. He was one of the '**Harvard Aesthetes**', the name given to a group of poets attending Harvard University in the early 1900s, and married Louise Wheelwright, sister of John Brooks Wheelwright (1897 - 1940), another poet identified with that group. Damon graduated from Harvard University in 1914, returning there after World War I as an instructor in the English Department. It would appear that S. Foster Damon, like Robert Hillyer (1895 -1961) another member of this circle of partakers of Peyote, was a tutor at the time of his involvement with Peyote at Harvard. Later, as a Blake scholar, **Damon intuited the Cabbalistic connections in Blake's writings**, both this and **Damon's** Peyote experiences are referred to by Allen Ginsberg in his introduction to Timothy Leary's book '**High Priest**' (Leary, 1968). **Damon's book** 'William Blake, His Philosophy and Symbols' (Damon, 1924) was later followed by 'A Blake Dictionary', in which he **refers to Blake's visions having the 'waking dream' character of Peyote visions, "the thought-emotions which rose from his subconscious inevitably took human form in visual symbols, with a vividness and completeness comparable to the color-visions of peyote"** (Damon, 1965, p. 436).

In his preface to "William Blake essays for S. Foster Damon" (Rosenfeld, 1969) Alvin A Rosenfeld recounts Virgil Thomson's memories of Foster Damon:

"I do not remember how I first knew him; but I do remember long walks and talks; and I remember him bringing me music and books that he thought I ought to know. Some of these such as the critical writings of T. S. Eliot and the Irish writings of James Stephens, I found merely informative or charming. Others changed my life. Among these last were the piano works of Erik Satie, a pile of them four inches high, and a thin small volume called Tender Buttons, by Gertrude Stein. I returned these favors by introducing him to Peyote, which we would take together, sometimes with **another poet and English A instructor Robert Hillyer."**

The American poet Robert Hillyer graduated from Harvard in 1917, after which he went to France and volunteered with the Ambulance Corps serving the Allied Forces in World War I. He had long links to Harvard University, including holding a position as a Professor of English. He was a member of the Epsilon chapter of the prestigious St. Anthony Hall Delta Psi fraternity at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. Hillyer, who is also identified with the Harvard Aesthetes group, is not kindly remembered by some Ezra Pound scholars, who associate him with his 1949 attacks on **Ezra Pound's work *The Pisan Cantos*** in the *Saturday Review of Literature* that reflected **Pound's overt anti-Semitism, following Pound's controversial award** of the 1948 Bollingen Prize in Poetry **despite Pound's wartime support for Mussolini's fascist regime.**

The involvement of Sherry Mangan, and other members of the Harvard Aesthetes, and their use of Peyote connects them into the literary circles of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and the international Bohemian culture of New York, Florence and Paris. John Wheelwright met the writer Mabel Dodge Luhan in Florence, one of the centres of

Bohemian culture whose occasional residents included Ezra Pound. Mabel Dodge Luhan had an ambivalent attitude to Peyote, having organised a chaotic Peyote party in Greenwich Village in 1914 (Palmer and Horowitz, 2000), she later campaigned against the decriminalisation of Peyote for members of the Native American Church (Stewart, 1987); this despite her having moved to Taos, New Mexico, due to her sympathy for Native American culture, taken a Native American husband and written elsewhere sympathetically about the Peyote experience. The personal, political and tribal politics involved here were complex and not all Native American elders approved the adoption of the Peyote rite.

The Harvard Aesthetes included John Dos Passos, who was a friend of the eccentric French poet and writer Blaise Cendrars, who in turn was a friend of Alexandre Rouhier **author of 'Le Peyotl, la plante qui fait les yeux émerveillés', (Peyote the plant that fills the eyes with wonder), (Rouhier, 1927).** Rouhier was connected with the French occult *demi-monde* of the 1920s and a source at that time for Peyote in Europe, which he cultivated himself in the South of France. The Polish artist, photographer, playwright and drug adventurer Witkiewicz (1885-1939), who painted under the influence of various drugs and recorded under the influence of which particular drugs he had painted by coded ciphers on his paintings, referred to him as a source of Peyote **at that time** (Gerould and Witkiewicz, 1992).

