

Psychonauts, submariners of the troubled seas of self

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I am reading a highly interesting book *Psychonauts: Drugs and the Making of the Modern Mind*. It is the best of a flurry of books proposing some version of the theory that drug experiences helped create the human mind. Author Mike Jay, an excellent researcher and writer, uses extensive quotes and biographic material to show how the idea of a hidden region of the mind emerged in the early 19th century and became a major influence on art and the theory of art, including literature, philosophy and even religion. Among the better known figures in Jay's account we might mention Schiller, Goethe, Byron, Humphry Davy, Moreau, de Quincey, Ludlow, Coleridge, Baudelaire, Thoreau, du Maurier, H. G. Wells, Conan Doyle, Robert Louis Stevenson, Blavatsky, Besant, Kierkegaard, Freud, Artaud.

Much of this drama was played out in arenas now widely deprecated: a variety of drugs that affected the mind (opium, hashish, nitrous oxide and other anesthetics, cocaine, peyote), hypnotism, mesmerism and other quasi-medical practices, spiritism (i.e. invocation of spiritual presences, communication with the dead, extra-sensory perception), quasi-religious and "esoteric" cults, etc. Jay's thesis is that our present-day concepts of mind, self, and world owes a major debt to these developments.

Here is a famous quote from the influential psychologist/philosopher William James, from his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Though it did not appear in print until around 1905 it evokes well the enthusiasm for such ideas throughout much of the 19th century:

Some years ago I myself made some observations on this aspect of nitrous oxide intoxication, and reported them in print. One conclusion was forced upon my mind at that time, and my impression of its truth has ever since remained unshaken. It is that our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different . . . No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.

Of all the many different "religious experiences" James writes about, this is the one he seems to take seriously.

In the early 19th, people began to directly experience and take seriously quite other realms than quotidian "consciousness." It became apparent that there was something important underneath consciousness, something about which very little was known. One word for it, "the subconscious," was coined only as late as 1889 by Pierre Janet, an enthusiastic promoter of hypnotism and spiritism. Janet was a mentor of Freud and a student of Charcot. Charcot was one of the originators of the use of hypnotism in medical practice. He is mentioned in passing, rather disparagingly, by Gurdjieff (*Beelzebub's Tales*, p. 573, chapter XXXII "Hypnotism"). Here, from Jay's book, is a drawing by Charcot from 1850, made under the influence of hashish:



This drawing conveys how deeply the idea of the subconscious was intertwined with an amoral eroticism, at least in the fevered imagination of many. Not only drugs were tarred by this brush but also hypnotism, spiritism, etc.

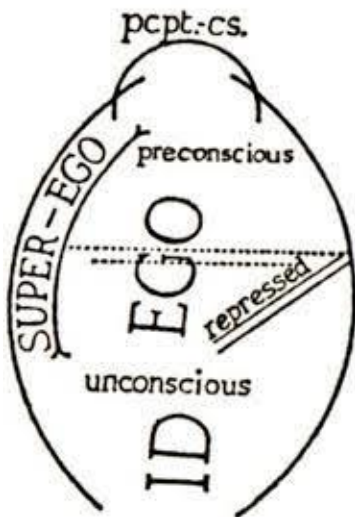
The word and the idea of the unconscious got a major boost into mainstream thought and practice by the work of Freud who developed means to compellingly demonstrate the vastness of the influence of subconscious mental processes in people’s lives. Freud had previously been instrumental in promoting cocaine use not only in medicine but also recreationally and for “self improvement”; but he later repudiated this in favor of his new practices of psychoanalysis, especially the methods of free association and the interpretation of dreams. He called dreams “the royal road into the subconscious.”

But a deeper royal road is Art, in the wide sense that includes music, theater, literature—and even practices ordinarily conceived of as belonging to different streams: religion, esotericism, science, sport. Freud’s great works can be understood as *literature* as much as medical science: it is telling that the most significant academic prize he ever received was the Goethe prize, awarded for literary excellence in the German language. His case histories and dream interpretations, in *Interpretation of Dreams* and elsewhere and his *Moses and Monotheism* are fabulous and compelling story-telling. All of the mentioned submariners of the self were artists, most of them far more radical in their art than Freud, who was born as and remained a straight-laced Viennese *Bürger*. Perhaps it was his choice of drug: cocaine, he said, increased his pleasure and his ability to work but not his imagination; whereas the opium and hashish of both European and Oriental practice were powerful stimulants to the latter, propelling the mind well beyond comprehensible boundaries.

