

ALTERED STATES/OTHER WORLDS:  
ROMANTICISM, NITROUS OXIDE, AND THE LITERARY PREHISTORY OF PSYCHEDELIA

Neşe Devenot

A DISSERTATION

in

Comparative Literature and Literary Theory

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2015

Supervisor of Dissertation

---

Charles Bernstein

Professor of English

Co-Supervisor of Dissertation

---

Michael Gamer

Associate Professor of English

Graduate Group Chairperson

---

Kevin Platt, Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures

Dissertation Committee:

John Tresch

Associate Professor of History and Sociology of Science

Richard Doyle

Professor of English

## ABSTRACT

## ALTERED STATES/OTHER WORLDS:

## ROMANTICISM, NITROUS OXIDE, AND THE LITERARY PREHISTORY OF PSYCHEDELIA

Neşe Devenot

Charles Bernstein

Michael Gamer

This project explores the relationship between experimental poetry and experimental science as it relates to the multidisciplinary discourse on self-actualization in the medical humanities. Engaging with the history of medicine and narrative medicine during the Romantic era, I demonstrate the mutual constitution of medicine and poetics in this formative period for both disciplines. In examining the ongoing legacy of Romantic-era formal innovations in self-experimentation, I argue for the mutual dependence of science and poetry in both catalyzing and documenting the lasting impact of heightened aesthetic experiences. Further, the project reads Romantic poetry as an early prototype of present-day psychedelic psychotherapy, since both activities explicitly aim to promote psychological healing by inducing ecstatic states of consciousness. This intervention reads canonical Romantic lyric poetry by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge as a specific mode of self-experimentation, wherein the poet isolates and reproduces natural scenes that reliably stimulate ecstatic states of consciousness. Their procedure arises verbatim in Romantic scientific investigations of mind-altering chemicals, demonstrating that nitrous oxide and developments in the science laboratory are equally essential to understanding Romantic poetry as are the more-familiar themes of opium, Nature, and the sublime. I trace the afterlife of this function of lyric poetry through Aldous Huxley's *Doors of Perception* (1954) to 21st-century psychedelic medicine, all of which rely on Romantic experimental methods to heal intractable psychic wounds. With Humphry Davy's 1799 discovery of nitrous oxide's psychoactivity as a case study, I demonstrate that the collaboration between poetry and science is fundamental to any project of mapping new realms of subjective experience. Collectively, my conclusions expand

conceptions of Romanticism's ongoing heritage, arguing for renewed, interdisciplinary scholarship on altered states and the therapeutic impact of heightened aesthetic experiences on consciousness.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	V
PREFACE .....	IX
<b>CHAPTER 1: COMPOUNDING ECSTATIC ELIXIRS: CHEMICAL SYNTHESIS AND SELF-EXPERIMENTATION IN ROMANTIC SCIENCE AND POETRY .....</b>	<b>1</b>
THE BIRTH OF A SCIENTIST.....	4
PNEUMATIC CHEMISTRY AND FACTITIOUS AIRS .....	6
PNEUMATIC SCIENCE BETWEEN TWO CULTURES .....	8
TALENT VERSUS GENIUS .....	14
SELF-EXPERIMENTATION WITH NITROUS OXIDE .....	17
NITROUS OXIDE: PSYCHEDELIC OR ANESTHETIC?.....	18
SELF-EXPERIMENTATION AND THE GREATER ROMANTIC LYRIC.....	23
<b>CHAPTER 2: ROMANTICISM’S ALTERED INSIGHTS.....</b>	<b>35</b>
RESEARCHES CONCERNING NITROUS OXIDE.....	38
LIMITATIONS OF LANGUAGE, PART 1: UNPRECEDENTED EXPERIENCES .....	43
ENTHUSIASM AND NITROUS OXIDE DEPENDENCY.....	53
LIMITATIONS OF LANGUAGE, PART 2: PHENOMENOLOGICAL INCONSISTENCY.....	58
NITROUS OXIDE AND POETRY: ON THE SUBLIME.....	64
COLERIDGE ON NITROUS OXIDE.....	75
LIMITATIONS OF LANGUAGE, PART 3: AMNESIA AND STATE-SPECIFIC MEMORY.....	81
DAVY’S “CONCATENATION OF IDEAS” .....	85
<b>CHAPTER 3: RECOLLECTING NITROUS OXIDE IN TRANQUILITY.....</b>	<b>114</b>
DEATH AND METAMORPHOSIS .....	118

<b>CONCATENATION AND THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING .....</b>	<b>130</b>
<b>VISIONARY INSPIRATION .....</b>	<b>147</b>
<b>ABRAHAM TUCKER AMONG THE VEHICLES .....</b>	<b>162</b>
<b>THE LITERARY HISTORY OF PSYCHEDELIC SCIENCE.....</b>	<b>176</b>
<b>SCIENCE FACT AND SCIENCE FICTION.....</b>	<b>178</b>
<b>CODA: ENCODING ECODELIA .....</b>	<b>182</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4: ALDOUS HUXLEY'S NEW ROMANTICISMS: READING BLAKE AND WORDSWORTH AFTER MESCALINE.....</b>	<b>184</b>
<b>CLEANSING THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION: WILLIAM BLAKE ON MESCALINE .....</b>	<b>193</b>
<b>HUXLEY'S "DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS": A CONCEPTUAL LOVE AFFAIR .....</b>	<b>195</b>
<b>"INNUMERABLE FINE SHADES": VISUAL PERCEPTION ON MESCALINE .....</b>	<b>200</b>
<b>A NEW OLD ROMANTICISM: RE-READING WORDSWORTH THROUGH THE "DOOR IN THE WALL" .....</b>	<b>217</b>
<b>CONTRA BEHAVIORISM.....</b>	<b>221</b>
<b>HUXLEY'S PSYCHEDELIC AFTERLIVES .....</b>	<b>228</b>
<b>APPENDIX: THE INFLUENCE OF NITROUS OXIDE ON DAVY'S "CONSOLATIONS IN TRAVEL" (1830) .....</b>	<b>231</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>243</b>

## Aldous Huxley's New Romanticisms:

### Reading Blake and Wordsworth After Mescaline

**ABSTRACT:** This presentation demonstrates mescaline's revisionary impact on Aldous Huxley's interpretations of Romantic poetry. Huxley published the results of his self-experiments with the psychoactive chemical mescaline in *The Doors of Perception* (1954), which took its title from William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) and contributed to Blake's popularization in the twentieth century. Despite Huxley's acknowledged impact on Romanticism's popular reception, little prior scholarship has investigated Huxley's views on Romantic poetry over time. Rather than associating mescaline with a preexisting interest in Romanticism, I present evidence that Huxley's mescaline experiences directly resulted in his subsequent appreciation for the poetry of Blake and William Wordsworth. As Huxley's 1959 lecture series at UC Santa Barbara illustrates, mescaline provided Huxley with a vision of nature and humankind as inherently "interlinked," which supplanted his prior views of nature as fundamentally alien. This transformed view of nature led Huxley to reverse decades of outspoken hostility towards Romantic poetry, shifting Huxley's characterizations of Blake and Wordsworth from accusations of naive escapism to effusive praise for their ecological visions for the potentials of human culture. In demonstrating the potential for psychedelic chemicals to transform readings of canonical Romantic poetry, this presentation argues for the importance of continuing scholarship on the relationships between poetry and altered states of consciousness within the frameworks of narrative medicine and cognitive literary studies.

Although Aldous Huxley's literary talents were widely celebrated during his lifetime, his relationship to the modernist canon is uneasy.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have noted that the modernist penchant for radical formal experimentation conflicts with Huxley's comfortable adoption of conventional writing styles.<sup>2</sup> His choice to align with tradition was intentional, as demonstrated by his acute awareness of contemporary literary movements and their relationship to historical forms. As Peter E. Firchow notes, Huxley was one of the first twentieth-century literary figures with a university degree in English literature, having graduated from Oxford with highest honors

---

<sup>1</sup> "Aldous Huxley emerged as the foremost satirist of his age with the widely-acclaimed *Crome Yellow* (1921) and *Antic Hay* (1923), works which represented the new cynical post-war mood of England to the world, attracting the praise of Scott Fitzgerald and H. L. Mencken, and even earning Huxley, alone among contemporary English novelists, a favourable reference in *A la Recherche du temps perdu*" (Ayers 162). As an indication of Huxley's cultural significance, Philip Goldberg notes that his death interrupted news reports on the day that John F. Kennedy was assassinated (Goldberg 97). David Garrett Izzo adds that "Huxley was the man in British literature in the 1920s, much more so than [T.S.] Eliot was, although Eliot's reputation has fared better since then. ... In the U.K. and U.S., undergraduates made sure to read him in the 1920s" (Izzo 1).

<sup>2</sup> See Stevenson, 30. Other scholars have suggested that Huxley's stylistic and structural experimentations were "overshadowed" by his modernist contemporaries and hence have been undercredited. On this point see Keulks, 93.

in 1915, and he worked professionally as a literary reviewer for *The Athenaeum* from 1919 to 1921 (Firchow 159, 173). Huxley regarded the panoply of new aesthetic movements as so many variations on a central blasphemy: a “revolt against the soul” based on the “disparagement of spiritual and individual values” (Huxley, *1930-1935* 252). In his view, the abstraction of form and rejection of tradition promoted a culture “afraid of beauty, afraid of the great emotions, afraid of universal truths” (qtd. in Firchow 159).

Huxley’s name for this tendency—the “New Romanticism”—was ironic, since it represented a perverse inversion of traditional literary Romanticism: “the old romanticism turned inside out” (Huxley, *1920-1925* 251). Where the old Romanticism championed personal liberties and individuality, the new trend subsumed individuality within a monotonous, hive-like collectivity.<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that Huxley advocated a nostalgic return to the old model. Indeed, both versions of Romanticism represented one-sided excess, childish fixations with imaginary abstractions. Just as art depended on a mix of novelty and tradition, he believed that the naïve goals of pure individualism or pure collectivism were equally impossible to achieve.

Such at least were Huxley’s views in 1931, when he published “The New Romanticism” in his essay collection, *Music at Night*. This paper is emblematic of Huxley’s outlook throughout the interwar decades, when he regularly invoked the figure of William Wordsworth as a relished punching bag. In “Wordsworth in the Tropics” from the collection *Do What You Will* (1929), Huxley criticized Romantic nature worship as dependent on a domesticated and colonized vision of “nature,” imposing “an oversimplified design upon the world’s complexity” (Meckier 66). Huxley surmised that the feral nature of tropical jungles were incompatible with any such salutary consolations:

the Wordsworthian adoration of Nature has two principal defects. The first is that it is only possible where Nature has been nearly or quite enslaved by man. The second is that it is only possible for those who are prepared to falsify their immediate intuitions of Nature.... Our direct intuitions of Nature tell us that the world is bottomlessly strange: alien, even when it is kind and beautiful,

---

<sup>3</sup> On the topic of Huxley’s “inverted romanticism,” see Meckier, 201-2.

sometimes even unimaginably, because inhumanly, evil. [...] A voyage through the tropics would have cured him [Wordsworth] of his too easy and comfortable pantheism.<sup>4</sup> (Huxley, 1926-1929 336)

Huxley suggests that since true, undomesticated “Nature” is radically alien and permanently separate from the sense of self, Wordsworth’s views on the relationship between man and nature were disingenuous.

