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Literature and Psychedelics: a Pharmacological Subversion of Authentic Life. With an example from William S. Burroughs

Pierre-Louis Patoine

Abstract

In this article, we investigate how “authentic life” is constituted through the imposition of a normative style of consciousness, which literary and psychotropic practices contest. We carry out this investigation by focusing more specifically on hallucinogenic compounds and on William S. Burroughs’s *The Wild Boys*. This comparative analysis is built on the Platonic notion of the *pharmakon*, and on discussions of the neurophysiological specificities of psychedelics and literature. We conclude by observing the pharmacological effects of Burroughs’s use of ekphrasis, as it disrupts habitual, sequential consciousness and frees sensation and desire from the normative constraints of modern production and reproduction.

Résumé

Nous explorons dans cet article la manière dont la « vie authentique » se constitue à travers un style de conscience normé, que la pratique de la littérature et de certains psychotropes conteste. Cette exploration se consacre plus précisément aux hallucinogènes dits « psychédéliques » et à *The Wild Boys*, que William S. Burroughs publie en 1971. Cette analyse comparée s’appuie sur la notion platonicienne de *pharmakon*, et sur la prise en compte des spécificités neurophysiologiques de la littérature et des substances psychédéliques. Nous concluons en observant que l’usage que fait Burroughs de l’ekphrasis agit comme une drogue psychédélique,

perturbant la conscience séquentielle habituelle et libérant la sensation et le désir des contraintes normatives de la production et de la reproduction promues à l'époque moderne.

Key words

Altered states of consciousness; psychedelics; sensation; neuroscience; biopolitics; William S. Burroughs; literature and consciousness; ekphrasis.

Mots-Clés

États de conscience modifiés; substances psychédéliques; sensation; neuroscience; biopolitique; William S. Burroughs; littérature et conscience; ekphrasis.

It seems that our physiology is amenable to stories. Our heart rejoices when Ulysses, after a twenty-year exile, wins the bow contest and regains his rightful place in Ithaca. Our eyes shed tears when Iseult arrives too late to save Tristan from his tragic fate, and dies of grief. But are these bodily responses to narrative motivated by *authentic* emotion? This classical problem of aesthetics and fiction theory has carried an ethical burden at least since Plato's warning against the power of mimesis to excite irrationality in *The Republic*. Is being physiologically moved by literary "games of make-believe" unhealthy? Throughout the ages, numerous moralists have answered this question in the affirmative (see for example Vicesimus Knox's 1778 essay "On Novel Reading"), accusing the pleasures of absorption and illusion of being toxic not only for the individual, but also for the social body. Toxicity is also a feature of psychotropic drugs. These have been condemned on grounds similar to those used by Plato to disparage mimetic arts: they generate experiences deemed inauthentic or illusory (Beaudelaire's *paradis artificiels*), and would too easily grant beatitude (in contrast with more "serious" techniques

such as fasting or meditation). Just like mimetic arts, they would be dangerously compelling and misleading. In a word, both psychotropic drugs and an engagement with arts and literature produce altered states of consciousness (being high, being absorbed/immersed) that have been considered to be inauthentic and potentially toxic for the community. In this article, we will investigate how this toxicity momentarily contests “authentic life.”

For post-Marxists Italian thinkers Negri, Agamben and Esposito, “authentic life” is a life in which “the sphere of subjectivity and of *bios* [qualified life]” depends on the “species-life (or: *zoe* [bare life]),” itself defined by “life-in-common” relying on “general intellect” (Vatter 2016, 123-124). In my view, such “general intellect” allowing for “authentic life” must include normative styles of consciousness: for example, a community will demand of its members periods of wakefulness and self-possession to carry out productive and reproductive activities. These normative styles of consciousness are essential for communal life, but need to be refreshed through their temporary destabilization in psychotropic and aesthetic practices.

