

THE PLANT AS AUTONOMOUS POWER

by ERNST JÜNGER, translated by STEPHEN SLATER

*The following excerpt is a chapter from ERNST JÜNGER's book *Annäherungen. Drogen und Rausch*¹ (Approaches: Drugs and Ecstatic Intoxication), first published in German in 1970. It is a wide-ranging, loosely organized account of the author's experiences with ether, alcohol, cocaine, hashish, opium, mescaline, LSD, and psilocybin, along with more speculative reflections on the nature of ecstatic intoxication. Although the book as a whole has not yet appeared in English, the immediately preceding chapter, entitled "Drogen und Rausch," was translated as "Drugs and Ecstasy" in *Myths and Symbols: Studies in Honor of Mircea Eliade*, edited by JOSEPH M. KATAGAWA & CHARLES H. LONG, pp. 327-342 (Chicago: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS 1969).*

JÜNGER is best known for *In Stahlgewittern* (In Storms of Steel), first published in 1920, which is a narrative of his experiences as a front soldier in World War I. A prolific essayist and diarist, he was a prominent figure in Germany's right-wing opposition to the Weimar Republic. Although a foe of parliamentary democracy, he was never a Nazi. During World War II he served as an officer of the German army in occupied France. His allegorical novel *Auf den Marmorklippen* (On the Marble Cliffs), published in 1939, was read by many as an attack on the Nazi regime.

For the most part, JÜNGER doesn't demonstrate or even seek to convince—he observes, muses, reflects. Therein lies one of the obstacles for the reader: his style, despite its outward form, is fundamentally aphoristic rather than essayistic. In the chapter translated here, I have not attempted to amend the original, except in one case of an obvious misprint. Otherwise, in two instances, I have indicated with the notation "[sic]" passages that are problematic for other reasons.

1. *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 11, pp. 42-45 (Stuttgart: KLETT-COTTA 1978)

When juices of vegetable and animal origin intermingle, new molecules come into being, chains and rings of the most varied sorts are formed. Only recently have we been able to look into this fine structure a bit—were we not able to, then little or nothing would really be altered. This insight, as some suppose and many suspect, probably distracts from more important things.

That some molecules nourish the body and others pass through it naturally is as little disputed as the fact that still others trigger mental effects. The American Indian distinction between everyday and divine nourishment is based on this perception, as is, in the higher cultures [sic], that between natural and sacred substances in general.

The question as to whether these effects are merely triggered or whether they "ensue" leads beyond the problems of the psychologists and the chemists. If we recognize the plant as an autonomous power which enters in order to put forth roots and flowers in us, then we distance ourselves by several degrees from the skewed perspective which imagines that spirit [*Geist*] is the monopoly of human beings and doesn't exist outside of them. A new world-picture has to follow the planetary leveling; that is the task which the next century

will take up. The nihilistic and materialistic theories are called upon to prepare the way for it; thus, their persuasive power, so incomprehensible to their opponents. Of course, even in a storm which uproots forests and tears the roofs off of houses, we don't see the pull of windless distance—the same is true of time.

We are moving here at the edge of quarrels about the Lord's Supper, which occupied minds for thousands of years, occasionally intensifying. It is a matter of bread and wine, of differences between presence and approach. When something really happens, the rough and the fine differentiations collapse. After all, they don't penetrate into the "interior of nature." We can give the widest possible scope to both "that is" and "that means." Basically, they meet in one point. Even on the evening of its establishment, the Supper "meant" something beyond its actuality, although as a high stage of approach.

Today, we are plagued by other worries. Above all, this: that on this path gods no longer steal in.





Around 1806,¹ cocaine was successfully prepared in WÖHLER's famous GÖTTIGEN INSTITUTE, one of Pandora's boxes for the world. The whole nineteenth century is interspersed with this precipitation and concentration of active principles from organic substances. It began with the extraction of morphine from the juice of the poppy by the twenty-year-old SERTÜNER, who thereby developed [*entwickelte*], or rather, unwrapped [*auswickelte*] the first alkaloid.