By this point in 1931, Huxley’s displeasure with Wordsworth had been festering for over a decade. In *The Burning Wheel*, a 1916 collection of Huxley’s poetry, he included extended parodies of Wordsworth’s greater Romantic lyrics.<sup>5</sup> Huxley’s poem “The Walk,” in particular, is a direct and explicit affront to Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey.” Although he adopts Wordsworth’s “self-consciously poetic diction,” meter, and rhyme schemes, the poems have more overall differences than similarities (Meckier 57). Where Wordsworth’s poetic rapture provides a grand synthesis of contraries—merging self, other, and landscape with past, present, and future times—Huxley’s poem represents the cold brutality of irreconcilable differences. During an excursion through the countryside, Huxley’s nameless male and female protagonists become increasingly alienated from the environment and from each other. As they gradually come to see their positions as radically incompatible, their philosophical discussion degenerates into the silence of stalemate (56). The poem’s conclusion represents neither comfort nor epiphany, with the male protagonist critiquing Wordsworth’s search for ecstatic transcendence:

---

<sup>4</sup> Meckier surveys the extent of Huxley’s mockery of Wordsworth: “Huxley parodied Wordsworth repeatedly in his early stories and novels. In the fall issue of *Coterie* for 1920 (69-73), Denis Stone, soon to be the protagonist poet in *Crome Yellow*, takes ‘A Country Walk’: he fails to transform the deaf old hag he meets into a female Cumberland Beggar because her rotten teeth offend his sensibilities. In *Those Barren Leaves*, Francis Chelifer ridicules the ‘meaningless Wordsworthian formulas’ his father admired (*TBL*, 122). Anthony Beavis in *Eyeless in Gaza* dislikes Wordsworth because the Romantic poet contends the child is father of the man. An irresponsible hedonist, Beavis wants his days kept ‘separated each from each’ (*EG*, 9). John Atkins’s contention that Huxley took no part in the modern ‘denigration of Wordsworth’ even though ‘aware of his deficiencies’ is indefensible (Atkins, 22); Huxley was the ringleader” (Meckier 66). Additionally, in a 1932 letter to Edward Sackville-West, Huxley describes the search for quality writing amidst Wordsworth’s corpus as being “like extracting radium from pitchblende, one gramme in 200 tons” (Huxley, *Letters* 356).

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed analysis of Wordsworth’s influence on *The Burning Wheel*, see Meckier, 37-67. For a discussion of the greater Romantic lyric, see Chapter 1 in this dissertation.

But poor old Infinite's dead. Long live his heir,  
Lord Here-and-Now... for all the rest  
Is windy nothingness, or at the best  
Home-made Chimera, bodied with despair,  
Headed with formless, foolish hope. (Huxley, *Collected Poetry* 35)

Parodying Wordsworth was by no means unique to Huxley. Indeed, Meckier describes the production of such poems as “a minor industry throughout the nineteenth century” (Meckier 63). But Huxley’s poetry contained more vitriol than many other poems written in this genre. Meckier compares his poetry to Thomas Love Peacock’s 1809 poem, “Lines written *en badinage*, after visiting a paper-mill near Tunbridge Wells, in consequence of the lovely Miss W., who excels in drawing, requesting the author to describe the process of making paper in verse”—a hyperbole of Wordsworth’s predilection for longwinded titles. But whereas Peacock’s “Lines” represent a “good-natured spoof,” Meckier describes Huxley’s “The Walk” as an attempt to vanquish the “harmful illusions” promoted by Wordsworth’s dangerous worldview. To Huxley, Wordsworth was a “falsifier” whose rosy whitewashing of the human condition directly promoted the cultural degradation apparent in Huxley’s day (63). The perceived stakes of Huxley’s poetry were proportionately higher.

But Huxley’s relationship to the “old Romanticism” is not as straightforward as these interwar texts would suggest. By the Cold War decades, his evaluation of Wordsworth would appear unrecognizable from the vantage of this earlier perspective.<sup>6</sup> In a 1959 lecture at the University of California, Huxley proclaimed:

I am an old and unregenerate Wordsworthian; I regard Wordsworth as among the four or five greatest poets and as a man who contributed insights of enormous importance in regard to what our relationship towards the world should be. Wordsworth’s whole idea was that man and nature are closely interlinked, that morality goes right back into our relations with the world, and that our sense of the divine can be most powerfully mediated through our relations with the world of nature. (qtd. in Deese, “Agnostic Gospels” 114)

---

<sup>6</sup> Meckier refers to Huxley’s ability to convincingly argue for opposing viewpoints as testament to his talent as a writer and philosopher (Meckier 64).

It is clear from this passage that Huxley's reading of Wordsworth underwent a dramatic transformation in the intervening decades. Huxley's earlier dismissal was based on the notion that Nature is essentially "alien," experienced as separate from mankind. Accordingly, he insists that any felt connection to Nature is an irreducibly "falsified" or inauthentic experience of Nature. By 1959, however, Huxley's opinion has flipped on its head. Rather than seeing them as separate, Nature and mankind are irreducibly "interlinked."

Huxley's psychedelic experiences with mescaline in 1953 directly catalyzed his newfound appreciation for Romantic poetry during the Cold War years. Writing to his editor Harold Raymond in 1953, Huxley describes mescaline's effects:

No unpleasant physical results, except a faint seasickish feeling at the beginning, no lowering of intellectual capacity, and absolutely no hangover—just transformation of consciousness so that one knows *exactly what Blake meant* when he said, "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear as it is, infinite and holy." (Huxley, *Moksha* 42; emphasis added)

Rather than conforming to a preexisting understanding of Romanticism, mescaline *enabled* a new understanding of Romantic poetry based on a reconceptualization of its themes and intentions. Wordsworth's pantheism was no longer a defect to be "cured"—it was an acknowledgement of the "inter-implication" of self and other, body and mind. With the dissolution of the ordinary subject-object boundaries, psychedelics introduced Huxley to "an awareness of self and the outer world as being one" (129).

Scholars have commented on the monumental influence of mescaline on Huxley's intellectual development. Jeffrey Allen Sadler observes:

To understand Huxley's intellectual development during this last decade it is necessary to deal with the significance he derived from his experience with consciousness-expanding drugs. Huxley's world view up until 1953 had been, it seems, merely an intellectual postulate, one based on an enormous amount of information, but information ascertained, as it were, second hand. (Sadler 281)

Mescaline—and, a few years later, LSD—provided irrefutable content for many of the abstract metaphysical concepts that Huxley encountered during his decades-long fascination with mysticism. His psychedelic insights carried a sense of conviction despite their resistance to

conceptual reasoning, as he describes in a 1957 letter to Philip B. Smith: “there is an actual experience of truths (they are *known* to be truths), which, when presented in conceptual terms to the mind in its normal state, seem incomprehensible and absurd” (Huxley, *Moksha* 130; original emphasis). In the same letter, Huxley implicitly associates the “absurdity” induced by conceptual thinking with his earlier dismissal of Romantic poetry: “Blake said that ‘gratitude is heaven itself’—a phrase I was unable to understand before taking LSD, but which now seems luminously comprehensible” (ibid).<sup>7</sup> Although Romantic poets like Blake and Wordsworth discovered endogenous routes to non-conceptual states of consciousness, Huxley suggests that psychedelics provide a legitimate means of understanding their poetry. By opening a door to unexplored areas of the mind, psychedelics facilitate “what the mystics call ‘obscure knowledge’ about the nature of the universe—a ‘sense of something far more deeply interfused’ (in Wordsworth’s phrase), a sense that All is present in every particular, the Absolute in every relative” (130). In this state, the ordinary boundaries between subjects and objects are transcended, producing an “awareness” that the self and outer world are fundamentally unified. Such an experience enables “a new mode of apprehension,” in which—Huxley implies—one is capable of understanding Romantic poetry as more than just naïve escapism.

Although this chapter focuses primarily on the mutual constitution of Huxley’s views on psychedelics and Romantic poetry, scholars have previously noted the impact of psychedelics on the twentieth-century reception of Romanticism more generally. Jonathan Roberts opens his own contribution to this topic with a personal confession reminiscent of Huxley’s: “Ever since that experience of mescaline I have had a new, continuing visual appreciation of all art forms,

---

<sup>7</sup> Huxley would repeatedly reference Blake’s phrase, “Gratitude is heaven itself,” to illustrate the educational power of psychedelics and the impact of such chemicals on his own conceptual reorganization. In a 1959 letter to Thomas Merton, he writes that psychedelics “helped me to understand many of the obscure utterances to be found in the writings of the mystics, Christian and Oriental. An unspeakable sense of gratitude for the privilege of being born into this universe. (‘Gratitude is heaven itself’, says Blake—and I know now exactly what he was talking about)” (Huxley, *Letters* 863). For a reference to the same line in Huxley’s 1959 letter to Margaret Isherwood, see p. 874.

an appreciation which I did not have before.... Since this realization, the mystical strand of Blake's and Wordsworth's poetry has a far clearer meaning to me than before" (Roberts, *Blake* 46). In line with Salvador Dali's pronouncement that "I do not take drugs. I am drugs" (qtd. in Wernick 48), Roberts suggests Blake and Wordsworth are associated with drugs today not because they took them, but because psychedelic drug users recognize as "familiar territory" the "mystical states of mind that their poems represent" (Roberts, *Blake* 56). He argues that in the twentieth century,

[P]sychedelic drugs...opened up a whole series of new possibilities of understanding: as a stimulus to artistic creativity; as a space for political opposition to the status quo; as a new psychiatric tool for better understanding the mind; and as a potential treatment for mental illness. In these... respects there are analogues to the 'Romantic' interests and political sensibilities of Blake and Wordsworth (particularly in the latter's younger years). In short, the literary credentials of the psychedelics are impeccable, and the philosophical questions opened up by the psychedelics have much in common with those that preoccupy writers in the Romantic period. The many readers who have connected the world of psychedelics to the works of Blake and Wordsworth have every justification for doing so: philosophical, psychological, historical and aesthetic.

Beyond the mere display of commonalities, Roberts insists that "the histories of mysticism and psychedelics are so entwined in the reception of Blake's and Wordsworth's writings as to be *inseparable*" (59, emphasis added).

But Huxley would push the integration of Romantic poetry and psychedelic experience further still, advocating for the inclusion of Romantic poetry in the very protocol of scientific psychedelic experimentation. He argues that listening to Romantic poetry in a psychedelic state serves two related functions: psychedelics facilitate deeper insight into the meaning of the poetry, while the poetry simultaneously potentiates or amplifies the effects of the psychedelic chemical itself. Writing to Humphry Osmond in 1958, Huxley advises:

One of the things that should be read to a person under LSD is Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, including the extraordinary 'Memorable Fancies' that precede and follow the 'Preverbs of Hell'. Read the thing through and see if you don't agree. I'm sure that if this were put on tape it would be found extremely enlightening by the subject. (Huxley, *Letters* 848)

Huxley's recommendation is based on personal experience. Describing listening to records of poetry and "religious utterances" under the influence of LSD as "valuable in many ways," he adds that "one seems to penetrate the inner significance of what is being read, the meaning for oneself, more completely than in ordinary circumstances" (ibid). In a separate letter to Osmond from that year, Huxley recommends that researcher-guides pose a series of "paradoxical" questions to the subject-experiencer that "might act as Zen koans and cause sudden openings into hitherto unglimped regions" of the mind (Huxley, *Letters* 844). As the first item on his list, Huxley proposes: "Do you now understand what Blake meant when he said, 'Gratitude is heaven itself?'" (843).<sup>8</sup> Nor was this an isolated recommendation; a few years later, Frank Barron would advise Timothy Leary on the subject of psychedelic mushrooms: "This sort of research is internal. Take it yourself and read Blake" (Leary, *Priest* 287).<sup>9</sup>

At the heart of Huxley's vacillation towards Romanticism rests his equally mercurial philosophy of vision. Describing Huxley's first experience with mescaline, Jay Stevens writes that "suddenly he was seeing 'what Adam had seen on the morning of creation.' It was as though, born myopic, he had just put on his first pair of glasses" (Stevens 45). For Huxley, whose remedial eyesight impacted his life from an early age, the issue of vision remained a central intellectual preoccupation throughout his lifetime. He is most famous today for his contention that linguistic concepts collaborate with the central nervous system to filter out visual details from conscious awareness—a view that he supports with anecdotal evidence from his first mescaline experience in *The Doors of Perception* (1954).