We will examine a particular modality of this destabilization by considering together hallucinogenic compounds and William S. Burroughs’s 1971 novel *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead*, a text in which the use of ekphrasis encourages the reader to immerse herself in “inauthentic,” fictional sensations that are freed from the linear progress of narrative. As we will see, Burroughs’s psychedelic use of ekphrasis strives to cure the biopolitical, (re)productivist influence of what he calls the “language virus.” For the American writer, this literary guerilla against the language virus (and its production of “authentic life”) does not belong to the realm of metaphor, but to that of actual biological warfare. We will take this idea seriously, and buttress it by relating it to Plato’s notion of *pharmakon*, before explaining how the anti-viral action of literature parallels that of serotonergic drugs such as LSD. This elaboration will allow us to revisit Burroughs’s notion of the language virus and to sketch the ekphrastic tactics *The Wild Boys* uses against its proliferation.

A comparative pharmacology

Both literature and psychotropic drugs can act on our neurochemical setup (neurotransmission and signaling is impacted by drinking wine, or by commiserating with Iseult's fate). This parallel agency underruns Western philosophy's history of pondering on the relation of aesthetics and intoxication. Let us inscribe our meditation within this history by following Derrida's reading of Plato's *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates "compares the written texts Phaedrus has brought along to a drug (*pharmakon*)," an ambivalent substance "which acts as both a remedy and poison" (Derrida 1981, 70). According to Derrida, the written text and the drug are both of the order of the *pharmakon*, which, by "[o]perating through seduction, [...] makes one stray from one's general, natural, habitual paths and laws" (70). In the *Phaedrus*, this "making one stray" appears as Socrates is compelled to leave the city, to cross a stream and sit in the shade of a tree, attracted by the perspective of hearing Phaedrus read Lysias's transcribed speech on love. Socrate's appreciation of the "deliciously cold" stream and "delightful breeze" is then gently derided by Phaedrus, as city-centrism: "What an incredible being you are, Socrates: when you are in the country, as you say, you really are like some stranger who is led about by a guide. Do you ever cross the border? I rather think that you never venture outside the gates." To which Socrates responds:

Though I do indeed believe that you have found a spell [Derrida proposes: "a drug," citing translations using "recipe" and "remedy," 71] with which to draw me out of the city into the country [...] For only hold up before me in like manner a book, and you may lead me all round Attica, and over the wide world. And now having arrived, I intend to lie down, and do you choose any posture in which you can read best. Begin. (Plato 1999, online)

Thus Socrates prepares for a "trip," not around Attica, but in the images and ideas conjured up by a book, by a "spell" or drug that entices him to leave ordinary life, the life of the city. Although one must take into account the historical gap that separates Classical Greece's from today's notion and uses of the (immersive) written word, lying down with a book or with a

hallucinogen, giving ourselves up to their seductions still allows us to travel unusual roads that lead outside the community, with its laws and regulations.

In the *Phaedrus*, these literary seductions are interlaced with the illusory. For Derrida: “The incompatibility between the *written* and the *true* is clearly announced at the moment Socrates starts to recount the way in which men are carried out of themselves by pleasure, become absent from themselves, forget themselves and die in the thrill of song.” (68) This “incompatibility between the written and the true,” the illusory quality of literary and psychotropic experience may well be the source of the *pharmakon*’s ambivalent nature, of its capacity to cure and to poison. In the hands of moralists and medical doctors, drugs and literature have been used as remedies, keeping us in the norm of what is considered health and healthy behavior, bringing us back to “natural, habitual paths”: edifying literature and Ritalin have both been used for such a purpose. Poets, shamans and psychonauts, artists and revelers ingest similar substances, but in order to go beyond the laws of everyday life, to temporarily leave the city behind and expand the realm of vitality beyond what is strictly useful. This poisonous use of literary and psychotropic substances harbors its own dangers – it involves, after all, the temporary death of the ego, dissolved in the “thrill of the song”– and, as such, it has always been subjected to control, in both traditional societies (through ritual law) and modern industrialized ones (through public health and morality laws).

