

## Chapter 12

# Gnosis Potency: DMT Breakthroughs and Paragnosis

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**Abstract** DMT (N,N-dimethyltryptamine) is a powerful tryptamine that has experienced growing appeal in the last decade, independent from ayahuasca, the Amazonian visionary brew in which it is an integral ingredient. Investigating user reports available from literary and online sources, this chapter focuses on the *gnosis potency* associated with the DMT “breakthrough” experience. I explore the parameters of the tryptaminal state and, in particular, the extraordinary *paragnosis* associated with the DMT event, perceived contact with “entities,” and the transmission of visual language. As the reports discussed illustrate, for milieus of the disenchanting, among other entheogens, DMT is venerated as a gift that enables connection to a reality (nature, the universe, divinity) from which modern humanity is imagined to have grown alienated. Through an exploration of the legacy of principal actors, including Terence McKenna, Jonathan Ott, Jim DeKorne, and Nick Sand, the chapter navigates the significance of DMT in modern Western esotericism.

## Introduction

Known to produce out-of-body states and profound changes in sensory perception, mood, and thought, DMT (N,N-dimethyltryptamine) is a potent short-lasting tryptamine. While DMT has been outlawed in most nations following the UN Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971, recent surveys have shown that this relatively harmless tryptamine compound has grown increasingly desirable (Sledge & Grim, 2013; Winstock et al., 2013). Independent from ayahuasca, the Amazonian visionary brew in which DMT is integral, the modern usage of DMT followed the discovery of its psychopharmacological actions in the 1950s. The promotional tours of psychedelic raconteur Terence McKenna in the 1980s and 1990s were integral to its underground appeal, as was the Internet. Users typically participate in an informed networked milieu where knowledge of chemical synthesis, botanical

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identification, extraction techniques, and methods of administration circulate. DMT is today commonly smoked using crystal-vaporizing methods or blended with other herbs, as in “changa” (St John, 2017a). While sociocultural research on this phenomenon remains scarce, a circumstance hampered by criminalization, evidence builds on familiarity with the effects of DMT, as evidenced in clinical research (Strassman, 2001), and through research using interviews (Tramacchi, 2006), surveying (Cott & Roc, 2008), ontology (Luke 2008, 2011) and cultural history (Gallimore & Luke, 2015; St John, 2015).

While dependent on broad variables commonly recognized as “set” (i.e., the mood, expectations, and attentions affecting the individual’s state of being) and “setting” (i.e., social and environmental context), as well as source (i.e., botanical or synthetic), technique of administration, and dose, the DMT event typically involves the rapid onset of an out-of-body experience of brief duration (i.e., its effects typically last about 15 min), with a sensation of transit common to the experience. While distortions in space and time, complex geometric patterns, energetic light sources, and veridical encounters with sentient entities are reported features of this visionary space, the experience possesses phenomenological diversity, as found in Strassman’s clinical trials (2001). The wide parameters of the DMT “world”—its *hyperliminality*—are to be addressed in a future publication.

Examining user experiences in literary sources, from existing research and in anonymous reports archived on the Internet, including those found on Erowid and DMT-Nexus, this chapter navigates the *gnosis potency* of the DMT event. It therefore addresses the profile of DMT, among other tryptamine sources, within one of three interconnected modalities of use: gnosis, therapeutic, and recreational (St John, 2015, pp. 305–307). While there are diverse “events” shaped by a spectrum of variables, the user reports presented illustrate DMT events are extraordinary “breakthrough” experiences that not uncommonly facilitate outcomes that bear the stamp of gnosis—i.e., access to the truth of one’s connectivity with nature—including one’s divine self, as well as the natural world, or more generally the cosmos or universe from which humanity is understood to have grown alienated. Not uncommonly received as a gift, experiences will act upon such knowledge in various ways. An exploration of the ontology of the DMT breakthrough experience is undertaken in three sections. The first explores the *tryptaminal paragnosis* of DMT *hyperspace*. The second addresses the profile of DMT within the development Wouter Hanegraaff names “entheogenic esotericism” (Hanegraaff, 2013), a profile elevated through the prodigious commitment of Terence McKenna. Drawing largely on the examples of three figures, William Burroughs, Jim DeKorne, and Nick Sand, the third section navigates the wide parameters of *entheogenesis*.

## DMT Hyperspace and Tryptaminal Paragnosis

Ontological warp speed arrived in a startlingly immediate flash as the universe quite literally deconstructed itself in front of my eyes into a complex green and red geometrical grid that artist Alex Grey has rendered as the “Universal Mind Lattice.” An impossibly elaborate onrush of candy-colored, chaotically presented patterns of pure visual information then ensued as the intergalactic Wagnerian horn section continued to blow a spectacular fanfare. The emotional content was one of genuine awe, a briefly terrifyingly integration of my neurology into the submolecular fabric of the universe (Gehr, 1992, p. 47).