Scholars have yet to comment on the fact that *Doors* represents a dramatic departure from Huxley's views in *The Art of Seeing* (1942), which he published just one decade prior. In

---

<sup>8</sup> Huxley invokes Blake's famed "augury of innocence"—"To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower"—in an additional proposed question: "the Absolute is present in every relative and particular event. Eternity manifests itself in every moment of time. How do you feel about these paradoxes?" (Huxley, *Letters* 843).

<sup>9</sup> Barron also spoke from experience. As the result of his own internal research, he had "plunged...into twelve months of contemplation, wild poetry, and dedicated study of mystical philosophy" (Leary, *Priest* 287).

this earlier text, Huxley argues that linguistic concepts correlate with *increased* attention to visual details in the environment. Here, Huxley supports his argument by referencing anecdotal evidence from a personal experience with a dental anesthetic. The fact of this reversal is significant for Huxley scholarship on a number of counts. First, *Art of Seeing* establishes a precedent for Huxley's metaphysical use of introspective reports from psychoactive drug experiences, long before his first encounter with mescaline. Second, Huxley's polar shift in thinking symbolizes a major transformation in his views on the relationship between language and perception—a transformation that ultimately undergirds new possibilities in interpreting Romantic poetry.

### **Cleansing the Doors of Perception: William Blake on Mescaline**

Of all the Romantic poets, Huxley is most closely associated with William Blake. In spite of this association, Nicholas M. Williams observed that “the precise nature of the relation between Blake and Huxley has for the most part been ignored or, when considered, largely trivialised” (Williams 41). As a case in point, Williams cites Dent Shirley and Jason Whittaker's *Radical Blake: Afterlife and Influence from 1827*, where Huxley is described as adopting a “particular brand of Blakean mysticism” that celebrates “the individual's free will to create a universe in his or her own image” (qtd. in Williams 41). Williams reads this claim as a fetishization of the solipsistic imagination, a whimsical curio that emphasizes the proliferation of make-believe worlds at the expense of social significance or political engagement. Shirley and Whittaker identify this statement as exemplary of a sustained trend, wherein “later users of Blakean imagery and language repeatedly suppress or avoid the inherently social and political force of his work” (41). In citing Shirley and Whittaker, Williams implies that they likewise miss the true social significance of Huxley's invocations of Blake.

The source of confusion is apparent in Huxley's *Texts & Pretexts* (1932), on which the authors of *Radical Blake* likely based their assessment:

The implication here, is that our imaginations can create the world in their own image. That they do some creating is obvious. But it is surely no less obvious that there is a limit to their powers. Blake himself half admits it. [...] [E]xperience shows that the processes of cleansing and improvement cannot last for more than a very short time. We are not free to create imaginatively a world other than that in which we find ourselves. That world is given. [...] Blake wants the world to be different from what it is and asserts that, by some miracle, it will become different. And in the first moment of reading we generally believe him, because he is a great and most persuasive artist, and because what he says is always partly true and wholly desirable. No philosopher is quite so exciting as Blake; for none has the art of mingling such profound and important truths with such beautiful, wish-fulfilling errors. Add the finest poetry, or a magnificently gnomic prose, and you have a mixture that turns the strongest heads. (Huxley, *Texts* 57-8)

In this passage, Huxley is commenting on a section from Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1792) that Huxley would later make famous with his 1954 publication of *The Doors of Perception*: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern" (qtd. in Huxley, *Texts* 57). Christoph Bode refers to Huxley's analysis here as "the most disappointing moment of his engagement with Blake" in a text that is already riddled with misreading and "inaccurate" quotations.<sup>10</sup> Based on this passage, it is unsurprising that Shirley and Whittaker would accuse Huxley of falling prey to an escapist notion of "Blakean mysticism" based on an impossible desire to be rid of the world.

The problem is not that Shirley and Whittaker misread Huxley (as Williams implies), but that they only read some of him.<sup>11</sup> Supporting Williams' dismissal of their depiction, however, is the fact that their assessment is based on a text in which Huxley has demonstrably misread Blake at numerous turns. Huxley claims, for instance, that "Blake's doctrine of states is one of the most alluring ever propounded. Accepted, it frees us at one stroke from all moral

---

<sup>10</sup> Bode reads the systematic misprision in *Texts & Pretexts* as evidence that "Huxley is definitely not a Blakean in this period" (Bode 129).

<sup>11</sup> Shirley and Whittaker do not actually cite any sources for their claims about Huxley other than *Doors*. The conflict between Williams and the authors of *Radical Blake* speaks to the difficulty in presenting pithy summaries about Huxley's "views" in any simplistic way. Huxley's prodigious output testifies to a continually active mind, and any assessment of his ideas demands sensitivity to their historical development.

responsibility whatsoever. [...] [T]he individual is no longer accountable for his actions" (45). This "amoral" reading of Blake sits at odds with a figure that consistently championed social and reformist causes. Blake believed in an intrinsic morality divorced from religious scriptures: "The truth & certainty of Virtue & Honesty...is Evident as the Sun & Moon" (Blake 614). Certainly, this is not the voice of someone who abolishes all moral responsibility.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the evidence for charges of misreading, Huxley's respect for Blake was apparent since the 1920s, in stark contrast to Huxley's shifting assessment of Wordsworth. In Huxley's satirical novel *Point Counter Point* (1928), for instance, Mark Rampion invokes Blake as the antithesis of modernity's dominant trend towards one-sided extremes:

'Blake was civilized', he insisted, '*civilized*. Civilization is harmony and completeness. Reason, feeling, instinct, the life of the body—Blake manages to include and harmonize everything. Barbarism is being lop-sided. You can be a barbarian of the intellect as well as of the body. A barbarian of the soul and the feelings as well as of sensuality. Christianity made us barbarians of the soul and now science is making us barbarians of the intellect. Blake was the last civilized man'. (Huxley, *Point* 103)

Although scholars have questioned whether this view can be attributed to Huxley,<sup>13</sup> owing to the text's fictional nature, Rampion's disparaging view of modernity squares neatly with the discussion here of Huxley's own views.

### **"Distinguishing Characteristics": Huxley's Conceptual Love Affair**

Huxley wrote *The Art of Seeing* in 1942. In it, he describes his successes with the "Bates Method" of "visual reeducation"—a technique to reform poor eyesight using visualization practices and physical exercises. Physician W. H. Bates outlined the controversial method in his self-published book, *The Cure of Imperfect Sight by Treatment Without Glasses* (1920). More than a restatement of Bates' work, Huxley intended for his publication to explore the psychological and philosophical implications of Bates' approach to vision (Marovitz 110). "[E]ver

---

<sup>12</sup> Further supporting accusations of misreading, Huxley here suggests that Blake created a personal mythology to "justify" his personal predilection for polygamy (Huxley, *Texts* 48, 134).

<sup>13</sup> See Bode, 125; and Williams, 42.

since ophthalmology became a science,” Huxley argues, eye experts have been “obsessively preoccupied with only one aspect of the total, complex process of seeing—the physiological” (Huxley, *Seeing* 1). *The Art of Seeing* offers a more expansive notion of vision that also incorporates the “mental side to vision” (2).<sup>14</sup>

Huxley’s interest in the Bates Method was highly personal. His eyesight had deteriorated in 1910 with an infection that inflamed his corneas, preventing him from reading for nearly two years. Once the infection cleared, his right eye was ninety-percent blind. By 1913, he was able to read for eight hours a day with the aid of a magnifying glass, but his poor eyesight derailed his plans to make a career as a medical researcher (Marovitz 111).<sup>15</sup> Despite this roadblock, science and medicine remained central to Huxley’s intellectual pursuits throughout his life.<sup>16</sup>

Bates’s method emphasizes the role of the mind and conscious attention in visual perception. Rather than a purely mechanical or physiological process, Bates argued that visual perception is influenced by memory and the imagination. When a familiar object is perceived anew, vision is “enhanced through apperception” by associating the immediate sensory input with memories of the object’s identity and physical characteristics. While contemporary research on cognition supported this idea, as Marovitz points out, Bates’s extrapolations were often more radical than accepted science could support (115).<sup>17</sup> Bates insisted that poor eyesight resulted from psychosomatic strain, and that visual acuity could be restored by “relaxing” both body and

---

<sup>14</sup> Cytowic refers to this “mental side” as “the ancillary nonoptic aspects of vision.” This is especially explored in Huxley’s chapters on “The Mental Side of Seeing,” “Memory and Imagination,” and “The Variability of Mental Functioning” (Cytowic 321).

<sup>15</sup> Huxley attributed dramatic improvement to the Bates Method, but independent verification is wanting. Marovitz observes that “many are the friends and acquaintances, from his early years at Garsington—including his hostess there, Lady Ottoline Morrell, and such other guests as Virginia Woolf—through the last decade of his life, who remarked on Huxley’s poor eyesight, whereas relatively few commented on its improvement over time” (Marovitz 112). Eye experts were quick to ridicule Huxley for peddling a “cure” when many observers considered him “at best half blind” (117).

<sup>16</sup> As a symbol of the consistency of Huxley’s interest in science, Sybille Bedford recalled that among stacks of unsolicited literary journals, the only two journals that Huxley “read religiously throughout his life” were *Nature* and *The Lancet* (Deese, *Amphibians* 169).

<sup>17</sup> The Bates Method has never been supported by empirical evidence (O’Hara 120).

mind into a “free, natural condition”: “Neither imagination nor memory can be perfect unless the mind is perfectly relaxed. Therefore when the imagination and memory are perfect, the sight is perfect. Imagination, memory and sight are, in fact, coincident. When one is perfect, all are perfect” (Bates 151). Although his unconventional methods (which included “palming, swinging, and other physical activities”) were ultimately benign, physicians warned they could worsen eyesight by encouraging patients to neglect evidence-based methods for improvement (Marovitz 120).

*The Art of Seeing* is not a popular object of Huxley scholarship. Kieron O’Hara refers to it as “[o]ne of the oddest pieces of Huxley’s varied output” (O’Hara 119). A history book of “bad medicine” characterizes it as “full of medical misconceptions, purely imaginative ideas and some distinctly dubious practices” (Schott and Youngston n.p.).<sup>18</sup>

Factual merit aside, *The Art of Seeing* is significant as an early instantiation of topics that would preoccupy Huxley for the rest of his life. David K. Dunaway goes so far as to say that “*Doors of Perception* and *The Art of Seeing* together comprise his most extended autobiography. Only visual revelations were important enough to overcome his studied disinclination to write about his own life” (Dunaway 297).<sup>19</sup>

In an overlooked passage, Huxley supports his views on the cognitive processes involved in perception with an anecdote from a drug-induced altered state of consciousness. He describes the experience of “coming out” of an unspecified “anaesthetic administered in the dentist’s chair”—very likely nitrous oxide (Huxley, *Seeing* 12). Huxley’s phenomenological

---

<sup>18</sup> While eye experts were quick to discount the rampant “pseudoscience” in *The Art of Seeing*, Huxley’s book was an immediate commercial success, testifying to the author’s fame. Its first British edition of 10,000 copies sold out within a few days, and its first American edition had sold about 23,000 copies by September 1943 (Watt 23).