Just like texts, however, psychotropic drugs are not equally toxic. Even if we consider only the hallucinogenic compounds (ignoring stimulants and depressants), we should recognize how they “carry us out of ourselves by pleasure” in different ways, and to different degrees. As philosopher and anthropologist Martin Fortier explains in his analysis of the effects of psychotropic drugs on the “sense of reality” (2018), hallucinogens present a variety of physiological and phenomenological profiles. His discussion of the fundamental differences between the effects of serotonergic drugs (serotonin receptor agonists, i.e. chemicals that bind

to serotonin receptors, such as psilocybin, LSD, ayahuasca, peyotl, mescaline...) and anticholinergic drugs (belladonna, datura, mandragore...) can help us to delineate the common ground they share with literature and other mimetic arts. One of the main difference between these two families of substances resides in the relation they establish between hallucinations and the sense of reality. Serotonergic drugs, the “classical psychedelics,” produce altered sensory experiences while preserving the consciousness of their difference from everyday life. Under LSD, we might see trees as dancing green flames, but we remain conscious of their hallucinatory nature. Indeed, according to Fortier, hallucinations under serotonergic drugs create a “feeling of presence” deprived of a full “feeling of reality.” In this, they differ from the anticholinergic drugs that tend to abolish awareness of the neurochemical nature of the experience (Fortier 2018, 3.1). Also called deliriants, substances such as belladonna cause the psychonaut to hallucinate experiences with a full “feeling of reality,” which of course can lead to lethal situations. Fully realized, the *pharmakon*’s illusory power is indeed deadly.

To what family of hallucinogens does the experience of immersion and absorption in a text best correspond? While “lost in a book” (Nell 1988), we encounter situations endowed with a certain presence (hence the tears we shed on Iseult’s tragic fate) but rarely do we confuse such presence with reality (and thus do not take action to comfort Iseult). As we have just seen, such “split consciousness” also characterizes psychedelic trips under serotonergic compounds. This shared pharmacology might explain why a number of artists, at least during the twentieth century, have appreciated serotonergics such as mescaline (Artaud, Michaux, Huxley) or LSD (Kerouac, Ginsberg, Dylan). In accordance with this affinity, my focus is on psychedelics (serotonergic hallucinogens) and their ability to propose experiences that go beyond the limits of “authentic life,” leading one, just like certain texts, outside of “habitual paths.” This capacity to “lead out of the city” and of its life-in-common recalls Shklovski’s 1917 notion of *ostranenie*, the “enstrangement” (162) through art of our automatized recognition of things. We will now

see how this de-automatization is achieved through the freeing of perception from the constraints of efficient, purposeful action.

Philosophical and neurological approaches to intoxication

Let us approach the aesthetic and psychedelic dissociation of perception and action through the words of William James, who writes, in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*: “Sobriety diminishes, discriminates, and says no; drunkenness expands, unites and says yes. It is in fact the great exciter of the *Yes* function in man. [...] To the poor and unlettered it stands in the place of symphony concerts and of literature.” (376-377) Here, literature and concerts share a psychophysiological effect with alcohol (although we should remember that these reflections are intertwined with James’s description of his experimentations with nitrous oxide): they all activate the “*Yes* function in man.” But what exactly is this “*Yes* function”? We can understand it as total receptivity to one’s surroundings, in which sensations are not hierarchized but are taken in undifferentiated. This undifferentiated perception characterizes many types of intoxication, while sober and efficient action demands the organization of sensation: to open a door, we do not indifferently contemplate its whole surface, our perception is rather organized by our goal and we focus on the doorknob. Efficient action demands strategic selection among the infinite complexity of the world, and allows us to concentrate on aspects pertinent to our survival. These aspects constitute “authentic life” as opposed to “illusory” intoxication with hallucinogenic drugs and immersive texts. “Illusory intoxication,” however, is not achieved by any reader with any text. As James suggests, “the poor and unlettered” cannot use “literature and concerts” as intoxicants; this would be the privilege of “dignified surrenderers” (Eno 2011) that know how to adopt postures of openness such as Socrates lying down in the shade of a tree to “say Yes” to Phaderus’s reading.