The student member of Harvard circle, who was responsible for introducing them to Peyote, was the aforementioned Virgil Thomson, the American composer who later wrote the **score for Gertrude Stein's opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*** (Thomson, Stein, 1934). Virgil Thomson was born in Kansas City, Missouri and, when a child, he befriended Alice Smith, and it was **Alice's father, Frederick Madison Smith**, who introduced Thomson to Peyote. In his autobiography (Thomson, 1966), Virgil Thomson records how Frederick Madison Smith (1874 –1946), third Prophet-President of the Reorganized Church of Jesus **Christ of Latter Day Saints "passing the previous winter, for his wife's health, in the Southwest, [Frederick Smith] had made inquiries about a hallucinogenic cactus known as Peyote, as a student of man's higher powers, notably those of second sight and prophecy"**.

Frederick Smith earned a Doctorate in Philosophy in 1916 and his PhD dissertation, published in 1918 **as "The Higher Powers in Man"** (Smith, 1918) contains a sympathetic study of the Peyote rite as a means of achieving religious ecstasy. Smith had participated in the Peyote rite and according to Smith's own account **he went through this ceremony several times as recorded in Frederick Madison Smith, *A Trip among the Omaha Indians*, (Smith, 1919, pp. 1151-1154).** Although the Mormon Church forbade the use of alcohol Dr Smith **"did not believe that Peyote was, technically, a drug. To him it was a natural substance, an ancient means to tap into one's inner powers derived from hallucinogenic cactus 'neither injurious nor habit-forming'" (Tommasini, 1987, p.83).** The possible use of psychoactive plant drugs by the original Mormon prophet, Joseph Smith himself, is explored by Dr Robert Beckstead (2007) in his paper *The Restoration and the Sacred Mushroom: Did Joseph Smith Use Psychedelics to facilitate his Visionary Experiences?*

According to **an account by Shelby M Barnes (1995)** "believing that the Peyote experience first released then enhanced the human mind toward creative expansion, (Frederick Smith) understandably encouraged others to use the drug. One such example

concerned Virgil Thomson. Thomson, who was to become a famous composer and long-time music critic at the *New York Times*, was a college friend of Smith's oldest daughter, Alice." **Virgil Thomas' introduction to Peyote is described in Anthony Tommasini's biography, *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the aisle*, (Tommasini, 1997, pp. 83-84):**

"One night in his study after dinner, Dr Smith described to Virgil his peyote 'highs' with their 'characteristic excitation to feats of endurance and color visions'. Virgil asked if he may try it. Dr Smith obliged him for he believed that musical ecstasy was particularly powerful.... His one condition was that Virgil promise to write of his experience for Dr Smith's studies. He gave Virgil five bumpy little buttons less than an inch across and hard as wood,' and suggested that he chew them up before he went to bed."

Virgil described his experience to Damon "who was intensely interested and wanted to try it. Virgil wrote to Dr Smith who was still obtaining Peyote from those Texas Indians. The Mormon president became Virgil's supplier. He and Damon, and sometimes also the young poet Robert Hillyer, would take Peyote together- about ten times over the next few years."

Tommasini quotes Virgil Thomson's account of his initial experience (Tommasini, 1997, p. 84):

"The effects, full visions each as complete in color and texture as a stage set, began slowly to appear before my closed or open eyes, then came more rapidly till two hours later they were flashing at least two times every second, with no delay involved in their complete perception. Each one, moreover, had a meaning, could have been published with a title; and their assembled symbolisms or subjects, though not always sequentially related, constituted a view of life not only picturesque and vast but all mine and all true."

According to Tomassini **"For Virgil these peyote adventures were always surprising and sumptuous" but, by Virgil's own account, "in none did the heavens so definitely open as they had for me that first time alone in my room" (Tommasini, 1997, p.84).**

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