<sup>19</sup> R.S. Deese echoes this autobiographical focus: “*The Doors of Perception*, though it is usually taken to be a book about the nature of the mescaline experience, is first and foremost a book about the mind of Aldous Huxley” (Deese, *Amphibians* 98). Huxley’s sister-in-law, Juliette Huxley, attests to the same: “Perhaps the sixty-odd pages of *The Doors of Perception* reveal more of the seeking, questing Aldous than all his books put together [...]; [they capture] the unfathomable Mystery—which haunted him all his life” (qtd. in Hull 458).

description proceeds in three distinct stages. At first, visual sensations are nonrepresentational and “devoid of significance”: “They were just coloured patches, existing in and for themselves, unrelated not only to the external world, but also to myself” (ibid). These “coloured patches” could not signify anything, Huxley claims, since the perceptions were untethered from his normal sense of self altogether. Without a stable sense of identity, these color perceptions “were not *mine*; they simply *were*” (ibid).

As a sense of self gradually returns, the “raw *sensa*” of the first stage are gradually interpreted as “known varieties of objects” in the three-dimensional world. By this second stage, identity is established but nonspecific: Huxley is “someone,” but he is still disconnected from the full range of his personal memories and accumulated knowledge. It is only in the third and final stage, when this psychological database of past experiences reactivates, that Huxley achieves maximum visual acuity, consciously relating the sight of objects to the self’s “organized pattern of memories, habits and desires” (ibid).

Huxley describes this as the progression of perception from a “merely physiological being” to an “un-self-conscious being” to a final “self-conscious being.” He argues that since the self-conscious being is “interested” in semiotic aspects of external reality that exceed the merely physical, the perceived objects are rendered “more visible”:

‘I’ had now returned; and since ‘I’ happened to take an interest in architectural details and their history, the things seen through the window were immediately thought of as a member of a new category—not merely as houses, but as houses of a particular style and date, and as such possessed of distinguishing characteristics which, when looked for, could be seen even by eyes as inadequate as my own were. These distinguishing characteristics were now perceived, not because my eyes had suddenly improved, but simply because my mind was once more in a condition to look for them and register their significance. (Huxley, *Seeing* 12-3)

Huxley buttresses his personal observations with reference to homologous scenarios:

The experienced microscopist will see certain details on a slide; the novice will fail to see them. Walking through a wood, a city dweller will be blind to a multitude of things which the trained naturalist will see without difficulty. At sea, the sailor will detect distant objects which, for the landsman, are simply not there at all. (13)

As this passage demonstrates, *Art of Seeing* offers a snapshot of Huxley's philosophy of perception at a time when he prioritized the value of conceptual thinking as paramount. From this vantage point, he portrays the expert visualizer as possessed of nuanced clusters of linguistic categories, accumulated over time as the products of focused study and attentive training. Such encyclopedic knowledge—whether of specific architectural elements, bacteria morphologies, or the taxonomy of insects on the forest floor—provide “hooks” for directing the visualizer's attention. In the absence of such categories, Huxley suggests, the visualizer would otherwise gloss over subtle details in his field of vision.

Huxley's subsequent experience with mescaline altered his outlook by inverting the stature of conceptual thinking. Instead of prioritizing the value of training and experience, he comes to see learned concepts as limiting one's attention based on the application of past expectations.

### **“Innumerable Fine Shades”: Visual Perception on Mescaline**

Huxley wrote *The Doors of Perception* in one month during 1954, during a time when psychedelics like mescaline and LSD were still legal for both medical and recreational use (Stevens 47). Despite this permissive environment, Jeffrey J. Kripal notes that the year marked “one of the most conservative and repressive moments in American history”:<sup>20</sup> “Eisenhower was in office, the races were segregated, gender roles were fixed and unquestioned, and McCarthyism was the order of the day” (Kripal 118). *Doors* was published as Huxley's fortieth book.

At the time of its publication, Huxley's essay joined a very short list of texts about mescaline in any discipline. Until Humphry Osmond and John Smythies established a mescaline research program in 1952, academic interest in the molecule had lain dormant since the 1920s.

---

<sup>20</sup> Huxley had moved to the United States in 1937 and wrote *Doors* from his home in Los Angeles.

An earlier wave of research culminated in K. Beringer's *Der Meskalinrauch* (1927) and Heinrich Klüver's *Mescal and the Mechanisms of Hallucinations* (1928), which catalogued mescaline's pharmacology and its chemical alterations of consciousness and visual perception, but no clear medical applications emerged from these early trials (Kennedy 109). Osmond and Smythies were initially intrigued by apparent analogies between mescaline experience and symptoms of schizophrenia. Once they discovered mescaline's structural similarity to the endogenous chemical adrenaline,<sup>21</sup> they hypothesized that schizophrenia might have a biological basis caused by a "failure of metabolism" (ibid).

Huxley initiated correspondence with Osmond after discovering a recent article on the state of psychological medicine (co-authored with Smythies) in the *Hibbert Journal*.<sup>22</sup> Huxley extended an invitation for Osmond to visit, but the possibility seemed remote until Osmond attended an American Psychiatric Association meeting in Los Angeles (Murray 398). In a letter arranging the details of meeting, Huxley beseeched Osmond to bring along a supply of mescaline, "for I am eager to make the experiment and would feel particularly happy to do so under the supervision of an experienced investigator like yourself" (qtd. in Murray 399).<sup>23</sup>

J.G. Ballard describes *Doors* as Huxley's "most important work of non-fiction" in the foreword to a 1994 edition,<sup>24</sup> and its cultural impact cannot be overstated (Hull 1).<sup>25</sup> Pairing its

---

<sup>21</sup> Musing on this "structural biochemical relationship" between adrenaline and mescaline in the beginning of *Doors*, Huxley portends the discovery of endogenous DMT later in the twentieth century: "each one of us may be capable of manufacturing a chemical, minute doses of which are known to cause profound changes in consciousness" (Huxley, *Doors* 11).

<sup>22</sup> Huxley's reputation for satire preceded him, as Osmond confessed after his death: "What impressed me from the start and continued to do so through the years of our friendship was the kindness and tolerance of this man, whose writings had sometimes led me to suppose that he would be disillusioned, cynical and even savage" (Huxley, *Moksha* 34).

<sup>23</sup> The testimony in *Doors* belies Huxley's personal agency in planning this meeting: "In spite of seventy years of mescaline research, the psychological material at his disposal was still absurdly inadequate, and he was anxious to add to it. I was on the spot and willing, indeed eager, to be a guinea pig" (Huxley, *Doors* 12).

<sup>24</sup> Ballard postulates that together with *Brave New World*, *Doors* "will outlast everything else written by him during his long and restless life" (Ballard). Murray further describes it as "the most famous English literary drug taking since De Quincey" (Murray 399).

vivid descriptions with Huxley's established reputation as one of the most formidable intellects of the twentieth century, *Doors* generated "vast public interest" in psychedelic substances and contributed to their widespread use in the following decades. The influence of this tiny book was immediate and far-reaching. Following its publication, a tidal wave of letters inundated Huxley's British publisher, Chatto & Windus, requesting information on how to obtain doses of mescaline (Deese, *Amphibians* 99).

Huxley was the first and "by far the most eloquent" mainstream writer to explore the "mind-manifesting" potentials of psychedelics (Gould 318). According to Thomas M. Disch, Huxley's mescaline descriptions were more enchanting—and hence more seductive to mainstream audiences—than William S. Burroughs's more "transgressional" advocacy of drug use (Disch 111). Upon receiving the manuscript, Huxley's editor immediately noted his uncommon talent for weaving poetry out of the unwieldy depths of mescaline experience: "You are the most articulate guinea pig that any scientist could hope to engage" (qtd. in Murray 401).<sup>26</sup>

Beyond generating broad interest in psychedelics, *Doors* established a persistent framework for structuring and interpreting psychedelic experiences.<sup>27</sup> In the words of Jonathan Gould, Huxley provided "much of the vocabulary and metaphorical imagery with which the inexpressively subjective nature of these experiences would be henceforward expressed" (Gould 318). Christopher Partridge describes it as the urtext of modern psychedelic spirituality,

---

<sup>25</sup> The most recent Kaplan study guide for the SAT Subject Test in U.S. History offers a colorful illustration of Huxley's influence. In a single paragraph summarizing the "cultural roots" of the 1960s, the history primer states matter-of-factly: "Aldous Huxley's *Doors of Perception* (1954) introduced hallucinogenic drugs to the baby boomers" (Willner et al. 333). Christopher Partridge marks its publication as "the first flowering of contemporary psychedelic spirituality" in the West, with *Doors* as the movement's "key text" (Partridge 133).

<sup>26</sup> Raymond also speculated that a mescaline-infused soft drink might surpass Coca-Cola in popularity while inaugurating a golden age of civilization (Deese, *Amphibians* 99).

<sup>27</sup> Lindsey Michael Banco describes Huxley as a "countercultural vanguard" whose "sentiment and vocabulary" in *Doors* would influence subsequent authors (Banco 32). Thomas M. Disch similarly describes the essay as "required reading for the '60s counterculture" and refers to its author as the "Pied Piper of the Drug Age" (Disch 111). Along these lines, Robert Ellwood writes that *Doors* "left a sort of charter for sixties mysticism" generally (qtd. in Partridge 133).

serving as the “principal inspiration” for many seminal psychedelic texts that followed, including Alan Watts’ *The Joyous Cosmology* (1962), Timothy Leary’s (et al.) *The Psychedelic Experience* (1964), and Terence McKenna’s *The Food of the Gods* (1992) (Partridge 133). Andrei A. Znamenski argues that even Carlos Castaneda “did not care too much about the world of the occult and magic”—themes at the heart of his books on the psychedelic teachings of Don Juan—“until he read *The Doors of Perception*” (Znamenski 194).

An outside aspect of Huxley’s legacy involves the close association of psychedelic experience with analogies drawn from Eastern mysticism. Since the publication of *Doors*, Orientalized characterizations of psychedelic experiences have been so pervasive that the connection with Eastern mysticism has been all but naturalized.<sup>28</sup> As David Lenson describes:

Because these texts determined the popular reception of the family of psychedelics, it is now difficult to guess how else these drugs might have been welcomed in Europe and America. ... Huxley’s first interpretation still influences, and sometimes even determines, not only discussion of the subject [of psychedelics] but the drugs’ effects themselves. (Lenson 143)

Even contemporaries lamented the subtle imaginative constriction imposed by this paradigm: “their insistence on forcing their insights into a framework which is essentially Tibetan produces a strained, somewhat artificial effect like the efforts of early astronomers to force the movement of the planets to fit into the Ptolemaean system” (qtd. in Lenson 143). While others recognized a potential for Eastern mysticism to serve as a productive foil for certain aspects of the psychedelic experience, the widespread colonization of psychedelics by a monolithic paradigm threatens to foreclose consideration of other interpretive frames.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> The Orientalism initiated by Huxley should be distinguished from that of Thomas De Quincey, which Nigel Leask explores in *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire* (2004). Lenson notes that whereas psychedelics like peyote and LSD are indigenous to the West, nineteenth-century supplies of opium and hashish actually originated in the Orient and arrived by import (Lenson 144).

<sup>29</sup> Part of the appeal of Eastern mystical traditions might also reflect the relative insufficiency of the English language. Huxley’s friend Gerald Heard frequently pointed out that Sanskrit—the language of the *Bhagavad Gita*—contains over forty different words to describe alterations in consciousness (Stevens 48).