In his 1956 “History of Tension,” Aldous Huxley comments on the above passage from James. Referring primarily to hallucinogens and more specifically to mescaline, Huxley expands on the idea of the “yes function,” suggesting that these psychedelics trigger “a bypassing of [...] the cerebral reducing valve, the normal brain function that limits our mental processes to an awareness, most of the time, of what is biologically useful” (1999, 121). This going beyond biological usefulness, beyond *zoe*, characterizes psychedelic but also aesthetic experience: both allow us “to tear away being from the limits of a thinking essentially occupied with assuring the *judicious order of things*” (Bataille 2012, 227, my translation). Georges Bataille, in a passage where he contrasts Gide’s hedonism with Nietzsche’s philosophy of being, defines the “judicious order of things” as the reduction of being to things and to their pragmatic demands. He asks: “Will man have, or not have, beyond the judicious order, a sovereign life, problematic, useless, dangerous, which has meaning in itself, and is decidedly tragic?” (227, my translation) Sovereign life here is similar to intoxication as defined by James and Huxley, as it is not subjected to the “reducing valve” of biological usefulness. Like Plato’s *pharmakon*, it is dangerous, tragic, seductive. But in Bataille’s thought, the sovereign also possesses a temporal dimension: it is the present in its fullness, liberated from the exigencies of any future goal. Psychedelics, non-edifying arts and literature thus disable efficient action and promote contemplation: perceiving a tiger during a film does not call for judicious action such as fight or flight. The sensation of “tiger” can then be experienced in its sovereign presence.

Psychedelics act in a similar way, as neurophysiological studies tend to demonstrate. Robin Carhart-Harris and his colleagues from the Imperial College of London have concluded, in a 2016 study, that LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide) causes the temporary desegregation and disintegration of sensory and cognitive neural networks, a reduction of their separateness which could have dis-inhibitory consequences (thereby activating the “Yes function”), facilitating the release of “un-judicious” anarchic patterns of excitation (5). Carhart-Harris and his team discuss

how the treatment of visual stimuli under LSD integrates cognitive functions that are normally more distant, explaining why psychedelic vision is more colored by other senses, emotions or even abstract ideas (4). This increased integration would be linked with a diminution of the cortical alpha wave, that might play a role as a global inhibitor, and participate in the filtering of non-pertinent information (such as the lavender color of a door one is trying to open). Decrease in such filtering could for example explain aberrant salience (attention is absorbed by useless details), which is typical of psychedelic states but also of aesthetic contemplation. In any case, serotonergic hallucinogens, just like arts and literature, make possible a de-hierarchizing of perception, an opening of the “doors of perception.” For this reason, they can conflict with “authentic life” and the laws of judicious behavior.

William S. Burroughs and *The Wild Boys*: a Cure For the Language Virus

Published in 1971, *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead* succeeds in balancing the disruptions of Burroughs's earlier experimental novels (*Naked Lunch*, *Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express*) with a relatively stable narrative frame. The eighteen chapters of *The Wild Boys* traverse different spaces and times – with special focus on Marrakech, Tangier, and the Blue Desert in 1976 and 1988, and St Louis, Missouri, in 1920 – in which characters, words and images circulate and recur. We explore these interconnected chronotopes through the erotic and exotic experiences of characters such as the young men Audrey, Kiki and Johnny, or CIA agents and US Army personnel. The main narrative thread is that of the “wild boys,” an international (mostly Latin American and African) paramilitary network of gloriously hybrid shamanic young men (“snake boys in fish-skin jockstraps,” Warrior Ants division boys, “glider boys with bows and laser guns, roller-skate boys—blue jockstrap and steel helmets”, 147). These boys are preparing to free North America and Western Europe from the “police machine and all its records” and “all dogmatic verbal systems” (139-140). These dogmatic verbal systems

are equivalent to what Burroughs names the “language virus,” which, by infecting its hosts, produces their objective, “authentic” reality (2005, 7). Burroughs writes against this virus, fomenting a pharmacological guerrilla.