As is everywhere the case with the approach to the world of the Titans, concentration and radiation increase here as well. In this world, forces and substances appear which, to be sure, are obtained from nature, but are too strong, too vehement for natural powers of comprehension, so that human beings have to rely on increasing distance and greater caution, if they don't want to destroy themselves. These forces and substances are visible modifications of the entrance into a new world of spirit.

Fermentation, distillation, precipitation and finally production of radioactive matter from organic substance [*sic*]. With that, the twentieth century begins—1903, discovery of radium and polonium; 1911, NOBEL Prize to the CURIES for the purification of radium from immense amounts of *Joachimsthal* pitchblende. In 1945, the Americans handed over this *Joachimsthal* to the Russians, who extracted large amounts of fissionable material there.

Every transition is at the same time a break, every profit also a loss. When that is felt in the depths, even if not comprehended, the pain is especially great—above all, when there is still suffering due to the retreat of the gods from the Titans. Opinions on it differ like day and night. PIERRE CURIE was among the first victims of motorized transportation († 1906). LÉON BLOY gloated over the news about “the crushing of the infamous brain.”



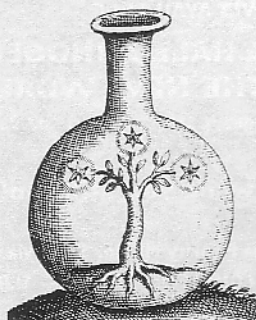
Just as GOETHE views color as one of the adventures of light, we could view ecstatic intoxication [*Rausch*] as a triumphal march of the plant through the psyche. The immense family of nightshades thus nourishes us not only physically, but also in dreams. For a study of them, systematics would have to be combined with the vision of a FECHNER. Their name, “Solanaceae,” is presumably derived from “solamen,” consolation.

Just as the plant turns toward us not only physically but also spiritually, it did this much earlier erotically, toward the animals. To see that, we of course have to recognize them as on an equal footing with us, even as the stronger partner. Among the most noteworthy phenomena, the true wonders of our planet, is the mystery of the bees, which is at the same time a mystery of flowers. The love-duet between two creatures so

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immensely far removed from one another in their form and development must have once been attested, as if by a stroke of magic, through innumerable acts of caring. The blossoms are reshaped into sex organs which adapt themselves in a wondrous fashion to completely foreign creatures—flies, hawk moths and butterflies, also sunbirds and hummingbirds. At one time, they were pollinated by the wind.

That was one of the short-circuits in the ancestral line. A Great Transition. In such images, the veil of the iris becomes transparent. Cosmogonic Eros breaks through the separations of the educated world. The thought that such a thing might be possible would never occur to us, were it not palpably confirmed in myriad ways on a walk through a spring meadow, at every flower-filled slope. Nonetheless, it was not until our era that a human being solved the mystery. Again, a rector: CHRISTIAN KONRAD SPRENGEL—*The Revealed Mystery of Nature* (1793).² What we call mysteries are, of course, only manifestations; we come closer to them in the bell-like buzzing under the blossoming linden tree. Knowledge is correspondence.



This plant, although itself hardly mobile, casts a spell over what moves. NOVALIS saw it in his hymns. Without the plant, there would be no life anywhere. All creatures that eat and breathe depend on it. One can only guess how far its spiritual power extends. The parable refers to it above all, and not without reason.

What is wakened, for instance, by tea, tobacco, opium, often just by the mere scent of flowers—this range of delights, from indeterminate dreams to anaesthesia—is more than a palette of conditions. There must be something else, something new which ensues.

Just as the plant forms sex organs in order to mate with the bees, it also weds human beings—and the contact gives us access to worlds we would never enter without it. The mystery of all addictions is concealed here, as well—and whoever would cure them has to give a spiritual equivalent. ✱

1. The original has "1860" here, which is clearly a misprint.
2. *Das entdeckte Geheimnis der Natur*.

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