Despite the radiation of its long-term impact, the critical reception to *Doors* was predictably muted.<sup>30</sup> A sizeable contingent of commentators viewed Huxley's abandonment of his "prodigious gift" for satire as a literary travesty (Deese, *Amphibians* 102). Some viewed its publication as a death knell for Huxley's cultural relevance.<sup>31</sup> Others, such as the Swami Prabhavananda and R.C. Zaehner, decried as illegitimate Huxley's attempted conflation of mystical enlightenment with chemical ecstasy (Murray 401; Cowling 360). Yet a third camp derided *Doors* for its unrealistic, "escapist" agenda, which Thomas Mann associated with social degeneracy:

It represents the last, and I am tempted to say, the rashest development of Huxley's *escapism*, which I never liked in him.... Now, given the eloquent endorsement of this famous writer, many young Englishmen and especially Americans will try the experiment. For the book is selling like mad. But it is an altogether—I do not want to say immoral, but must say irresponsible book, which can only contribute to the befuddlement of the world and to its incapacity to meet the deadly serious problems of the times with intelligence. (qtd. in Murray 402)

Ironically, Mann's criticism of Huxley "escapism" maps closely onto Huxley's earlier accusations against Wordsworth.

Regardless of the disappointment from pundits, *Doors* sold a steady stream of copies. Huxley wrote to his editor Harold Raymond on March 8, 1954, thanking him for good news regarding sales: "excellent, I should say, for an essay" (Huxley, *Letters* 700). In an early review from *The Reporter*, Marvin Barrett attributes the publication's success as testament to Huxley's preexisting literary stature:

Coming from a lesser writer than Huxley, such suggestions for the salvation of mankind could be dismissed as the woolgathering of a misguided crackpot. But coming as they do from one of the masters of English prose, a man of immense

---

<sup>30</sup> See Watt, 27.

<sup>31</sup> Donald Watt locates a qualitative shift in the critical consensus around this time. One year after Huxley's death in 1963, the *Year's Work in English Studies* claimed Huxley was "virtually ignored since he was dismissed as a novelist in the early 'fifties." John Wain, writing in the *New Republic*, would echo this sentiment in 1971: "There have been times, since about 1955, when I wondered if he was going to disappear altogether" (qtd. in Watt 27). Despite this view, Watt's analysis of available sales figures suggests that the decreases in Huxley's popular reception were modest in comparison to this "sharp downward curve" in his critical reputation (Watt 28).

erudition and intellect who usually demonstrates a high moral seriousness, they deserve more careful scrutiny. (qtd. in Siff 64)

Osmond administered 400 mg of mescaline to Huxley on May 3, 1953, at eleven o'clock in the morning. After describing the moment of dosing, Huxley begins his account by detailing the barriers to communicating any account of subjective experience: "Sensations, feelings, insights, fancies—all these are private and, except through symbols and at second hand, incommunicable. We can pool information about experiences, but never the experiences themselves" (Huxley, *Doors* 12-3). Huxley suggests that people with different modes of perception inhabit "radically alien universe[s]," even if they physically live side by side. When the constitutions of writer/speaker and reader/listener are sufficiently similar, language may be enough to permit an "inferential understanding" or "mutual empathy" between individuals; but in cases where life experiences are sufficiently divergent, "communication between universes is incomplete or even nonexistent." He suggests that "short of being born again as a visionary," no amount of linguistic description will permit entry to the alien worlds experienced as lived realities by figures like Blake or Swedenborg (13).

Huxley had mulled over these concerns well before taking mescaline. He describes "always" having postulated that techniques of altering perception might succeed where language fell short. Huxley thought that through hypnosis, meditation, or drugs, he "might so change my ordinary mode of consciousness as to be able to know, from the inside, what the visionary, the medium, even the mystic were talking about" (14). Based on what he had *read* about mescaline, "I was convinced...that the drug would admit me, at least for a few hours, into the kind of inner world described by Blake.... But what I expected did not happen" (14-5). Given this disjuncture, it might seem odd that Huxley would choose to title his essay with a line from William Blake. But as Huxley continues his account, it is increasingly evident that Blake's writings became activated in unexpected ways.

Huxley expected to see “visions of many-colored geometries, of animated architectures, rich with gems and fabulously lovely, of landscapes with heroic figures, of symbolic dramas trembling perpetually on the verge of the ultimate revelation.” He attributed the absence of such phantasmagorias to his mental disposition as a “poor visualizer,” although dosage was a likely factor (15).<sup>32</sup> The reality turned out to be much more subtle than his extravagant expectations. His immediate observations involve anomalous perceptions of color, unmoored from associations with identifiable objects: “a slow dance of golden lights,” “sumptuous red surfaces,” and “complex gray structures” with “pale bluish spheres” (4).

Rather than transporting him into visionary worlds, Huxley insisted, mescaline altered his perception of the objective world “out there.” This might seem odd, considering that philosophers since Locke have characterized colors as “secondary qualities”—trivial and subjective epiphenomena relative to the verifiable “primary qualities” of size and shape. From the non-signifying whorls of light and color, Huxley proceeds to meditate on a vase holding three diverse flowers. Here again, his attention is consumed with their colors: “a full-blown Belie of Portugal rose, shell pink with a hint at every petal’s base of a hotter, flammier hue; a large magenta and cream-colored carnation; and, pale purple at the end of its broken stalk, the bold heraldic blossom of an iris” (ibid). Whereas Huxley’s sober self had earlier been preoccupied by the flowers’ stark juxtaposition, the arrangement now represented “what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation—the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence” (ibid). Under the gaze of mescaline, the flowers took on a metaphysical significance as “a bundle of minute,

---

<sup>32</sup> Huxley wrote *Doors* on the basis of a single mescaline trip. In 1962, Alan Watts would write *The Joyous Cosmology: Adventures in the Chemistry of Consciousness* in part because he didn’t think Huxley had tripped hard enough: “In *The Doors of Perception* Aldous Huxley has given us a superbly written account of the effects of mescaline upon a highly sensitive person. It was a record of his first experience of this remarkable transformation of consciousness, and by now, through subsequent experiments, he knows that it can lead to far deeper insights than his book described. ... I feel that the time is ripe for an account of some of the deeper, or higher, levels of insight that can be reached through these consciousness-changing ‘drugs’ when accompanied with sustained philosophical reflection” (Watts xxiii).

unique particulars in which, by some unspeakable and yet self-evident paradox, was to be seen the divine source of all existence” (Huxley, *Doors* 5).

In this subtle allusion to William Blake, Huxley depicts his mescaline experience as a rebuttal to the dualistic “Platonic philosophy” that seeks to separate Being from becoming and Ideas from sensations. The connection to Blake’s “minute particulars” is instructive on this point. Resisting Enlightenment trends towards generalization, categorization, and abstraction, Blake argued that universality is only ever achieved by attending to the specific details of the material world. He opposes “mathematic form” to the “living form” he finds embodied in minute particulars. In doing so, Blake also aligns the spiritual with the corporeal, resisting puritanical injunctions to disavow the body and its drives.

Under the influence of mescaline, Huxley experienced a divine immanence comparable to Spinoza’s “concatenation of all things.” Fundamentally non-dualist, this experience challenged his allegiance to linguistic categories. Although Huxley read widely in the mystical traditions, he admits that textual descriptions of mystical experiences failed to adequately communicate their nature.<sup>33</sup> It is only with mescaline that Huxley is able to fill content into such verbal abstractions: “The Beatific Vision, Sat Chit Ananda, Being-Awareness-Bliss—for *the first time* I understood, not on the verbal level, not by inchoate hints or at a distance, but precisely and completely what those prodigious syllables referred to” (5, emphasis added). He recalls having read an essay by Suzuki, wherein universal mind or “the Dharma-Body of the Buddha” is equated with a mundane “hedge at the bottom of the garden” (ibid). For Huxley, such a notion had only registered as “a vaguely pregnant piece of nonsense” (ibid). Suddenly now, with his recognition of divinity in minute particulars, “it was all as clear as day, as evident as Euclid” (ibid).

---

<sup>33</sup> Huxley elaborates on this notion in *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (1956): “the statement, whether verbal or pictorial, is valueless in itself. ‘The pointing finger is not the moon which is pointed at.’ ‘The Buddha never preached enlightenment’—for the simple reason that enlightenment is something for every individual to experience for himself” (qtd. in Sadler 282).

Colors, in other words, communicated meaning to Huxley where words had fallen short. The flowers were “all but quivering under the pressure of the significance with which they were charged,” revealing “deeper to ever deeper meaning” (ibid). Nor was this communication of significance limited to the flowers alone. Turning his gaze from the vase to his bookshelves, Huxley observes:

Like the flowers, they glowed, when I looked at them, with brighter colors, a profounder significance. Red books, like rubies; emerald books; books bound in white jade; books of agate; of aquamarine, of yellow topaz; lapis lazuli books whose color was so intense, so intrinsically meaningful, that they seemed to be on the point of leaving the shelves to thrust themselves more insistently on my attention. (ibid)

Huxley found himself in a new world where secondary qualities carried more importance than primary ones: “spatial relationships had ceased to matter very much.... Place and distance cease to be of much interest” (ibid).

As a result of this experience, Huxley arrives at an exact reversal of his earlier philosophy of perception from *The Art of Seeing*:

Reflecting on my experience, I find myself agreeing with the eminent Cambridge philosopher, Dr. C. D. Broad, “that we should do well to consider much more seriously than we have hitherto been inclined to do the type of theory which Bergson put forward in connection with memory and sense perception. The suggestion is that the function of the brain and nervous system and sense organs is in the main eliminative and not productive. ... [Their] function...is to protect us from being overwhelmed and confused by this mass of largely useless and irrelevant knowledge, by shutting out most of what we should otherwise perceive or remember at any moment, and leaving only that very small and special selection which is likely to be practically useful.” (6)

Recall that in his 1942 text, Huxley associates perceptual acuity with his normal sense of self and ordinary waking consciousness. There, it is only in remembering the existence of conceptual or linguistic categories—such as a particular architectural style—that Huxley knows to look for specific, nuanced details in his environment. With renewed access to his storehouse of accumulated knowledge, Huxley insists he is able to observe features of a house that he could not see otherwise.

In *Doors*, however, normal waking consciousness is represented as inhibiting the perception of environmental details. In place of his earlier view, Huxley emphasizes that linguistic categories *filter out* information according to expectations from past experiences, and that words both represent and reinforce the resulting “reduced awareness” of the surrounding world (ibid). The world is hypostatized or “petrified by language,” which lulls mankind into complacency: “language...confirms him in the belief that reduced awareness is the only awareness and...bedevils his sense of reality, so that he is all too apt to take his concepts for data, his words for actual things” (ibid). But as his choice of literary medium suggests, Huxley is not suggesting that all language is inherently carceral. Instead, it has a tendency to exert a kind of perceptual drift towards increasing abstraction, which means that “[m]ost people, most of the time, know only what comes through the reducing valve and is consecrated as genuinely real by the local language” (7). But other people at other times acquire a “by-pass” that manages to partially circumvent the reducing valve. This by-pass is either an inborn capacity, as Huxley suggests of William Blake, or it is acquired temporarily—“either spontaneously, or as the result of deliberate ‘spiritual exercises,’ or through hypnosis, or by means of drugs” (ibid).

Huxley suggests that mescaline bypasses the reifying tendencies of language by expanding perception beyond the confines of utilitarian awareness. In presenting the case for mescaline as a countermeasure against this reification, he implicitly equates the function of mescaline with that of poetry as described by Romantic poets like Percy Shelley and William Blake. In “There Is No Natural Religion” (1788), Blake writes:

He who sees the Infinite in all things sees God. He who sees the Ratio only sees himself only. ... If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character the Philosophic & Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things, & stand still unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again. (Blake, *Complete* 3)

Blake’s “ratio” refers to a system of abstraction extrapolated from the limited data provided by past experiences—a system comparable to Huxley’s “universe of reduced awareness, expressed and...petrified by language” (Damon 341). In other words, he who sees the world

through the lens of petrified language sees only what fits within his prevailing paradigm. Poetry disrupts this tunnel vision in its capacity “[t]o open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought” (qtd. in Damon 331). In expanding perception beyond the prevailing conceptual paradigms, poetry reminds us that there is more to the world than our concepts.

