

TWO PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCES:

A FUNDAMENTAL EXPERIMENT

René Daumal

THE SIMPLE FACT of the matter is beyond telling. In the eighteen years since it happened, I have often tried to put it into words. Now, once and for all, I should like to employ every resource of language I know in giving an account of at least the outward and inward circumstances. This 'fact' consists in a certainty I acquired by accident at the age of sixteen or seventeen; ever since then the memory of it has directed the best part of me toward seeking a means of finding it again, and for good.

My memories of childhood and adolescence are deeply marked by a series of attempts to experience the beyond and those random attempts brought me to the ultimate experiment — the fundamental experience of which I speak. At about the age of six, having been taught no kind of religious belief whatsoever, I struck up against the stark problem of death. I passed some atrocious nights, feeling my stomach clawed to shreds and my breathing half throttled by the anguish of nothingness, the 'no more of anything'. One night when it was about eleven, relaxing my entire body, I calmed the terror and revulsion of my organism before the unknown, and a new feeling came alive in me of hope, and a foretaste of the imperishable. But I wanted more, I wanted a certainty. At fifteen or sixteen I began my experiments, a search without direction or system. Finding no way to experiment directly on death — on my death — I tried to study my sleep, assuming an analogy between the two. By various devices I attempted to enter sleep in a waking state. The undertaking is not so utterly absurd as it sounds, but in certain respects it is perilous. I could not go very far with it; my own organism gave me some serious warnings of the risks I was running. One day, however, I decided to tackle the problem of death itself. I would put my body

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into a state approaching as close as possible that of physiological death, and still concentrate all my attention on remaining conscious and registering everything that might take place. I had in my possession some carbon tetrachloride, which I used to kill beetles for my collection. Knowing this substance belongs to the same chemical family as chloroform (it is even more toxic), I thought I could regulate its action very simply and easily: the moment I began to lose consciousness, my hand would fall from my nostrils carrying with it the handkerchief moistened with the volatile fluid. Later on I repeated the experiment in the presence of friends, who could have given me help had I needed it. The result was always exactly the same; that is, it exceeded and even overwhelmed my expectations by bursting the limits of the possible and by projecting me brutally into another world.

First came the ordinary phenomena of asphyxiation: arterial palpitation, buzzings, sounds of heavy pumping in the temples, painful repercussions from the tiniest exterior noises, flickering lights. Then, the distinct feeling: 'This is getting serious. The game is up,' followed by a swift recapitulation of my life up to that moment. If I felt any slight anxiety, it remained indistinguishable from a bodily discomfort that did not affect my mind. And my mind kept repeating to itself: 'Careful, don't doze off. This is just the time to keep your eyes open.' The luminous spots that danced in front of my eyes soon filled the whole of space, which echoed with the beat of my blood — sound and light overflowing space and fusing in a single rhythm. By this time I was no longer capable of speech, even of interior speech; my mind travelled too rapidly to carry any words along with it. I realized, in a sudden illumination, that I still had control of the hand which held the handkerchief, that I still accurately perceived the position of my body, and that I could hear and understand words uttered nearby — but that objects, words, and meanings of words had lost any significance whatsoever. It was a little like having repeated a word over and over until it shrivels and dies in your mouth: you still know what the word 'table' means, for instance, you could use it correctly, but it no longer truly evokes its object. In the same way everything that made up 'the world' for me in my ordinary state was still there, but I felt as if it had been drained of its substance. It was nothing more than a phantasmagoria — empty, absurd, clearly outlined, and necessary all at once. This 'world' lost all reality because I had abruptly entered another world, infinitely more real, an instantaneous and intense world of eternity, a concentrated flame of reality and evidence into which I had cast

myself like a butterfly drawn to a lighted candle. Then, at that moment, comes the *certainty*; speech must now be content to wheel in circles around the bare fact.

Certainty of what? Words are heavy and slow, words are too shapeless or too rigid. With these wretched words I can put together only approximate statements, whereas *my certainty* is for me the archetype of precision. In my ordinary state of mind, all that remains thinkable and formulable of this experiment reduces to one affirmation on which I would stake my life: I feel the certainty of the existence of *something else*, a beyond, another world, or another form of knowledge. In the moment just described, I knew directly, I experienced that beyond in its very reality. It is important to repeat that in that new state I perceived and perfectly comprehended the ordinary state of being, the latter being contained within the former, as waking consciousness contains our unconscious dreams, and not the reverse. This last irreversible relation proves the superiority (in the scale of reality or consciousness) of the first state over the second. I told myself clearly: in a little while I shall return to the so-called 'normal state', and perhaps the memory of this fearful revelation will cloud over; but it is in this moment that I see the truth. All this came to me without words; meanwhile I was pierced by an even more commanding thought. With a swiftness approaching the instantaneous, it thought itself so to speak in my very substance: for all eternity I was trapped, hurled faster and faster toward ever-imminent annihilation through the terrible mechanism of the Law that rejected me. 'That's what it is. So that's what it is.' My mind found no other reaction. Under the threat of something *worse*, I had to follow the movement. It took a tremendous effort, which became more and more difficult, but I was *obliged* to make that effort, until the moment when, letting go, I doubtless fell into a brief spell of unconsciousness. My hand dropped the handkerchief, I breathed air, and for the rest of the day I remained dazed and stupefied — with a violent headache.