This comment presents a not untypical example among DMT users in which this compound is recognized to enable a category of immediate knowing commonly designated as *gnosis*. Compared with other forms of knowing, gnosis is associated with the direct experience of the truth, unmediated by doctrine, faith, or reason. It has been established that a mix of hermetic, Neoplatonic, Occult, Kabbalistic, and other traditions have contributed to a dazzling variety of ideas and practices that have been associated with “gnosis” (Hanegraaff, 2006). As has also been recognized, the conditions for gnosis are often altered states of consciousness (ASC), such as ecstatic and trance states (Hanegraaff, 2008a; St John, 2011). The perspective on “gnosis” adopted here approximates what Hanegraaff, in his study of modern esotericism, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, called the “third option” (beyond “faith” and “reason”) in a spectrum of Western knowledge (Hanegraaff, 1998). As knowledge claims harboring discontent with established theologies and scientific rationalism, the idea was provoked by the work of Dutch historian of Christianity and Gnosticism, Gilles Quispel, who traced the history of “a certain type of religious or religiophilosophical thought and practice from antiquity to the present” (Hanegraaff, 2008b, p. 133). The key aspect of what Quispel called the “third component” in the European cultural tradition was “gnosis,” a Greek term meaning “knowledge” and, more specifically, “a kind of intuitive, nondiscursive, salvational knowledge of one’s own true self and of God” (Hanegraaff, 2008b, p. 133). Developing his own tripartite classification, i.e., faith, reason, and gnosis, Hanegraaff (2008b) was careful to state the classification is analytical and not historical, since they cannot be neatly bounded. It is also important to note that the catalytic role of psychoactive drugs, plant derived or otherwise, has been typically overlooked or ignored in official academic and “state-of-the-art” accounts of gnosis and histories of Western esotericism. For example, while ASC, including those enabled by psychoactive compounds, have been integral to experimental ecstasies and “psychedelic” reveries, there were neither entries on psychoactive drugs nor ASC in *The Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*.

As evidenced in a variety of sources, alongside tryptamine analogues and among a host of “teacher” plants and their compounds, DMT holds appeal as a powerful means for gnosis inducement or, more pointedly, *paragnosis* potentiation. The latter term refers to extraordinary and paranormal means of knowledge acquisition. Known to expose users to “worlds” previously hidden from view, encounters with sentient otherworldly “entities,” and transmissions of “visual language,” the strangely familiar transpersonal DMT state is persistently recognized within the

user community as a state of paragnosis. From my reading of user accounts, amid a diversity of experiences, including those of principal figures discussed in this chapter, there remains a persistent feature that the DMT user purportedly arrives at, or approximates, a direct and unmediated awareness of the intrinsic nature of reality (i.e., as it truly is), a reality that had previously been occulted. This awakening not untypically involves (a) the awareness that nebulous and normally unseen forces are the cause of tyranny, oppression, and alienation and (b) that one is intrinsically connected to the divine universe. The first condition is sometimes articulated using a term attributed to Gnosticism, i.e., “archons” (DeKorne 1994). Such revelations typically inspire action in the world. As a transpersonal experience potentiating an awakened identity and altered worldview, such events appear consistent with the transformational status of an “exceptional human experience” (Krippner, 2002).

The faculty of becoming endowed with enhanced visual perception is common during the DMT trance and integral to its paragnosis potency. Experiencers are not uncommonly feted with a *presque vu*, an ability to see, or almost see, through a reality filter previously unnoticed. The resulting effects are visions of “hidden” realities and “parallel universes.” While launched through alien cities at such a lightning speed that content retention was virtually impossible, smoking DMT at the Chan Kah Hotel, Palenque, gave Daniel Pinchbeck an awareness of the realm “next door.” As he wrote in *Breaking Open the Head*, “behind every billowing curtain, hidden inside the dark matter of consciousness, now playing every night in disguised form in our dreams. It is so close to us, adjacent or perpendicular to this reality. It is a soft shadow, a candle flicker, away.” It was in this realm that those Pinchbeck called the “cosmic supervisors” repeated: “This is it. Now you know. This is it. Now you know” (Pinchbeck, 2002, p. 242). In collated reports on DMT ventures, science columnist Clifford A. Pickover has commented that most users feel “as if a veil has been lifted, allowing them to view events that have been continuously transpiring in the DMTverse with an existence independent of the psychonaut.” Accessing this divine universe where explorers are accessing another reality “mere millimeters away from our own,” Pickover refers to the “feeling of enchantment, of sanctity, of beauty, a sense of gaining privileged access to knowledge and intelligence” among travelers in this space, for whom the world “appears to be ‘constructed,’ composed with care like a work of art or an intricate hand-spun fabric” (Pickover, 2005, p. 91).

Whether explained as travails through parallel universes, odysseys in other dimensions, or journeys to the psychic antipodes, the vicissitudes of *travel* are implicit to DMT hyperspace, the passage through which is often embraced as a breakthrough event. The experience had been widely asseverated via the concept of “hyperspace,” a psychoactively induced higher-dimensional space-time championed by T. McKenna, whose exploits in those realms are transmitted via a torrent of oral presentations circulating virally on YouTube. The “space” of the DMT event is commonly reported by users to be above the four dimensions of space-time (i.e., non-Euclidian). Enabling anonymity and modes of communication with some semblance to the virtuality of the experience, the virtual world of cyberspace has been pivotal to communities vested in DMT “hyperspace” (St John, 2017b). The

authenticity of the event is connected to the way this virtual “space” and its occupants are received as sources of information “seen,” felt, or otherwise sensed noetically as “gifts.” Hyperspace is often characterized as a liminal realm of universal knowledge, such as that accessed by D. M. Turner who, in *The Essential Psychedelic Guide*, described “CydelikSpace” as a “storehouse of universal experience” containing “all thoughts which did not occur but could have, and each variation of experience that did not take place” (1994, p. 127).