We find similar sentiments in “A Defense of Poetry” (1821), where Shelley describes the language of poets:

Their language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them, become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse. (Shelley 2)

For Shelley, poetic language both induces and perpetuates an expanded awareness. The word “marks” carries multiple semantic valences: poetry “takes notice of” unapprehended relations, “identifies” them in language, and consequently “makes [them] legible” to others (Wolfson 343). Poetry acts “beyond and above [normal] consciousness” as “[i]t awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought” (Shelley 5). Rather than generating mere “hallucinations,” Shelley’s choice of the word “unapprehended” emphasizes a *seeing* of real relations in the world that earlier escaped the attention of consciousness. This ontological actuality mirrors Huxley’s conviction that “[t]he great change was in the realm of objective fact” (Huxley, *Doors* 4). Shelley continues in this register: “Poetry *lifts the veil* from the *hidden* beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar” (Shelley 5, emphasis added). Huxley would similarly describe a dramatic shift in his observation of familiar objects, such as his clothing:

Those folds in the trousers—what a labyrinth of endlessly significant complexity! And the texture of the gray flannel—how rich, how deeply, mysteriously sumptuous! ... “This is how one ought to see,” I kept saying as I looked down at my trousers, or glanced at the jeweled books in the shelves, at the legs of my infinitely more than Van-Goghian chair. “This is how one ought to see, how things really are.” (Huxley, *Doors* 10)

Without the defamiliarizing and revitalizing force of poetry (or mescaline), language and perception drift towards fixation on abstractions.

The transformation in Huxley's thinking since 1942 is increasingly apparent: "Visual impressions are greatly intensified and the eye recovers some of the perceptual innocence of childhood, when the sensum was not immediately and automatically subordinated to the concept" (7). This is light-years away from Huxley's earlier adulation of "perceptual experience" based on the subordination of sensum to concept. As the ego grows progressively weaker, Huxley describes an inverse approach nearing towards "perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe" (ibid). Perception is only extended when normal waking consciousness is brushed aside.

Although Banco does not cite *Art of Seeing* as illustration, she notes that Huxley's first mescaline experience "profoundly disrupted his assumptions about perception and cognition" (Banco 35). By 1954, in a radical inversion of his earlier text, Huxley's visual acuity reaches a nadir as he returns to the "orthodox consciousness" of his "right mind" (41). Contrary to his earlier position, Huxley makes explicit this disavowal of the ego's perceptual prowess. The very boundary between self and other dissolves altogether as he describes observing the legs of a chair: "'I' was not involved...nor in a certain sense were 'they'" (Huxley, *Doors* 6). Instead of his normal self, Huxley exists as a "Not-self" in a dimension outside "the world of selves, of time, of moral judgments and utilitarian considerations, the world...of self-assertion, of cocksureness, of overvalued words and idolatrously worshiped notions" (10). As with the "un-self-conscious being" induced by anesthesia in *Art of Seeing*, awareness is here divorced from his ego: "that interfering neurotic who, in waking hours, tries to run the show, was blessedly out of the way"

(16). But unlike that intermediary stage of anesthesia, the absence of ego induced by mescaline *increases* his range of perception.<sup>34</sup>

Within this context of circumventing the mind's usual "reducing valve," Huxley resumes his discussion of color. Under the influence of mescaline, the perception of color undergoes "enormous heightening": "Mescaline raises all colors to a higher power and makes the percipient aware of innumerable fine shades of difference, to which, at ordinary times, he is completely blind. It would seem that, for Mind at Large, the so-called secondary characters of things are primary" (8). Where *Art of Seeing* attributes heightened perception to the ego's fluency with concepts, *Doors* associates it with the absence of egos and concepts altogether.

In this state of heightened perception, a simple bamboo chair takes on all the significance of "Wordsworth's daffodils," engendering "a new direct insight into the very Nature of Things" (ibid). More than merely functional posts, he insists "these chair legs *were* St. Michael and all angels" (ibid, emphasis added). This is likely another allusion to William Blake, who says in the vision of the "Last Judgment":

I assert for myself that I do not behold the outward creation, and that to me it is hindrance and not action. "What," it will be questioned, "when the sun rises, do you not see a round disc of fire somewhat like a guinea?" Oh! no, no. I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host [angels], crying: "Holy! Holy! Holy! is the Lord God Almighty." (Blake, *Complete* 565-6)

---

<sup>34</sup> The revolution in Huxley's thinking is further evidenced by the differing roles of architecture in either text. In 1942, Huxley's familiarity with particular architectural styles allows him to notice details that he would otherwise overlook. There, architecture provides a conceptual frame that extends the range of his perception. But by 1954, insisting that concepts interfere with perception, Huxley experiences heightened awareness *in spite of* his conceptual associations with architecture: "Here, in spite of the peculiar hideousness of the architecture...all at once I saw what Gaurdi had seen and (with what incomparable skill) had so often rendered in his paintings—a stucco wall with a shadow slanting across it, blank but unforgettably beautiful, empty but charged with all the meaning and the mystery of existence" (Huxley, *Doors* 18). Rather than noticing details associated with a particular architectural style, the "perceptual acuity" in this second scene involves witnessing an additional layer of metaphysical significance in otherwise mundane objects. Huxley signals his non-conceptual cognition with the words "blank" and "empty"—a paradox of presence in absence beyond the ability of language to contain. The specific words emerge from Huxley's interest in Zen Buddhism: "Elsewhere in the world blank walls are really considered empty spaces to be filled in. In Buddhist meditation the blank walls and empty spaces are already full" (Jacobson 140).

The transformation in Huxley's thinking about Romanticism is evident in his discussion of modern art and literature. Huxley's criticisms are consistent with his views from 1931 (as expressed in "The New Romanticism") insofar as contemporary art is still depicted as allergic to explorations of spiritual values and universal truths. Described as an act of idolatry, modern artistic and literary movements substituted for these the worship of Blakean "ratios"—mathematical abstractions divorced from higher truths and living forms. Huxley laments that contemporary poets have retreated into "highly abstract terms, not of the given, objective fact, but of mere scientific and theological notions" in a world of reified concepts (Huxley, *Doors* 14). But while Huxley had criticized contemporary culture for its overemphasis on collectivism in his earlier text, his focus in *Doors* has shifted to its overemphasis on the personal subconscious, divorced from universal truths. Huxley describes this subconscious as the ego's ratio: "a mental world more squalid and more tightly closed than even the world of conscious personality" (15). While on mescaline, Huxley describes a brief excursion into this world of "plastic and enameled tin"—cold, dead surfaces juxtaposed with the "living light" radiating from the external world. Examining this tautological inner realm, he poses a sardonic question: "These contraptions of tin and highly colored plastic—where had I seen them before? In every picture gallery that exhibits the latest in nonrepresentational art" (ibid).

Despite the apparent contradiction between collectivism and solipsism, Huxley's characterization of the "old" Romanticism is the more dramatic transformation from 1931 to 1954. In his earlier text, "old" Romanticism was merely an extreme inversion of the "new," and hence guilty of comparable crimes. While the ostensible focus was different (i.e., collectivism usurped the place of individualism), the orientation of "old" Romanticism was just another anthropocentric abstraction. But in *Doors*, Huxley eulogizes Romantic poetry without qualification, referencing the older tradition as an ideal alternative to the pettiness embodied in modern literature. In particular, Huxley cites Blake and Wordsworth as two exemplars of this alternative orientation. He describes Wordsworth's poetry as "a contemplation...of the Dharma-

Body as hedge,” thematizing the presence of divinity in mundane elements of the natural environment, while Blake’s poetry testifies to “visions...of the ‘wonderful originals’ within the mind” (14).

After the mescaline runs its neurological course, Huxley laments that “I had returned to that reassuring but profoundly unsatisfactory state known as ‘being in one’s right mind’” (19). This is a far cry from the glorification of “one’s right mind” in *Art of Seeing*, where normal waking consciousness is lionized for its precision and efficacy.

Although Huxley had long sought out enlightenment from books, he admits that language can never be wholly adequate to communicating such experiences. At best, language can “prepare the mind” for immediate insights, which the mind must ultimately achieve on its own (8). However expressive symbols may be, they “can never be the things they stand for” (ibid). In spite of this impasse, Huxley was persistent in his search—even obsessively so. For one so captivated by the notion of mystical experience, his introduction to mescaline was galvanizing. Huxley envisioned a role for mescaline in re-educating the world’s intellectuals, whose capabilities and creativity had so far been stunted by a slavish obsession with words and notions. He describes these intellectuals as he earlier described the victims of ophthalmologists in *An Art of Seeing*: constitutionally atrophied due to an overreliance on extrinsic lenses. Just as the ophthalmologists ignored alternative exercises for improving vision, Huxley laments that educators choose to ignore potential methods “for widening the range and increasing the acuity of human perceptions” and for heightening creativity (23). He views the relative absence of academic interest in mescaline—in spite of seventy years of promising scientific testimony—as itself symptomatic of the ills that mescaline is capable of curing:

How many philosophers, how many theologians, how many professional educators have had the curiosity to open this Door in the Wall? The answer, for all practical purposes, is, None. In a world where education is predominantly verbal, highly educated people find it all but impossible to pay serious attention to anything but words and notions. (ibid)

Huxley bitingly refers to the cancerous proliferation of doctorates squabbling over the “all-important problem” of “Who influenced whom to say what when?” (ibid). When it comes to the “non-verbal humanities”—the art of investigating how we may become “more perceptive, more intensely aware of inward and outward reality”—respectable academics at respectable universities would never deign to pursue them (ibid).

Quoting Blake, Huxley demonstrates the enduring nature of this prejudice: “I have always found...that Angels have the vanity to speak of themselves as the only wise. This they do with a confident insolence sprouting from systematic reasoning” (ibid). Huxley associates Blake’s “Angels” with his contemporary intellectuals, like the “behaviorists” who jettisoned the study of subjective experience. By relying on manmade tools to argue for the unreality of anything outside the purview of those tools, such intellectuals foreclose the possibility of other kinds of knowing. Huxley hopes that by experiencing reality beyond the filter of conceptual paradigms, such “Angels” might abandon their dogmatic self-assurance and overreliance on only one set of tools:

Under a...less exclusively verbal system of education than ours, every Angel (in Blake’s sense of that word) would be permitted as a sabbatical treat, would be urged and even, if necessary, compelled to take an occasional trip through some chemical Door in the Wall into the world of transcendental experience. ... In either case the Angel might lose a little of the confident insolence sprouting from systematic reasoning and the consciousness of having read all the books. (24)

Rather than escapism, Huxley envisioned the intellectual’s “mescaline sabbatical” according to a specific, utilitarian purpose:

[T]he man who comes back through the Door in the Wall will never be quite the same as the man who went out. He will be wiser but less cocksure, happier but less self-satisfied, humbler in acknowledging his ignorance yet better equipped to understand the relationship of words to things, of systematic reasoning to the unfathomable Mystery which it tries, forever vainly, to comprehend. (ibid)

### **A New Old Romanticism: Reading Wordsworth through the “Door in the Wall”**

It is clear that Huxley was forever changed by the experience. By his own account, mescaline became an inflection point in his biography that signaled a fundamental transformation in his thinking. He attests that “until this morning I had known contemplation [only] in its humbler, its more ordinary forms” (12). Under the influence of mescaline, Huxley experienced—for the first time—the possibility of experiencing a world without concepts (Pendell 109). For a hyper-conceptual intellectual of Huxley’s stature, mescaline was nothing short of revelatory. As Osmond observed, mescaline “slowly etched away the patina of his conceptual thinking; the doors of perception was cleansed, and Aldous perceived things with less interference from his enormous rationalizing brain” (Huxley, *Moksha* 36).