I shall now try to bring that wordless *certainty* into focus by means of images and concepts. To begin with, it must be understood that this certainty exists on a *higher level of significance* than that of our usual thoughts. We are accustomed to use images or illustrations to signify concepts; for example, a drawing of a circle to represent the concept of a circle. In the state I am describing the concept itself is no longer the final term, the thing signified; the concept — or idea in the usual sense of the word — is itself the sign of something higher. Let me recall that at the moment when the *certainty* revealed itself, my ordinary intellectual mechanisms continued to function; images took shape, ideas and judgements formed in my mind, but free

from the weight and tangle of words. This last condition accelerated these operations to the speed of simultaneousness that they often have in moments of great danger — as when one falls while mountain-climbing, for example.

Thus, the images and concepts I am going to describe were present at the time of the experiment on a level of reality intermediate between the appearance of our everyday 'exterior world' and the *certainty* itself. A few of these images and concepts, however, grew out of my having written down, later, a partially coherent account. Such an account was necessary, for as soon as I wanted to relate the experience to anyone, and first of all to myself, I had to use words, and therefore to develop certain implicit aspects of these images and concepts.

Even though the two occurred simultaneously, I shall start with the images. They were both visual and auditory. In the first case, they took the form of what seemed a veil or screen of luminous spots, a veil more real than the ordinary 'world,' which I could still make out behind it. A circle, half red and half black, inscribed itself in a triangle colored in the same fashion, with the red half-circle against the black segment of triangle, and vice versa. And all space was endlessly divided thus into circles and triangles inscribed one within another, combining and moving in harmony, and changing into one another in a geometrically inconceivable manner that could not be reproduced in ordinary reality. A sound accompanied this luminous movement, and I suddenly realized it was I who was making it. In fact I virtually *was* that sound; I sustained my existence by emitting it. The sound consisted of a chant or formula, which I had to repeat faster and faster in order to 'follow the movement.' That formula (I give the facts with no attempt to disguise their absurdity) ran something like this: 'Tem gwef tem gwef dr rr rr,' with an accent on the second 'gwef' and with the last syllable blending back into the first; it gave an unceasing pulse to the rhythm, which was, as I have said, that of my very being. I knew that as soon as it began going too fast for me to follow, the unnamable and frightful thing would occur. In fact it was always *infinitely close* to happening, and infinitely remote . . . that is all I can say.

The concepts revolve around a central idea of *identity*: everything is perpetually one and the same. They took the form of spatial, temporal, and numerical diagrams — diagrams that were present at the time but whose separation into these categories naturally came later along with the verbal description.

The space in which these shapes arose was not Euclidean, for it was so constructed that any indefinite extension of a point returned

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to itself. That is, I believe, what mathematicians call 'curved space.' Transposed into a Euclidean scheme, the movement could be described as follows. Imagine an immense circle whose circumference reaches the infinite and which is perfect and unbroken *except for one point*; subsequently this point expands into a circle that grows indefinitely, extends its circumference to infinity and merges with the original circle, perfect, pure and unbroken *except for one point*, which expands into a circle . . . and so on unceasingly, and in fact instantaneously, for at each instant the circumference, enlarged to infinity, reappears simultaneously as a *point*; not a central point, that would be too perfect; but an eccentric point that represents at the same time the nothingness of my existence and the disequilibrium that my existence, by its particularity, introduces into the immense circle of the All — the All which perpetually *obliterates me*, reasserting its undiminished integrity. For it is I alone who am *diminished*.

In respect to time, the scheme of things is perfectly analogous. This movement of an indefinite expansion returning to its origin takes place as duration (a 'curved' duration) as well as space: the last movement is forever identical with the first, it all vibrates simultaneously in an instant, and only the necessity of representing all this in our ordinary 'time' obliges me to speak of an infinite *repetition*. What I see I have always seen and shall always see, again and again; everything recommences in identical fashion at each instant, as if the total nullity of my particular existence within the unbroken substance of the Immobile were the cause of a cancerous proliferation of instants.