Travelers of the interdimensional interstices write reports on the parameters of these spaces, which are then passed on, like return gifts, to their own communities. Such include James Oroc who uses quantum physics to explain his access to “all knowledge in the universe, at once” (the “Akashic Field”) under the influence of 5-MeO-DMT (Oroc, 2009, p. 197).<sup>1</sup> While the experience is reported to be like receiving the complete encyclopedia of cosmic history, pan-cultural awareness, and total biographical recall within a momentary download, returnees understandably face difficulties retaining the information. As a kind of Ur-space of primary wisdom that is apparent and yet incomprehensible, immediate and yet profoundly other, this space is sometimes described as a “vaulted dome.” While returnees chart the multidimensionality of hyperspace, and report on the “dome effect,” experience of this space is characterized by ontological variability (St John, 2018).

Among the visceral affects of one’s passage through this space is the sensation that experiencers have undergone an initiation or induction of some kind. This passage is most often characterized by the perception of a newfound and unheralded connectedness. Commentary from musician Devin James Fry illustrates this cosmic initiation while at the same time illuminating DMT’s popular appeal. Inspired to write the song “I Touch My Face in Hyperspace Oh Yeah” after a DMT experience, Fry has been reported to state: “It’s like seeing the source code of the universe: a river of vibrating mandalas, geometric shapes shifting and moving. That night I became it. There wasn’t a separation anymore—I was part of that. I was certain that consciousness is a non-local event ... It’s more like we’re antennas beaming something in for the duration of our time in these bodies” (Curtin, 2015, paras. 7, 9).

The sensation of dissolving boundaries previously separating the user from the universe, divinity, or reality itself, is not uncommon and was succinctly announced by a returnee reporting on Erowid: “I definitely felt I had been closer to the core of the real than ever before and that this mystery is front and center to who we are as humans, who we really are. I felt very connected to my universe, very sensitive and strong and in touch with things” (SFos, 2000, para. 11). “Entities” are a common medium for the transmission of this gnosis. While a veritable “bestiarum” has been identified—from teachers to archons, elves to mantids, and therianthropes to tree spirits, among a wide spectrum of beings (Hanna, 2012; Tramacchi, 2006)—as

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<sup>1</sup>5-MeO-DMT (5-methoxy-N,N-dimethyltryptamine) is included in this discussion, given reports of its gnostic potency paralleling that of N,N-DMT, both short-acting hallucinogens of the tryptamine family. That is, they are simple indole alkaloids derived biosynthetically from tryptophan, an essential amino acid present in all plants and animals (D. McKenna & Riba, 2015). Despite this similarity, they are different chemicals with distinct strengths and profiles (see Erowid Crew, 2009).

mentioned, accounts typically acknowledge the reception of a “gift.” The following offers one example.

The female being got in my face and communicated to me (not in words) look at whats ON the pedestal! I looked up and saw a diamond shaped object that was made of similar stuff to the walls but infinitely more brilliant, more dazzling, more unspeakably awesome. And as my smile grew and total awe and amazement filled me, this female being began flying around the object at great speed, keeping her eyes fixed on me. She was doing flips and sharp turns and cheering as though she was celebrating the fact that she had the chance to show me. She kept communicating to me, Look at it! Look at it! Isn't this awesome?! This continued, and I kept my eyes on that unbelievable object as the scene began to fade. (Universal Shaman, 2004, para. 10)

The “impossibility” of episodes reputedly defying the five senses and testing the limits of language poses serious challenges for users attempting to transpose their experiences post-event. These challenges are among the reasons why art inspired by DMT (and other compounds), such as work produced by Alex Grey, is appealing to users and why many prefer to adopt media other than written language (e.g., painting, sculpture, film). Otherwise, users may coin neologisms to translate the “unEnglishable,” as they have done at the DMT-Nexus, where a list of terms—the “Hyperspace Lexicon”—has been created. The common perception that one can “see” light with all of one’s senses is, for instance, posited as “kinesioöptic,” referring to a state where “the body can dissolve in the experience and be left with just the sensing of light.” Another term, “kalonkinesioöptic,” prefixes “kinesioöptic” with “kalon,” a Greek term referring to the Platonic idea of transcendental beauty, thereby referring to immersion in astonishing beauty (Hyperspace Lexicon, n.d.)

It cannot be ignored that DMT inaugurates a diverse range of phenomenological experiences, as reported by Tramacchi (2006) in his ethnography of Australian DMT users. While at one extreme, Tramacchi reported a preoccupation with death and dismemberment, in another pattern, interlocutors interacted with “earth spirits or earth energies,” communications thought “potentially therapeutic for both the individual and the planet” (2006, p. 73). Consistent with the wide visionary spectrum to which Aldous Huxley (2009 [1955]) was familiar, dramatic variability is native to psychedelics. At one extreme, a palpable atmosphere of decay and senescence is present in user reports and artistic expressions—an enveloping shadowland not unlike that depicted in the screenplay of Gaspar Noé’s perverse 2009 epic feature, *Enter the Void*. At the other, outcomes are consistent with the “ecodelic” thesis of Richard Doyle in *Darwin’s Pharmacy*, where ayahuasca, DMT, and other substances are inspiring language and evolving consciousness to the benefit of “the Noösphere” (Doyle, 2011).