In his essay *The Electronic Revolution* first published in 1970, Burroughs explicitly articulates his theory of the language virus. Although it reads like a scientific or philosophical argument, *The Electronic Revolution* should be understood as an integral part of Burroughs’s artistic oeuvre: its free and energetic style, with its integration of fictional characters (such as Doktor Kurt Unruh von Steinplatz, from *The Wild Boys*) marks it both as a direct appendage of the novels of this period, and as their interpretive key. In the last section of *The Electronic Revolution*, Burroughs identifies a number of words/notions responsible for mind control and the viral production of objective or authentic reality. Among these, one is of special interest in relation to psychedelics: “THE WHOLE CONCEPT OF EITHER/OR. Right or wrong, physical or mental, true or false, the whole concept of OR will be deleted from the language and replaced by juxtaposition, by AND.” (2005, 33-34) “Either/or” are logical operators that reinforce the logical law of non-contradiction, as an entity cannot be both A and non-A: you are *either* male *or* female. This law is a fundamental aspect of the “biologically useful” and of the “judicious order of things.” To survive, we have to categorize objects clearly: they are either edible or not, threatening or not. Habitual perception obeys the “either/or” imperative, while aesthetic, literary and psychedelic perception escapes this reducing valve in favor of a split consciousness in which fiction and reality commingle. Let us examine how Burroughs’s writing embraces contradiction and simultaneity, refusing the coherence imperative and laws of non-contradiction that are the backbone, as Barthes (1975, 3) argues, of so many of our legal and social institutions, constitutive of our life-in-common: court, school, polite conversation, gendered and professional identity... all rest on the assurance that one is either A or B, guilty or innocent, knowledgeable or ignorant, and so on.

Psychedelic writing and the biopolitics of “authentic life”

The Wild Boys' loose narrative is constituted by a variety of images intermeshed with first- and third-person testimonies: sepia photographs in gilded books, the recurring “penny arcade show” but also military films from the 1970s and 80s. These media presences often lead to ekphrasis, which is an organizing principle of *The Wild Boys*: images become so vivid that they turn into worlds that characters penetrate, just like the reader can enter and inhabit Burroughs's textual worlds. Let us take for example Chapter 8, “The Miracle of the Rose,” which begins as a conventional narrative:

June 23, 1988. Today we got safely through the barrier and entered the Blue Desert of Silence. [...] I have two guides with me Ali a Berber lad with bright blue eyes and yellow hair a wolfish Pan face unreadable as the sky. The other Farja of a dusky rose complexion with long lashes straight black hair gums a bright red color. We are wearing standard costumes for the area: blue silk knee-length shorts, blue silk shirts, Mercury sandals and helmets. (71)

The flashy, vivid colors (blue and bright blue, yellow, dusky rose, bright red) and exotic, pop, surreal imagery (wolfish Pan face, blue silk shorts, Mercury sandals) make the scene vividly imaginable, an immersive setup in which the reader can project and identify with the first-person narrator in his interest for these attractive, fantasized guides. The text describes the characters' march through the desert and their arrival at ruins with a “room with rose wallpaper.” Ali and Farja will then engage in sex, which rapidly becomes oneiric as “nitrous fumes twisted from the pink rectal flesh in whorls of orange and sepia” (73). Human and vegetal conflate in an erotic, horrific configuration, making the text jump to another diegetic level:

A scream of roses burst from tumescent lips roses growing in flesh tearing thorns of delight intertwined their quivering bodies crushed them together writhing gasping choking in an agony of roses sharp reek of sperm.

Sepia picture in an old book with gilt edges. THE MIRACLE OF THE ROSE written in gold letters. I turn the page. A red color that hurts transparent roses growing through flesh the other leans forward drinking roses from his mouth their hearts translucent roses squirming in naked agony [...] musty house slow smile you there dim jerky bedroom 18

on the top floor . . . my flesh . . . I could . . . the film breaks . . . jerky silent film [...] . . . sadness in his eyes 1920 movie. (73-74)