We also need to understand the role of the superego, Freud’s “über-Ich.” As Jonah Lehrer says in *Imagine*, a recent book about artistic creativity, more of the work of the artist is in *editing* rather

than *generation* of ideas. He gives the example of Beethoven, whose manuscripts show endless revisions, initial musical ideas being ~~scratched out~~, improved upon, finally transforming into the crystalline forms of the finished score. This process is well-known to most artists. The subconscious, driven by its impulses and desires, throws up all sorts of associative ideas, which are subject to an immediate reactive censorship; but then for the experienced artist a critical evaluation in which only a few are selected as suitable for work. Drugs may free up the unconscious springs of creativity and paralyze the censor but they do not help with the editing.

Freud drew this diagram:



The ego and the superego were originally parts of the id (“das Es,” the “it”, the subconscious). They are generated from a fundamental id drive: to possess a self-identity. A properly functioning superego is not just a censor, as some think of it: it is an observer, a critic, a selector: a “critical” part of the process of art and indeed of all inner life. Perhaps this is what is called the overself, which becomes, if properly developed, the real consciousness. Is this Ouspensky’s “third point” which witnesses as from above the double-arrow (the seer ↔ the seen)?

In psychoanalysis, and in the development of an artist, the censor, that which represses the repressed (Freud’s “unconscious” proper), needs to be softened so that the locked-up vital repressed forces, the disowned impulses of the id, can resume their proper place in inner life and in the engendering of art.

Cicero’s provocative etymology for the word “re-ligio,” Latin for “religion,” which he derived (in *On the Nature of the Gods*) from Latin *re-legare*, to re-read, re-imagines such editing as a holy act. It is interesting to re-read Gurdjieff’s ideas on art as expressed in the chapter “Art” in *Beelzebub’s Tales*. Most readers read him as saying that “objective” art is created by artist who are objective because they have become able to calculate consciously the effects of their works, and have two objective aims for these works: to make them permanent in the sense that they will be transmitted unaltered to successive generations; and to make them of lasting benefit to humanity. But in his deepest treatment of a specific art—theater—the impulse for practice of the art appears as a subconscious impulse of an actor, which he expresses, and it is then taken up by other actors in an act of co-creation.

This is similar to contemporary improv work, perhaps the most pure form of theater because it is a work *in the moment*. Peter Brook for example, one of the leading dramatists of the late 20th century, uses this technique both in training actors, and in his work as a teacher of Gurdjieff. This can be considered, as

Gurdjieff put it, the subconscious becoming conscious—if there is calculation of effects, this calculation is done in the subconscious mind which has far greater powers of human understanding than the relatively flimsy ordinary consciousness. Indeed, most artists understand the sources of their inspiration in such a way.

Gurdjieff, who began his work with people in an era when ideas of a deeper “subconscious” mind reached a crescendo (the second decade of the 20th century) seems to have had an attentive interest. He writes knowingly, apparently from personal experience, about spiritistic practices, the use of hashish and opium in esoteric traditions, about hypnotism, and even about Freud, whom he deprecates but seems to borrow much from and from the whole European tradition described above—including the word “subconscious.” This is made clear especially in the chapter “Hypnotism” of *Beelzebub’s Tales*. Such practices do not however seem to have played a significant continuing role in the communities that emerged to continue his teaching legacy, presumably because of their suspect nature; however a few individual followers still work with them.

A practice of “sitting” (a form of meditation) is a principal means used by Gurdjieff’s contemporary followers for contacting the subconscious, the deeper, truer, mind whose life is hidden inaudibly beneath daily life by the noise of the so-called “conscious” mind. By practices of “self-observation,” including sitting, it is revealed that every shock received in life, especially every strongly emotional shock, burns an indelible mark, an “impression,” in the subconscious. Those from early childhood, and those inscribed under extreme stress such as murder, war, betrayal, rape are very resistant to healing. Often it is hard for people even to remember the event, and to face its consequences in their self. Yet it is not impossible to become much more aware of these marks and their effects, which without awareness and reflection engender a profound slavery to emotional reactions. Gurdjieff wrote in one line of the sayings he attributed to his Great Teacher figure Ashiata Shiemash: “Emotional hope is slavery.” And Freud said that only a person free of such slavery is truly mature, capable “to love and to work.”

A large industry has arisen of institutional contexts whose *raison d’etre* is the healing of such diseases of the self. And not only in the last couple of centuries: there is even a parallel with the origins of religions and initiatic traditions throughout past millennia. The question arises, both for those of us who are called to the task of becoming objective observers of human psychospiritual history, and more pressingly for individuals involved in such—let’s call them simply “cults,” even if some of them have become “respectable” institutions—the question of whether the proffered cures may not be worse than the disease, and the cause of new so-to-say iatrogenic diseases.

Do we really need these cults? We may need those that are schools, in which an art is cultivated. Still, we need more to be doing art than we need just being in school. But doing art is hard, and people tend to avoid doing hard things. *Ars longa, vita brevis* as an ancient saying has it—so let us make our life more long in inner time by working to be artists. And let us scrupulously follow Ecclesiastes 9:10: “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.”