Despite this spectrum of extraordinary experience, one also cannot ignore the common threads, as evidenced by the rhetoric of returnees. A case in point is D. M. Turner, the comparative psychonaut who advised on various combinations like harmala alkaloids with DMT in smoking blends that prolonged the effects by 30–40 min. In this duration, Turner reported: “I often feel that my body and Being are ‘embraced’ by an ancient earth spirit. And this earth spirit is instructing me to

become aware of, and open up, many lines of communication that exist between my mind, body and the external world” (Turner, 1994, p.: 78).

## Atomic Age Gnosis

As apparent in such paragnosis, and in invented nomenclature, the revelatory character of the breakthrough event is consistent with the way DMT enables transparencies typically involving a realization of one’s prior alienation, e.g., from one’s higher self, nature, or the universe. Typically, the experience amounts to liberation from oppression, an emancipation not disconnected from an awareness of the powers—entities, faiths, and dogmas—that sustain it. Enabling awakening, and fueling conspiracies, sometimes with the assistance of sentient intermediaries, DMT is often approached as a sacrament. In this way, it can be likened to the use of psilocybin-containing mushrooms, mescaline, or ayahuasca used in nontraditional contexts, as explained by Wouter Hanegraaff.

Entheogenic sacraments like ayahuasca are credited with the capacity of breaking mainstream society’s spell of mental domination and restoring us from blind and passive consumers unconsciously manipulated by “the system” to our original state of free and autonomous spiritual beings. . . . They are seen as providing *gnosis*: a salvational knowledge of the true nature of one’s self and of the universe, which liberates the individual from domination by the cosmic system. (Hanegraaff, 2011, p. 88)

As an integral component of ayahuasca, but also as an independent agent, DMT carries this liberating potential and should be recognized within the context of “entheogenic esotericism” (Hanegraaff, 2013), which takes its place, previously neglected, in the history of Western esotericism. In his revisionism, Hanegraaff (2010) names Terence McKenna as the figurehead in this development, pointing out that, as demonstrated in public orations such as the Lectures on Alchemy delivered at Esalen in 1990, McKenna sought in pre-Enlightenment hermeticism “models of a ‘magical’ and enchanted revival” relevant to the crises of the present (Hanegraaff, 2013, p. 406).

While any such label will likely have been disputed by McKenna himself, “entheogenic esotericism” resonates, especially as it appears to recognize what McKenna called the “Re: Evolution”-ary impact of plant “allies,” that they provide the keys for ingesteers (i.e., humans) to realize their own divine nature. McKenna had been outspoken on the idea that psychoactive compounds (notably, hallucinogenic mushrooms) were integral to the emergence of human consciousness. He was also a trenchant critic of modern culture, the “ennui” of which, he commented in *The Food of the Gods*, “is the consequence of a disrupted quasi-symbiotic relationship between ourselves and Gaian nature.” Among the most appalling symptoms of this disruption, he averred, are the conventions prohibiting plants that are themselves empowering and evolutionary. And perhaps the greatest indictment of all is the fact that, under national and international legal frameworks implemented at the turn

of the 1970s that had deemed it to possess no medicinal or therapeutic value, DMT is criminalized.<sup>2</sup> The folly is noteworthy, not least since DMT exists everywhere in nature and occurs naturally in humans. “Only a restoration of this relationship in some form,” he continued, “is capable of carrying us into a full appreciation of our birthright and sense of ourselves as complete human beings” (McKenna, 1992, p. 56).

With such a restoration in mind, McKenna advocated an “archaic revival” and a “renewed shamanism” (1992, p. 98). In a 1992 spoken word performance—“Re: Evolution,” backed by UK act The Shamen—McKenna stated that, with the “dissolution of boundaries” triggered by tryptamines, especially an “heroic dose” of DMT or psilocybin-containing mushrooms,

one cannot continue to close one’s eyes to the ruination of the earth, the poisoning of the seas, and the consequences of two thousand years of unchallenged dominator culture, based on monotheism, hatred of nature, suppression of the female, and so forth. . . . So, what shamans have to do is act as exemplars, by making this cosmic journey to the domain of the Gaian ideas, and then bringing them back in the form of art in the struggle to save the world. (McKenna, Colin & West, 1992)

McKenna did not advocate these experiments as self-directed therapy. With intention and courage, and with attention to dose and technique, psychedelic tryptamines were to be ingested in feats of world-saving heroism. The following is a crucial insight from a 1995 lecture:

Everyone of us when we go into the psychedelic state, this is what we should be looking for. It’s not for *your* elucidation, it’s not part of *your* self-directed psychotherapy; you are an explorer and you represent our species and the greatest good we can do is to bring back a new idea because our world is endangered by the absence of good ideas. Our world is in crisis because of the absence of consciousness. To whatever degree any one of us can bring back a small piece of the picture and contribute it to the building of the new paradigm, then we participate in the redemption of the human spirit. (Burn in Noise, 2008)

The perspective is indebted to the Platonic idea that humans, having fallen from perfection—the world soul—could return to the stars, and many of McKenna’s ideas regarding the virtuous use of psychedelics and “alien gnosis” can be read through this lens.