Even those around Huxley noticed a change in his personality after taking mescaline. As Huxley’s first wife Maria lay dying in February 1955, Gerald Heard was astonished by his relative composure. Huxley had relied on Maria as his “surrogate eyes...cook, typist, secretary, [and] chauffeur” for thirty years, and Huxley’s friends worried about how he would cope in her absence. Heard felt that the calmness of Huxley’s grief was “wholly attributable...to the wisdom he had gained from mescaline” (Stevens 51).

The fact of this fundamental change offers a new way of understanding Huxley’s relationship to William Blake in particular, and to Romanticism more generally. In his chapter on “Huxley and Blake: The Meeting of the Parallels,” published in Jerome Meckier’s 2011 edited collection on Huxley’s mysticism, Christophe Bode attempts to debunk the critical commonplace that Blake is “one of Huxley’s chief witnesses” for a mystical worldview. Despite the prevalence of this association, Bode is unconvinced by the bibliographic evidence:

My paperback edition of Huxley’s *The Perennial Philosophy* (1946) has a William Blake painting, *Jacob’s Ladder*, on its cover. Yet when I consult the index of Huxley’s most important book on mysticism, I find only one entry for Blake, W.: one mention only in almost 400 pages.<sup>35</sup> And when Huxley volunteered to give a reading list of the most important documents of Western mysticism in Christopher

---

<sup>35</sup> Bode notes that Huxley’s lone reference to Blake in *The Perennial Philosophy* is the same line that he borrows for the title of *Doors*, only this time misquoted: “If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would be seen as it is, infinite” (qtd. in Bode 133).

Isherwood's *Vedanta for the Western World*, we look in vain for the name of the "born visionary;" William Blake. (Bode 124)

But based on the evidence assembled in this chapter, it is unsurprising that Blake is not a major player in either *The Perennial Philosophy* or the edited volume *Vedanta for the Western World*, which was first published in 1945. Rather than proof of widespread critical oversight, Blake's absence from these early texts lends support to my argument that Huxley only came to fully appreciate Blake's mysticism as a result of his mescaline experience in 1953.

Bode's grievances with Huxley's uses of Blake in *Doors* are twofold: that Huxley reveals his miscomprehension of Blake by even attempting to quote him, since Blake's writings resist any attempt at quotation; and that Huxley's materialistic reductionism of mysticism is anathema to Blake's actual views. On the first point, Bode insists that Blake's poetry—as a genre of "mystical text"—conveys meaning performatively and in context. The "meaning" of Blake's poetry is not contained in his words, since the words "necessarily" gesture to truths lying beyond the reach of their literal denotations. Bode concludes of Blake, "It is therefore most dangerous to 'quote' him" (137). But Huxley never actually relies on a Blake quotation as "proof" for his propositions. If he viewed Blake's poetry as offering such rigid proofs, his interpretations of Blake should not have metamorphosed over time.

On the second objection, Bode insists that Blake "would have been shocked to learn that visionary experiences could be reduced to changes in our body chemistry. That was exactly the kind of view of reality that he was fighting against" (136). But even a cursory reading of *Doors* reveals that Huxley never actually "reduces" mystical experiences to mere biochemistry. In fact, his non-dual insight that "All is in all" precludes any tidy separation of the spiritual from the corporeal. *Doors* is an explicit rejoinder to reductionism's view of consciousness as an epiphenomenon of the brain and its material constituents.

R.S. Deese points out that Huxley had long expressed interest in the biological correlates of mystical experience. He wrote in *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936) that "a rapture is always

a rapture, whatever it's due to. Whether it's champagne or saying OM, or squinting at your nose, or looking at a crucifix, or making love...we are laid asleep in body, and become a living soul" (qtd. in Deese, *Amphibians* 97).<sup>36</sup> The notion that a change in physiology could trigger an ecstatic state of consciousness was informed by Huxley's early interest in the writings of Henry Bergson and of William James's descriptions of nitrous oxide experiences (79).<sup>37</sup>

Huxley's reconceptualization of Romanticism is predicated on changes to his perception of nature under the influence of mescaline. We recall that in "Wordsworth in the Tropics," Huxley characterizes nature as fundamentally alien and "bottomlessly strange." Since nature is radically separate from humanity and inhospitable to it, any attempt to merge with nature is illusory and misguided by definition. But mescaline's dissolution of conceptual boundaries complicates this tidy separation between self and nature. By *Doors of Perception*, Huxley embraces the positive potentials of merging individual consciousness with the natural world:

When we feel ourselves to be sole heirs of the universe, when 'the sea flows in our veins...and the stars are our jewels,' when all things are perceived as infinite and holy, what motive can we have for covetousness or self-assertion, for the pursuit of power or the drearier forms of pleasure? (Huxley, *Doors* 13)

In a 1959 letter to Thomas Merton, Huxley describes mescaline in terms of its ability to transfigure the outer world "so that it is seen as the young Wordsworth saw it and later described it in the 'Ode on the Intimations of Immortality in Childhood': a universe of inconceivable beauty in which all things are full of life and charged with an obscure but immensely important meaning" (Huxley, *Letters* 863).<sup>38</sup> Completely absent from this earnest

---

<sup>36</sup> Although Deese does not mention this, Huxley's quotation is a direct reference to Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" (1798): "we are laid asleep / In body, and become a living soul" (Wordsworth, "Lines" 45-6).

<sup>37</sup> Deese cites Richard Bucke, "cosmic consciousness" philosopher, as an additional influence (Deese 97).

<sup>38</sup> Due to this notion of mescaline's power to clear away the accumulated detritus of limiting concepts and perceptual restrictions, Huxley writes to Osmond in 1954 that the pair should write a collaborative play in order to "finance your research and our second childhood" (Huxley, *Letters* 712).

reference are the accusations of irresponsibility, naiveté, and escapism that characterized Huxley's earlier allusions to Wordsworth's poetry.

Huxley describes his visionary encounter with the bamboo chair as being “[l]ike Wordsworth's daffodils”—“a gift, beyond price, of a new direct insight into the very Nature of Things” (Huxley, *Doors* 8). Rather than representing the fetishization of illusory projections, Huxley here cites Wordsworth to illustrate the mescaline's sensation of “super-reality”—a “realer than real,” heightened perception of inner and outer worlds. In a 1955 letter to Osmond, Huxley categorizes “visionary” states of consciousness based on whether they possess such a quality of super-reality or, instead, a contrasting sense of unreality. On the side of unreality, he lists epileptic fits and electrode probe stimulations, whereas super-reality characterizes mescaline visions and “the visions of a Blake or an AE” alike (Huxley, *Letters* 766). Huxley suggests that rather than “escaping” from the real world, mescaline enhances one's awareness of reality.<sup>39</sup>

### **Contra Behaviorism**

Huxley explicitly situated *The Doors of Perception* as a counterforce to a dominant trend in professional psychology. Behaviorism insisted that science could only investigate observable behavior, denying the possibility of discussing subjective mental processes. At its most extreme, it even denied the existence of such mental processes altogether.<sup>40</sup> John Watson, who

---

<sup>39</sup> The scope of Huxley's transformed view of nature is evident in his impact on environmentalism and the Deep Ecology movement. Where Huxley had scoffed at associations between nature and spirituality in his youth, he would later serve as a poster child for environmentalist movements that celebrated such associations. As R.S. Deese observes, Bill Deval and George Sessions list Huxley first among the philosophical influences on the Deep Ecology movement, and historian Thomas R. Dunlap highlights Huxley's seminal influence on “succeeding generations of postwar environmentalists” (Deese 114).

<sup>40</sup> Abraham Edel illustrates behaviorism's approach to psychology: “[O]bservable behavior...may be described in the ordinary language of things and activities, e.g., ‘there is a loud noise,’ ‘the baby begins to cry,’ and so on. What the more extreme behaviorists rule out is such mentalistic expressions as ‘I am thinking,’ ‘I am feeling angry.’ In each case they would insist upon the description of behavior, the report of observable activity, such as ‘X is pacing up and down the room frowning; there are discoverable incipient movements of the larynx,’ and ‘X's blood-pressure has gone up, his face reddens’” (Edel 162).

introduced behaviorism to the United States in the early twentieth century, argued definitively that “[t]he time has come when psychology must discard all reference to consciousness ... its sole task is the prediction and control of behavior” (qtd. in Wallace 170). For scientific purposes, in other words, consciousness does not exist.

Behaviorism appealed to psychologists for its rigorous methodology, offering the approximation of a “hard” science at a time when psychology was vying for legitimacy. This consistency allowed it to eclipse the preceding vogue for “introspectionism,” which attempted to understand mental states on the basis of introspective reports (Crumley 35). The magnitude of behaviorism’s ascendancy is evident in the discipline’s leading reference books, which avoided the terms “introspection” and “consciousness” until the late 1980s (Freeman 13).

The mechanistic philosophy underlying “rigid” behaviorism depicts man as nothing more than a complex machine. Like Newton’s clockwork universe, such a concept enables the view that human behavior is subject to definable and static physical laws. Behaviorists suggested that by uncovering these laws, human behavior could be precisely predicted and controlled, just as chemistry aspired to the prediction and control of chemical reactions (14). Huxley’s *Brave New World* had thematized the dystopian possibilities raised by this doctrine, constructing a world wherein “grade C” men are born and raised to fill an obedient working class.<sup>41</sup> Making use of the “laws” of human behavior, grade C men are conditioned to possess aversions to the usual pleasures of life, as when grade C children are “shown beautiful flowers and given electric shocks as they reach for them” (Edel 166). These workers are trained to find pleasure only in “soma,” a psychoactive drug whose combination of euphoric, sedative, and hallucinogenic effects help to maintain a “doped and docile” population (Pinchbeck 125).

---

<sup>41</sup> *Brave New World* is a natural extension of John Watson’s more extreme claims: “Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I’ll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select—doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and, yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors” (Watson 104).

Three decades after the publication of *Brave New World*, Huxley's final novel, *Island* (1962), appeared as its "utopian counterweight." Fictitiously located near the coast of India, the island's civilization cultivates self-actualization and awareness through the application of principles "drawn from psychology, Yoga, and psychopharmacology" (Goldberg 96). Among this assemblage of educational tools is the drug called "moksha," taken from the Sanskrit word for liberation. Whereas soma is an "opiate for the masses" that reinforces a repressive social order, moksha increases self-knowledge by facilitating explorations of the mind beyond concepts (Borgonovi 74). Reflecting on his conversations with Huxley, Osmond would describe moksha's function in *Island* as "helping people prepare themselves to change in a changing world, teaching them how to learn to change for the better and how to prepare themselves for dying" (Huxley, *Moksha* 38).