From the first-hand account (“Today we got safely through the barrier”) to the “sepia picture in an old book” that becomes, in turn, a hallucinatory experience and then an old film (sepia, broken), *The Wild Boys* bounces from one level of reality to another. These jumps, made possible by the intensity of images, colors, textures and scents (themselves energized by the sentences’ breathless rhythm), are offered to us as a mode of reading, tempting us to physically enter Burroughs’s text. We are invited to let ourselves be seduced by its images, just like Socrates is seduced by Phaedrus’s textual *pharmakon*, and to overcome the rule of *either/or* by embracing sensations that are simultaneously animal and vegetal, intra- and extra-diegetic (“I turn the page feeling the rose twist alive in my flesh,” 77). In *The Wild Boys*, images rarely belong to a particular diegetic level. One is no more authentic than the other, as they eschew judicious order and promote the “split consciousness” of aesthetic and psychedelic contemplation. This ekphrastic configuration grows out of the repeating and echoing of images, which liberate them from narrative progression, just as psychedelics de-hierarchize perception by dissociating it from efficient action (which is oriented toward a future goal, and follows an inherent narrative order). Burroughs’s text thus gives a sovereign, aberrant salience to hybrid sensations.

Through this artistic *dispositif*, the realm of erotic sensation, so important in the novel, is freed from the biopolitical (Foucault 2012) imperatives of reproduction. This subversive (toxic) freeing is achieved by the force of illusion: the seduction of sovereign images that lead the reader out of habitual paths, far from the domain of biological usefulness. The last pages of the chapter entitled “The Wild Boys” represent explicitly such a passage from the “film of reality” to an evocative and syncopated “story book.” In this scene, the wild boys fallen in combat are given the possibility of being reborn through homoerotic shamanic reproduction:

The boys create offspring known as Zimbus. [...] Zimbus are created after a battle when the forces of evil are in retreat... (155)

A boy with Mongoloid features steps onto the rug playing a flute to the four directions. As he plays a phantom figures swirl around him taking shape out of the moonlight, campfires and shadows. He kneels in the center of the rug playing his flute faster and faster. The shape of a boy on hands and knees is forming in front of him. He puts down his flute. His hands molds and knead the body in front of him pulling it against him with stroking movements that penetrate the pearly grey shape caressing it inside. The body shudders and quivers against him as he forms the buttocks around his penis stroking silver genitals out of the moonlight grey then pink and finally red the mouth parted in a gasp shuddering genitals out of the moon's haze a pale blond boy spurting thighs and buttocks and young skin. [...] The Zimbus sleep in the blue tent. Picture in an old book with gilt edges. The picture is framed with roses intertwined . . . two bodies stuck together pale wraith of a blond boy lips parted full moon a circle of boys in silver helmets naked knees up. Under the picture in gold letters. Birth of a Zimbu. Boy with a flute charming a body out of the air. I turn the page. Boy with Mongoloid features is standing on a circular rug. [...] I turn the page. A boy is dancing will-o'-the-wisp dodges in front of him. I turn the page. (160-161)

Here, narrative progression is once again disrupted by the repetition of the scene in reversed-ekphrasis, as the diegetic scene becomes a series of images “framed with roses intertwined” (echoing with Ali and Farja’s earlier “rose scene”), in a book with “gilt edges” and “gold letters” (recurrent signs of nostalgia and materiality in *The Wild Boys*). Here again, the sparse punctuation of flowing sentences allows the juxtaposition of sensations, condensed in the sovereign present of the image (“stroking silver genitals out of the moonlight grey then pink and finally red the mouth parted in a gasp shuddering genitals out of the moon’s haze”). Partly liberated from the chains of narrative, these tactile, visual, erotic and environmental images gain autonomy and intensity, inducing an experience in which ontology is fluid and metamorphosis reigns. This in turn provides the reader with a psychedelic drug to be deployed against the viral constraints of productive and law-abiding identity. The reader’s posture echoes that of the impersonal narrator (“I turn the page”), mingling the actual with the textual, the biological with the fictional. By allowing the reader to become an eel-boy or a mutant erotic tree in a non-linear narrative, *The Wild Boys* simultaneously destabilizes the linear logic of language and story, and the biopolitical constraints on our bodies (such as the imperatives of

production and reproduction). Leading us out of the city and offering pleasures that are often intoxicating and deadly, Burroughs's psychedelic writing celebrates the power of arts and literature to act as a powerful *pharmakon* against the norms of “authentic life.”

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