Seized by the “DMT flash” in Berkeley in the fall of 1965/1966 and driven, with brother Dennis, to uncover its source in an epic psychonautical adventure to the

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<sup>2</sup>With its possession and distribution subject to prohibitions across the United States, beginning in California in 1966, by 1970, DMT and analogues DET (N,N-diethyltryptamine) and bufotenin were included in the Controlled Substances Act of 1970, which was followed closely by the UN Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971, putting pressure on foreign governments to follow suit. As a “Schedule I substance” in the United States, DMT has not only been classified together with LSD, mescaline, psilocybin, and other nonaddictive psychedelic compounds; it is typically classed alongside heroin and cocaine as a “dangerous drug” with “no recognized medicinal value.” While 5-MeO-DMT and other short-acting entheogenic tryptamines remained legal in the United States, they became subject to classification as illegal DMT analogues under the Controlled Substances Analogue Enforcement Act of 1986. In 2011, 5-MeO-DMT was added to Schedule I.

Amazon in 1971 (McKenna & McKenna, 1993 [1975]), McKenna recognized DMT as “the quintessential hallucinogen” (McKenna, 1994, para. 1). With knowledge of its endogenous status, DMT was championed as nothing short of a human “birth-right”—as much, or so he thought, as “our sexuality, our language, our eyesight, our appreciation of music” (McKenna, n.d., para. 5).

Throughout the 1990s, McKenna made a lasting impression speaking at dance festivals and proto-visionary arts gatherings, becoming chief bard to the neo-psychedelic counterculture. The repertoire on “hyperspace” McKenna forged to reckon with the perplexities of the DMT trance state have had a profound impact on countless participants in an emergent research culture whose members build, share, and debate interpretative frameworks to comprehend their experience (St John, 2015).

Within this culture, and with the assistance of the heuristics provided by T. McKenna (who, following his death in 2000, became something of a digitized cult figure), along with the influence of Strassman and Alex Grey, psychedelic trance and visionary arts events, such as Portugal’s Boom Festival and Symbiosis Gathering, became the revelatory topography for rediscovering a symbiotic relationship with the Earth. Intentionally “transformational” and participatory festivals celebrated awareness of one’s enmeshment in the web of life. Psychoactive compounds, notably DMT, have had a catalytic role in the emergence of psychculture (St John, 2015), with DMT among an assemblage of spiritual technologies, or *spiritechnics* (St John, 2012), championed by expressive expatriates aggrieved by the disastrous effects of monotheism, possessive materialism, and ecological maladaptation. Among the adopted alchemies is the popular experimental DMT smoking mix “changa,” sometimes referred to as “smokeable ayahuasca” (St John, 2017a), with transformational experiences interpreted as “psychedelic gnosis” (Gaia, 2016). In a hybridization of the New Age and New Edge movements, with the assistance of sensory technologies from digital electronics to ethnobotanicals, with repertoires from super diets to microdosing, and adopting trance dancing, yoga, and meditation, among a range of human potential maximizing techniques evidencing “entheogenic religion” in the “wide” sense (Hanegraaff, 2013, p. 393), protagonists seek passage from conditions of cosmic alienation.

This broad, and sometimes questionably, “transformational” milieu has inherited an ambience of discontent, an awareness that humanity is in the grip of a crisis in consciousness. For McKenna, and those surfing his wake, the solution to this crisis resided in psychedelic shamanism. Anarchic, experimental, and radically libertarian and empirical, this neo-shamanism would be integral to the evolution of the human condition. Rather than singularly figured to heal the individual self, psychedelic shamanism is ultimately figured to evolve the human spirit. The perspective has deep roots, though immediately indebted to Huxley, who understood that psychedelics like mescaline and LSD could empower the individual user in their knowledge of being. In *The Doors of Perception*, Huxley endorsed psychedelics as means by which to cleanse the “filters” ordinarily protecting humans from the infinite, practices previously the domain of saints, seers, mystics, and prophets. Perhaps more essential than ever in the mid-twentieth century, in the shadow of the mushroom

cloud, Huxley, and later psychedelic chemists Bear Owsley and Nick Sand, recognized the urgency of an atomic blast of consciousness in an Atomic Age.

The mounting crisis of the late 1960s demanded that the envelope be blown out on standard consciousness. The times demanded an uncommon courage in the human interfacing with psychoactive compounds. When announcing that “the last best hope for dissolving the steep walls of cultural inflexibility that appear to be channeling us toward true ruin is a renewed shamanism” (McKenna, 1992, p. 98), McKenna wasn’t simply backing a shamanic revival; he was propagating gnosis-enabling tools for the modern age. You don’t need to go “500 miles up a jungle river and live with primitive peoples and study techniques for 30 years,” an eager audience was informed. “If I had a pipe loaded with [DMT] in my hand, each one of you would be thirty seconds away from . . . this absolutely reality dissolving, category reconstructing, mind boggling possibility” (McKenna, 1998). By virtue of possessing a set of lungs, the secret was only seconds away.