The transition from soma to moksha is symptomatic of mescaline's influence on Huxley's views. In 1952—just one year before his introduction to mescaline—Huxley presented a bleak image of drugs by disparaging their potential to generate meaningful insights. In an epilogue to his non-fiction novel *The Devils of Loudun*, Huxley describes the self-transcendence offered by mind-altering chemicals as enslavement rather than liberation. Although he acknowledges that drugs may reveal glimpses of a reality beyond the limited (and limiting) ego, he insists that "these occasional flashes of revelation are bought at an enormous price":

For the drug-taker, the moment of spiritual awareness (if it comes at all) gives place very soon to subhuman stupor, frenzy or hallucination, followed by dismal hangovers and, in the long run, by a permanent and fatal impairment of bodily health and mental power. Very occasionally a single "anesthetic revelation" may act, like any other theophany, to incite its recipient to an effort of self-transformation and upward self-transcendence. But the fact that such a thing sometimes happens can never justify the employment of chemical methods of self-transcendence. This is a descending road and most of those who take it will come to a state of degradation, where periods of subhuman ecstasy alternate with periods of conscious selfhood so wretched that any escape, even if it be into the slow suicide of drug addiction, will seem preferable to being a person. (Huxley, *Moksha* 25)

By the time of his 1957 letter to Philip B. Smith, Huxley's position has metamorphosed dramatically. On the topic of mescaline, LSD, and mushrooms, Huxley states his belief that psychedelic experiences "really tell us something about the nature of the universe, that they are valuable in themselves and, above all, valuable when incorporated into our world-picture and acted upon [in] normal life" (129). Approaching psychedelic use pragmatically, Huxley notes that the validity of any mystical experience depends on its tangible effects on normal life—its ability, that is, to promote qualities like self-awareness and compassion towards all beings. Throughout *Doors* and his post-mescaline correspondence, Huxley emphasizes the non-addictive, non-harmful nature of mescaline, which conflicts with his earlier description of drugs as inherently dangerous and destructive. For a healthy individual, he insists repeatedly that "mescaline is completely innocuous...leaving no hangover and consequently no craving for a renewal of the dose" (Huxley, *Doors* 16).<sup>42</sup>

Although Huxley's epilogue insists that drugs will only ever inspire a statistically insignificant minority of users towards meaningful spiritual growth, his own adventures with mescaline lead him to backpedal in regard to the classic psychedelics. In a 1959 letter to Thomas Merton, he notes that the vast majority of mescaline users have a positive experience, and that all users agree the experience is "profoundly significant," even among those with negative reactions. Descriptions of mescaline frequently include superlative statements like "that is the most wonderful experience I have ever had" and "I feel that my life will never be quite the same again" (Huxley, *Letters* 863). Supporting the lack of any scientific evidence that mescaline is habit-forming, Huxley insists that mescaline effects "a feeling...that the experience is so *transcendently important* that it is in no circumstances a thing to be entered upon light-heartedly or for enjoyment" (ibid).

Recognizing the transformational power of his own experiences, Huxley envisions integrating psychedelics within a formal educational program capable of curing society's gravest

---

<sup>42</sup> On the non-addictive nature of psychedelic drugs, also see Huxley, *Letters*, 863.

ills. Despite decades of intellectual study, he insists that psychedelics uniquely “helped me to understand many of the obscure utterances to be found in the writings of mystics,” which he had anthologized—though not yet comprehended—in *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945). He describes the gestalt understanding arising from psychedelic states as not intellectual or conceptual, but rather “an understanding with the entire organism” (Huxley, *Moksha* 159). Translating into concepts after the fact, Huxley lists the aspects of his psychedelic experiences with the greatest lasting impact: “A transcendence of the subject-object relationship. A transcendence of the fear of death. A sense of solidarity with the world and its spiritual principle and the conviction that, in spite of pain, evil and all the rest, everything is somehow all right. ... [T]he affirmation that God is Love” (158-9). As in his 1952 epilogue, he emphasizes that these drug-induced experiences are always transient; but unlike the earlier text’s description of drug use descending inevitably into squalor and wretchedness, he insists memories of mescaline “continue to exercise a profound effect upon one’s mind” long after the chemical has run its course (159).

In the context of mescaline, Huxley conceives of the possibility that psychedelics may operate as protectants against the tightening grip of conceptual reification. Citing Wordsworth, Huxley suggests that through a psychedelic education, “the growing child may be taught to preserve his ‘intimations of immortality’ into adult life” (30). Conventional education—against which Huxley rails—performs the opposite function, accelerating the growth of the reducing valve: “Under the current dispensation the vast majority of individuals lose, in the course of education, all the openness to inspiration, all the capacity to be aware of other things than those enumerated in the Sears-Roebuck catalogue which constitutes the conventionally ‘real’ world” (ibid). Here again, Huxley emphasizes psychedelics’ ability to fill in “intellectual postulates” with concrete significance through direct experience:

In such a system of education it may be that mescaline or some other chemical substance may play a part by making it possible for young people to ‘taste and see’ what they have learned about at second hand, or directly but at a lower level

of intensity, in the writings of the religious, or the works of poets, painters and musicians. (ibid)

Although the psychedelics work at the level of the individual, Huxley believes their anti-reification properties could affect culture at the macroscale, potentially offering “a cure or preventative of this great modern plague” (43).

Despite their temporary duration, Huxley says that “inchoate revivals” of psychedelic states of consciousness can occur during meditation, suggesting a homology with Wordsworth’s “meditations in tranquility”:

Those who desire to make use of this ‘gratuitous grace’, to cooperate with it, tend to do so, not by repeating the experiment at frequent intervals, but by trying to open themselves up, in a state of alert passivity, to the transcendent ‘isness’, to use Eckhart’s phrase, which they have known and, in some sort, *been*. (Huxley, *Letters* 863)

Huxley’s reference to “alert passivity” suggests the connection to Wordsworth is not merely incidental. In a 1963 letter praising Timothy Leary for conceiving of a concretized, brick-and-mortar psychedelic academy, Huxley recommends as its mission “the problem of fruitfully relating what Wordsworth calls ‘wise passiveness’ to wise activity—receptivity and immediate experience to concept-making and the projection upon experience of intelligible order” (955).<sup>43</sup> As Huxley was well aware, the all-encompassing absorption involved in a mystical-type psychedelic experience does not lend itself to ready processing and integration. Just as the poet is incapable of writing poetry in the throes of a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling,” psychonauts on LSD or mescaline are transfixed “in a state of intenser, more significant experience—a state in which they are apt to become extremely impatient with the learned foolery of statistics, repeated experiments, scientific precautions, questions by investigators, etc.” Since the psychonaut can only retroactively narrativize the lasting significance of his experience and implement its lessons, Huxley compares the psychedelic researcher’s

---

<sup>43</sup> Huxley offers a similar to description to Osmond in 1953: “The basic problem of education is, How to make the best use of both worlds—the world of biological utility and common sense, and the world of unlimited experience underlying it” (Huxley, *Moksha* 29).

interventions to asking someone in the midst of making love to answer a questionnaire (Huxley, *Moksha* 133).<sup>44</sup> The “gratuitous graces” offered by psychedelics are thus “neither necessary nor sufficient for salvation”: “Ethical and cognitive effort is needed if the experiencer is to go forward from his one-shot experience to permanent enlightenment” (Huxley, *Letters* 874).

### **Huxley’s Psychedelic Afterlives**

Timothy Leary was profoundly influenced by *Doors*, which he read for the first time upon returning to Harvard from Mexico in 1960. Prior to this trip, Leary resisted suggestions about the potentials of psychedelic compounds for psychological research. He dismissed the testimony of George Litwin, a favored graduate student at Harvard’s Center for Personality Research, who attested to mescaline’s extensive influence on consciousness and perception: “George had spent several months running mescaline experiments the year before and used to drop into my office to tell me about the visions and insights and perceptual fireworks. I used to listen politely but not caring. I had no concepts, no mental hooks on which to hang his words” (Leary, *Priest* 62).<sup>45</sup> Leary’s indifference melted away upon his first dalliance with the mushrooms. George responded to this newfound enthusiasm by lending him two slender volumes, *Doors of Perception* and *Heaven and Hell*, which Leary read with avidity: “That night I read Huxley. And then I read those two books again. And again. It was all there. All my vision. And more too.

---

<sup>44</sup> Huxley elaborates on this idea in a 1959 letter to Thomas Merton: “Those who desire to make use of this ‘gratuitous grace’, to cooperate with it, tend to do so, not by repeating the experiment at frequent intervals, but by trying to open themselves up, in a state of alert passivity, to the transcendent ‘isness’, to use Eckhart’s phrase, which they have known and, in some sort, *been*” (Huxley, *Letters* 864).

<sup>45</sup> As an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, Litwin had studied under the anthropologist David Eberle, a “leading expert on the use of peyote by Navajo Indians in the Southwest” (Greenfield 115). Eberle would have frowned upon Leary’s eventual research program, since he believed Western culture lacked the necessary tools for successfully integrating psychedelic experiences. Peyote, he insisted, had “no place in our culture or our mythology. We don’t have anything that enables us to explain or deal with this and therefore I don’t think it is something we can introduce” (qtd. in Greenfield 115).

Huxley had taken mescaline in a garden and shucked off the mind and awakened to eternity” (65).

Just one week after this revelation, Leary learned that Huxley was spending that fall lecturing at the nearby Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Interpreting this as an auspicious omen, Leary wrote to him with an invitation to collaborate on research plans. The pair quickly discovered that they held compatible views about the state of professional psychology:

We would avoid the behaviorist approach to others’ awareness. Avoid labeling or depersonalizing the subject. We should not impose our own jargon or our own experimental games on others. We were not out to discover new laws, which is to say, to discover the redundant implications of our own premises. We were not to be limited by the pathological point of view. We were not to interpret ecstasy as mania, or calm serenity as catatonia; we were not to diagnose Buddha as a detached schizoid; nor Christ as an exhibitionistic masochist; nor the mystic experience as a symptom; nor the visionary state as a model psychosis. Aldous Huxley chuckling away with compassionate humor at human folly. And with such erudition! Moving back and forth in history, quoting the mystics. Wordsworth. (65-6)

The research project envisioned by the psychonautic pair departed from the dictates of behaviorist psychology. Rather than privileging the experimenter’s preconceptions and external observations,<sup>46</sup> Leary and Huxley outlined a research protocol that centered around the experiencer’s introspective observations:

From these meetings grew the design for a naturalistic pilot study, in which the subjects would be treated like astronauts—carefully prepared, briefed with all available facts, and then expected to run their own spacecraft, make their own observations, and report back to ground control. Our subjects were not passive patients but hero-explorers. (67)

The shared understanding between Huxley and Leary would ultimately only extend so far. Without mentioning Leary by name, Osmond summarized the tension between them: “In our

---

<sup>46</sup> Huxley elaborates on this view in a 1955 letter to Humphry Osmond: “the opening of the door by mescaline or LSD is too precious an opportunity, too high a privilege to be neglected for the sake of experimentation. There must be experimentation, of course; but it would be wrong if there were nothing else. There is a point where the director must stop directing and leave himself and the other participants to do what they want, or rather what the Unknown Quantity which has taken their place wants to do. Direction can come only, or mainly, from accumulated notional memories of past experience, from the conceptually known; but the highest mystical awareness comes only when there is freedom from the known, when there is no purpose in view, however intrinsically excellent, but pure openness” (Huxley, *Letters* 772).

work with psychedelics...Aldous advocated a cautious boldness, advising the explorers to do good stealthily, and to avoid publicity. Unfortunately his counsel was not always taken” (qtd. in Huxley, *Moksha* 37).<sup>47</sup>

As scientists revive interest in psychedelic research today, the importance of developing methodologies for generating and interpreting introspective reports is paramount. The history of translating psychedelic experiences into language can provide insights into this enduring project, which exists at the interstices of science and poetics.

---

<sup>47</sup> In a 1962 letter to Osmond, Huxley advocates for avoiding publicity: “the only attitude for a researcher in this ticklish field is that of an anthropologist living in the midst of a tribe of potentially dangerous savages. Go about your business quietly, don’t break the taboos or criticize the locally accepted dogmas. Be polite and friendly—and get on with the job. If you leave them alone, they will probably leave you alone” (Huxley, *Letters* 945).