In respect to *number*, the indefinite multiplication of points, circles, and triangles dissolves the same way, instantaneously, into a regenerated Unity, perfect *except for me*; and this *except for me*, throwing the unity of the All into disequilibrium, engenders an indefinite and instantaneous multiplication, which immediately merges with the uttermost limit, with a regenerated Unity, perfect *except for me* . . . and everything starts all over again, always in the same place, in the same eternal instant, and without producing any true alteration in the nature of the All.

If I continued thus to try to enclose my *certainty* in any sequence of logical categories, I should be reduced to the same absurd expressions: in the category of causality, for example, cause and effect perpetually blending into one another and separating from one another, passing from one pole to the other because of the disequilibrium produced in their substantial identity by the infinitesimal hole which *I am*.

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I have said enough to make it clear that the certainty of which I speak is in equal degrees mathematical, experimental, and emotional: a *mathematical* certainty — or rather *mathematico-logical* — as one can understand indirectly in the conceptual description I have just attempted and which can be abstractly stated as follows: the identity of the existence and of the non-existence of the finite in the infinite; an *experimental* certainty, not only because it is based on direct vision (that would be observation and not necessarily experimentation), not only because the experiment can be repeated at any time, but because I ceaselessly tested the certainty in my struggle to 'follow the movement' that rejected me, a struggle in which I could only repeat the little chant I had found as my sole response; an *emotional* certainty because in the whole affair — the core of the experiment lies here — it is I who am at stake: I saw my own nothingness face to face, or rather my perpetual annihilation, total but not absolute annihilation: a mathematician will understand me when I describe it as 'asymptote.'

I insist on the triple nature of this certainty in order to anticipate three kinds of incomprehension in the reader. First, I want to keep lazy minds from falling into the illusion of understanding me when they find only a vague sense of the mystery of the beyond to correspond to my mathematical certainty. Second, I want to prevent psychologists and especially psychiatrists from treating my testimony not as testimony at all but as an interesting psychic manifestation worth studying and explaining by what they believe to be their 'psychological science.' It is in order to forestall their attempts that I have insisted on the experimental nature (and not simply the introspective experience) of my certainty. Third, at the very heart of this certainty, the cry: 'It's I, I who am at stake,' should frighten the curious who think they might like to perform the same or a similar experiment. I warn them now, it is a terrifying experience, and if they want more precise information on its dangers, they can ask me in private. I do not mean the physiological dangers (which are very great); for if, in return for accepting grave illness or infirmity, or for a considerable shortening of the span of physical life, one could attain to a *single* certainty, the price would not be too high. I am not speaking, moreover, only of the dangers of insanity or of damage to the mind, which I escaped by extraordinary good luck. The danger is far graver, comparable to what happened to Bluebeard's wife: she opens the door of the forbidden room, and the horrible spectacle sears her innermost being as with a white-hot iron. After the first experiment, in effect, I was 'unhinged' for several days,

cut adrift from what is customarily called 'the real.' Everything seemed to me an absurd phantasmagoria, no logic could convince me of anything, and, like a leaf in the wind, I was ready to obey the faintest interior or exterior impulse. This state almost involved me in irreparable 'actions' (if the word still applies,) for nothing held any importance for me any longer. I subsequently repeated the experiment several times, always with exactly the same result, or rather I always found the same moment, the same instant eternally co-existing with the illusory unfolding of my life. Having once seen the danger, however, I stopped repeating the test. Nevertheless, several years later I was given an anaesthetic for a minor operation. The identical thing happened: I confronted the same unique instant, this time, it is true, to the point of total unconsciousness.

My certainty, naturally, had no need of exterior confirmation; rather it suddenly cleared up for me the meaning of all kinds of narratives that other men have tried to make of the same revelation. I understood, in effect, that I was not the only one, not an isolated or pathological case in the cosmos. First of all, several of my friends tried the same experiment. For the most part nothing happened except the ordinary phenomena preceding narcosis. Two of them went a little further, but brought back with them only vague recollections of a profound bewilderment. One said it was like the advertisements for a certain apéritif, in which two waiters are carrying two bottles, whose labels show two waiters carrying two bottles whose labels... The other painfully searched his memory in the attempt to explain: 'Ixian, ixian i, ixian i...' It was obviously his version of 'Tem gwef tem gwef dr rr rr...' But a third friend experienced exactly the same reality that I had encountered, and we only needed to exchange a look to know we had seen the same thing. It was Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, with whom I was to edit the review, *Le Grand Jeu*; its tone of profound conviction was nothing more than the reflection of the certainty we shared. And I am convinced that this experience determined the direction his life would take as it did mine, even if somewhat differently.