## Entheogenesis and Its Polarities

The revisionism that enables such practices to be recognized as legitimate foci for researchers of history, religion, and culture relies on a concept framed specifically in relation to plant products and derivative compounds that, by way of their visionary capacity, are thought to awaken the “divine within”: *entheogen* (Ruck et al., 1979). The concept is traced to pioneering natural product chemist Jonathon Ott’s (1996 [1993]) assiduous attention to the spiritual potency of a compendium of drugs, including DMT (and 5-MeO-DMT), alongside other tryptamines and psychoactive compounds deriving from plants like *Salvia divinorum*, the San Pedro cactus, and *Tabernanthe iboga*. The product of a long search for appropriate non-ethnocentric terminology, “entheogen,” was deemed appropriate for “describing states of shamanic and ecstatic possession induced by ingestion of mind-altering drugs.” *Entheos*—literally “god within”—had been used by the Greeks to denote “prophetic seizures, erotic passion and artistic creation” and to refer to “those religious rites in which mystical states were experienced through the ingestion of substances that were transubstantial with the deity” (Ruck et al., 1979, pp. 145–146). By adding the root *gen*—denoting the action of “becoming”—the term evoked a substance that could generate or awaken divinity. The newly minted terminology, then, highlighted the therapeutic and spiritually transformative potential associated with a variety of plants and compounds as they are adopted in nontraditional contexts and where they are typically subject to prohibition.

Among the notable aspects of Ott’s work is his millenarian reading of entheogenesis, a position not far removed from McKenna, despite the latter’s preference for the word “psychedelic.” In this view, a pharmacopeia of botanicals is capable of redeeming “hypermaterialistic humankind” in the otherwise dire conditions of the Anthropocene. The experience conferred by these “wondrous medicaments” could inaugurate, Ott averred, “the start of a new Golden Age,”

thereby constituting “humankind’s brightest hopes for overcoming the ecological crisis with which we threaten the biosphere and jeopardize our own survival” (Ott, 1996, p. 77). In Ott’s view, amateur ethnomycologist Robert Gordon Wasson’s rediscovery of the shamanic cult of *teonanacatl* (as reported in *Life* [Wasson, 1957]) presaged the modern advent of the entheogen and the revival of ecstatic religion. In this development, “ethnopharmacognostic” agents are adopted in response to the disenchanting conditions of modernity. “When people have direct, personal access to entheogenic, religious experiences,” Ott related, “they never conceive of humankind as a separate creation, apart from the rest of the universe” (Ott, 1996, p. 59).<sup>3</sup>

Today, “entheogen” enjoys interdisciplinary cachet, especially among those establishing the therapeutic value of a range of compounds, plants, and concoctions, including psilocybin and ayahuasca (Griffiths et al., 2006; Ellens, 2014). Over the last two decades, and generally within the “narrow” sense outlined by Hanegraaff, entheogenic practices have been explored within widening experimental, therapeutic, and academic circles. Huston Smith was a persistent voice of wisdom, stating that “nonaddictive mind-altering substances that are approached seriously and reverently” can enhance a religious life, even though they do not themselves facilitate a religious life (Smith, 2000, pp. xvi–xvii). While this period saw a growth in studies focusing on the significance of unique compounds and practices, notably the ayahuasca brew and its diasporic proliferation beyond the Amazon (Labate & Cavnar, 2014), studies of the “wider” implications of entheogenesis have moved apace (Fadiman, 2011; Grof, 2009; Roberts, 2013).

Signaling this paradigm shift, the concept of “entheogen” has gained appeal among research scientists and theologians. Staking down a position at a sharp remove from the neo-shamanic millenarianism of McKenna and Ott, psychiatrist William A. Richards encourages the association of entheogens with “the reality that theologians call *grace*” (Richards, 2014, p. 653). While the therapeutic value of “entheogens” has been established, little sociocultural research has been conducted on the contemporary use of psychedelics or entheogens, DMT or otherwise, within healthy user communities (cf. Milhet & Reynaud-Maurupt, 2011). While prohibition has played a role in preventing, obstructing, and discouraging such research, one could imagine research addressing the gnosis potential of the breakthrough experience aided by circulating nomenclature. In reference to its relationship to a near-death experience (NDE), a concept that specifically addresses the DMT event is “necrotogen.” Purportedly arising from a conversation between T. McKenna and Rupert Sheldrake, this term references how the DMT event anticipates the death state (Bell, 1999). Strassman’s research illuminated this association. Many volunteers were observed to be “embraced by something much greater than themselves, or anything they previously could have imagined: the ‘source of all existence.’” Furthermore, those who attain this experience, not unlike those undergoing an

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<sup>3</sup>As an apparent testament to this proposition in current psychological research, see Forstmann and Sagioglou (2017).

NDE, “emerge with a greater appreciation for life, less fear of death, and a reorientation of their priorities to less material and more spiritual pursuits” (Strassman, 2001, p. 221).

The powerful tryptamine-induced reverie in which one may become reconciled to the inseparability of death and life is figured in the word “ontoseismic.” A portmanteau of “ontos” (Greek for “being”) and “seismos” (earthquake, from “seiein,” meaning “to shake” in Greek), the word refers to the way a breakthrough event may shatter the world image and conditioning of first-time users of DMT. While the “ontoseismic” state may be traumatic and overwhelming, “the cause of the trauma is an Platonic experience of total truth, beauty and love” (Hyperspace Lexicon, n.d.). This concept seems appropriate in relation to some of the more notorious reports on experiments with DMT. Perhaps chief among these are commentaries from William Burroughs when injecting DMT (called “Prestonia”) in Tangier at the turn of the 1960s. In a letter to Brion Gysin on April 8, 1961, Burroughs likens the experience to a mental holocaust. “Trip to the ovens like white hot bees through your flesh and bones and everything, but I was only in the ovens for thirty seconds” (Burroughs, 2012, p. 70). And in another letter to Gysin, on April 20, 1961:

Took again of dim-N and stood in front of the Mirror waiting for the Attack that always comes when the dim-N hits. The attack came from the left side of the mirror—Blue eyed red haired Russians in Tunics and Chinese Partisans among the marchers many women as they advanced towards me to the sound of gongs all chanted “we’ll show you something show you something Johnny Come Lately WAR”—Tracer bullets and shells and flame throwers threw me back onto the bed groaning in the torn flesh of a million battle fields. (Harrop, 2010, p. 204)

After months of experimentation, Burroughs turned away from what he had called in his April 8, 1961, letter to Gysin “the nightmare hallucinogen” (Burroughs, 2012, p. 70).

In another example, founding editor of *The Entheogen Review*, Jim DeKorne, described the effect of an early 1990s breakthrough on an extract of *Phalaris arundinacea*, of which the main active alkaloid is 5-MeO-DMT. Using metaphors reminiscent of Burroughs, DeKorne reported an experience “analogous to having a psychic hydrogen bomb go off” in his brain. But, unlike Burroughs, who kept an antidote handy as a virtual sidearm to prevent complete psychic capitulation, DeKorne’s attitude was to “resist any impulse to resist: flow with it, breathe with it. Imagine a Zen meditation at Hiroshima ground-zero.” While DeKorne was at ground zero consumed by “an atomic fireball at the instant of detonation,” his ontoseismic flash receded, allowing him to receive a revelation, related by way of verses from the *Bhagavad Gita* where Krisna gives Arjuna “divine eyes,” through which he is able to behold Krisna’s “mystic opulence” (DeKorne, 1993, p. 2). In *Psychedelic Shamanism*, DeKorne championed the shaman as rebel, the mind-tinkering outcast who, by way of ethnobotanical experimentation, can heal the “planetary disease caused by human refusal to acknowledge whole systems” (1994, p. 81).

DeKorne described the realm behind “the veils,” visible to the psychedelic shaman with “divine eyes” as the pleroma, an unconscious or imaginal realm, transit

to which should be undertaken by those suitably equipped for cosmic battle. A Greek word meaning “fullness” or “plenitude,” *pleroma* is a term borrowed from Jung, who took it from the Gnostics, who knew of a hidden kingdom inhabited by gods and demons, among them, the Archons—entities that are “cruel, unfeeling and dictatorial in their relationship with humans” and who are otherwise “dissociated intelligences who feed off of human belief systems the way that we eat hamburger” (DeKorne, 1994, p. 69). For DeKorne, what is at stake is liberation from the coercive power of these invisible rulers. In this view, DMT and other psychoactives enable modern explorers recognition of the otherwise hidden agendas of the gods and, further, to convert their coercive powers into those at one’s own disposal.

DeKorne’s entheo-millenarian prognostications were announced in an early edition of *The Entheogen Review*. Entheogens, he averred, “may be the only realistic chance we have to make such an unlikely quantum leap of consciousness in the brief time remaining” (DeKorne, 1992, p. 2). Demonstrating a debt to Huxley and McKenna, and searching for a paragnostical weapon that could “transform our world,” he set his mind on *Phalaris* as a

*catalyst* to blast us out of our material myopia. To be effective, this catalyst must be available to the widest possible number of people at little or no cost—something so common that it would be impossible for the entrenched power structure to control or destroy. It must be easy to use, requiring minimal preparation. And it must be potent, even psychologically dangerous, for nothing less will open our awareness to the encompassing Mystery. (DeKorne, 1992, p. 2)

These views hold correspondence with those of Nick Sand, the first underground chemist on record to synthesize DMT (eventually manufacturing between 20 and 30 kg) (Hanna, Manning & Slattery, 2012). A yogi from the age of 15 and student of anthropology, in the early 1960s, before he manufactured the famed Orange Sunshine LSD (with Tim Scully), Sand discovered in DMT a powerful compound that triggered a lifelong dedication to manufacturing psychedelics. While it had previously been injected only, in 1964, Sand made the chance discovery that the vapor from DMT could be inhaled. In a biographic description of his life as a devoted alchemist of these sacraments, for which he spent time in 15 jails and prisons, Sand became, as Jon Hanna (2009) related, “a criminal as a matter of principle and as an act of civil disobedience, because he believed he was working for a higher good.”

In an article published in *The Entheogen Review* only months after his release from prison, and using a pseudonym, Sand wrote a concise missive on the healing and transformative power of DMT, all dependent upon appropriate set and setting (described at some length) (∞Ayes, 2001, p. 54). A student of world spiritual traditions, including the Kabbalah, Krishna consciousness, Sufism, aikido, t’ai chi, Zen, and tantra, and familiar with the teachings of Krishnamurti, Milarepa, Ramakrishna, and Rajneesh, among others (Hanna, 2009), for Sand, DMT, “the touchstone of the psychedelics,” was a powerful spiritual teacher that, under the right conditions and given appropriate support, could facilitate a mystical visionary state of consciousness. “We are not alone; we exist as an integral part of all life, breathing, pulsating, vibrating, giving off plant food, absorbing animal food, in a multi-level fabric of incredibly beautiful designs and patterns. This is what DMT shows us”

(∞Ayes, 2001, p. 51). One might imagine the subject taken up in *Psychedelic Secrets*, the unpublished tome Sand wrote in prison.