Little by little I discovered in my reading accounts of the same experience, for I now held the key to these narratives and descriptions whose relation to a single and unique reality I should not previously have suspected. William James speaks of it. O. V. de L. Milosz, in his *Letter to Storge*, gives an overwhelming account of it in terms I had been using myself. The famous circle referred to by a medieval monk, and which Pascal saw (but who first saw it and spoke of it?)

ceased to be an empty allegory for me; I knew it represented a devouring vision of what I had seen also. And, beyond all this varied and partial human testimony (there is scarcely a single true poet in whose work I did not find at least a fragment of it), the confessions of the great mystics and, still more advanced, the sacred texts of certain religions, brought me an affirmation of the same reality. Sometimes I found it in its most terrifying form, as perceived by an individual of limited vision who has not raised himself to the level of such perception, who, like myself, has tried to look into the infinite through the keyhole and finds himself staring into Bluebeard's cupboard. Sometimes I encountered it in the pleasing, plentifully satisfying and intensely luminous form that is the vision of beings truly transformed, who can behold that reality face to face without being

René Daumal (1908-1944) wrote the first version of this text in his late teens. It contains one of the most rigorous and unflinching analyses of supra-conscious experience to have been written in this century. Long training in the sciences, a fluent knowledge of Sanscrit and of its religious texts, and a period of turbulent relationships with the surrealists in Paris gave Daumal the power and the honesty to treat a subject usually relegated to visionaries and faddists. He worked at once as observer, critic, and poet.

During the Second World War the editor, Jean Paulhan, asked several authors to contribute to *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade* highly personal articles on the turning point in their lives. Daumal's early narrative of crossing the threshold of consciousness, rewritten under the title of *Une Expérience fondamentale*, was one of the only texts to come in. It has been republished in his volume of collected essays, *Chaque fois que l'aube paraît* (Gallimard, 1953).

The first volume of Daumal's to appear in English is the novel, *Mount Analogue*, which Vincent Stuart brought out this autumn with an introduction by Roger Shattuck from which the poem quoted below is reprinted.

In his last letter to his wife Vera, René Daumal wrote:

'This is how I sum up for myself what I wish to convey to those who work here with me.

*I am dead because I lack desire,
I lack desire because I think I possess.
I think I possess because I do not try to give.
In trying to give, you see that you have nothing;
Seeing that you have nothing, you try to give of yourself;
Trying to give of yourself, you see that you are nothing;
Seeing you are nothing, you desire to become;
In desiring to become, you begin to live.'*

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Some persons have naturally a very wide, others a very narrow, field of consciousness. The narrow field may be represented by an unusually steep form of the wave. When by any accident the threshold lowers, in persons of this type — I speak here from direct personal experience — so that the field widens and the relations of its centre to matters usually subliminal come into view, the larger panorama perceived fills the mind with exhilaration and sense of mental power. It is a refreshing experience; and — such is now my hypothesis — we only have to suppose it to occur in an exceptionally extensive form, to give us a mystical paroxysm, if such a term be allowed.

A few remarks about the field of consciousness may be needed to give more definiteness to my hypothesis. The field is composed at all times of a mass of present sensation, in a cloud of memories, emotions, concepts, etc. Yet these ingredients, which have to be named separately, are not separate, as the conscious field contains them. Its form is that of a much-at-once, in the unity of which the sensations, memories, concepts, impulses, etc., coalesce and are dissolved. The present field as a whole came continuously out of its predecessor and will melt into its successor as continuously again, one sensation-mass passing into another sensation-mass and giving the character of a gradually changing *present* to the experience, while the memories and concepts carry time-coefficients which place whatever is present in a temporal perspective more or less vast.

When, now, the threshold falls, what comes into view is not the next mass of *sensation*; for sensation requires new physical stimulations to produce it, and no alteration of a purely mental threshold can create these. Only in case the physical stimuli were already at work subliminally, preparing the next sensation, would whatever sub-sensation was already prepared reveal itself when the threshold fell. But with the memories, concepts, and conational states, the case is different. Nobody knows exactly how far we are "marginally" conscious of these at ordinary times, or how far beyond the "margin" of our present thought transmarginal consciousness of them may exist.² There is at any rate no definite bound set between what is central and what is marginal in consciousness, and the margin itself

² Transmarginal or subliminal, the terms are synonymous. Some psychologists deny the existence of such consciousness altogether (A. H. Pierce, for example, and Münsterberg apparently). Others, *e. g.*, Bergson, make it exist and carry the whole freight of our past. Others again (as Myers) would have it extend (in the "telepathic" mode of communication) from one person's mind into another's. For the purposes of my hypothesis I have to postulate its existence; and once postulating it, I prefer not to set any definite bounds to its extent.