It opens the doorway to the vastness of the soul; this is at once our own personal soul, and its intrinsic connection to the universal soul. When the underlying unity of this fictional duality is seen and felt, one experiences a completeness and interconnection with all things. This experience, when we attain it, is extremely beautiful and good. It is a song that rings and reverberates through the lens of God. Now we know why we were born; to have this intense experience of the sacred, the joyous, the beauty, and the blessing of just being alive in the arms of God. (∞Ayes, 2001, p. 56)

Beyond misguided recreational use, as a mobilizing agent for truth seekers, and ultimately “self-realization,” DMT was promoted as a powerful tool in a loose spiritual practice that adopted the language of Gurdjieff and transpersonal psychology. “This quest then, is about re-emerging from the swamp of forgetfulness and distraction in which we live, and being reborn in consciousness” (∞Ayes, 2001, p. 53).

While adopted as a technique among many others for accessing truth or remembering ourselves, as the most respected of all tools, DMT required discipline. “Properly prepared,” Sand wrote, “we meet the Gods that live deep within all of us. In that meeting we experience intense recognition of the oneness of all things. We receive true and simple instructions.” Enraptured by “the exquisite beauty and truth of this inner knowing” (∞Ayes, 2001, p. 56), he could not have been further removed from Burroughs, whose paranoid struggles with the same substance were influenced by the “psychotomimetic” and “psychotogenetic” paradigms of 1950s psychiatry, in which DMT, among other substances, was thought to cause psychopathologies.

## Conclusion: A Passage Beyond Hyperspace

As was also the case for Sand, the “secret” isn’t down in the Amazon, as Burroughs believed. It is right here, right now. This allusion to the capacity for humans to access an alternate dimensional space-time with the assistance of a compound known to be endogenous since the 1950s conveys the radical immediacy of an experience involving a rapid plunge across an invisible threshold into dramatically disembodied “worlds.” The implication that many advocates of psychedelics—e.g., Huxley, Leary, McKenna, and Sand—have championed is that these passage-like events are a human birthright, sans shamanic, guru, or cultic intermediaries. As a corollary to this neo-gnostic transit, in which individuals are emboldened to potentiate their *selves* with the assistance of plant allies and spirit molecules, any “ritual,” as such, is nonprescribed. As Tramacchi documented, the disembodied character of the DMT visions is “ritual-like.” He conjectured that there is little conspicuous ritual associated with DMT use “because the visions themselves can possess an intrinsically ritual-like quality” (2006, p. 177).

It's a curious point. What is this "ritual-like" character? Could it be an experiential black hole, at best "liminoidal" or "rituoid," and therefore echoing Victor Turner's (1982) lamentations on the effect of the attenuation of the transformational potency of ritual in modern leisure practices? Might DMT "events" be illegitimate by contrast with the ceremonial practices associated, for example, with ayahuasca shamanisms? Such recreational practices may well be examples of ritual ceasing to be an "effective metalanguage or an agency of collective reflexology" (Turner, 1985, p. 165). But usage occurs on a spectrum, with other uses illustrative of therapy and, as found in this chapter, paragnosis. Technicians of gnosis, amateur botanists, and other members of a worldwide milieu of returnee enthusiasts familiar with the aesthetics of hyperspace are committed to optimize the means of perception, achieved by way of extraction methods, phytochemical and ethnobotanical research, sustainable plant propagation, administration techniques, experimental assaying, environmental augmentation, and safe user guidelines. In addition, they actively translate the experience via artistic media, including visionary art, often present in the contexts of use. These practices combined suggest the intentional augmentation of what is already felt to be a quintessentially liminal experience: the arts and techniques of superliminalization serving to potentiate experimental paragnoses, enable transpersonalism, and facilitate extraordinary experiences on a widening scale.

I have indicated elsewhere the limitations of applying standard sensory transmission in extant models of ritual to synesthetic, transpersonal, and "higher-dimensional" experiences that, nevertheless, possess initiatory and transformational efficacy (St John, 2018). While "travels" in "hyperspace" replete with veridical "entities" present serious challenges for researchers coming to grips with experiential virtuality, specific components are evident. Many telling examples in the literature involve physical travel—e.g., to secluded sites, wilderness areas, or festivals—with hardship, ordeals, and other experiences that are hallmarks of rites of passage. The cases of entheogenesis recounted in this chapter are illustrative of induction into microcommunities of the experienced, whose members may exchange the noetic information ("gifts") received and whose "breakthroughs" may enable reputation and stature.

Moreover, as has been illustrated in this chapter, a range of commentary has been assembled to demonstrate how the DMT event and, in particular, the breakthrough experience, amounts to paragnosis, which is essential to understanding the ritualized proclivities of DMT, the liminality of hyperspace, and the superliminal aesthetics of its protagonists. Reports from key advocates in DMT's modern history of use and promulgation, along with anonymous net-archived commentaries, have been illustrative of "entheogenic esotericism." This association has necessitated a discussion of the gnosis potential of DMT, among other "entheogens," as implicit to entheogenesis. Thoroughgoing analysis of the gnosis of connectedness with which returnees appear to be typically endowed, and how this gift animates efforts to augment the means of perception, awaits future studies.

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