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ALDOUS HUXLEY AND THE LOTUS EXPERIENCE

Of *Odyssey* 9.80-104, Denys Page has written, with telegraphic concision: "They [the Lotus-Eaters] ate lotus; they meant you no harm; they gave you lotus to eat, and you wanted to stay with them for ever. That is all: and for the rest of time nobody has ever known anything more about the Lotus-Eaters."¹ Page goes on to adduce parallels from world folklore and to conclude that the Lotus-Eaters "have their origin in a true but dimly remembered tale about men in Egypt who lived on lotus. . . . to their lotus the poet ascribes a certain magical effect which he takes from common folklore."² But we should not be too quick to emphasize magic over pharmacology. Homer may well have had some rather precise information about the psychological effects of consuming a hallucinogenic substance. What that substance may have been, we shall never know, and, as Page notes in typically piquant fashion, some modern speculation is ludicrous: "have not the Lotus-Eaters lately been made real and relevant, a colony of drop-outs living on drugs, *bhang* possibly, or *hashish*?"³

I do not mean to add to the list of possibilities any suggestion that the Lotus-Eaters were Peyotists, but would merely draw attention to some striking similarities between the drug experience⁴ of Odysseus' men and that of Aldous Huxley, who experimented with mescaline—a hallucinogenic alkaloid present in the peyote cactus (*Anhalonium Lewinii*)—in 1953. Huxley recounted his experience in *The Doors of Perception*,⁵ a work popular in the heyday of the "drug culture" of the '60s. He reports the action of the drug as follows:⁶

"(1) The ability to remember and to 'think straight' is little if at all reduced. (Listening to the recordings of my conversation under the influence of the drug, I cannot discover that I was then any stupider than I am at ordinary times.)"⁷—So, in Homer, neither the crewmen who eat the lotus nor the Loto-phagi themselves appear mentally confused or disoriented in any way. When Odysseus finally takes the men forcibly back to the ships (*Od.* 9.98-99), they are aware that they are being compelled to leave and they weep at the fact. So too, earlier, they *chose* not to return from their reconnoiter; they were aware that

¹ *Folktales in Homer's Odyssey* (Cambridge, MA 1973) 6.

² Page, 20.

³ Page, 10; he cites L. G. Pocock, *Reality and Allegory in the Odyssey* (Amsterdam 1959) 53 (actually, p. 93). Page shows conclusively that none of the actual edible plants known to the ancients (or to ourselves) by the name "lotus" (*lôtos*) is intended in *Od.* 9. See further W. W. Merry and J. Riddell, ed., *Odyssey 1-12*, 2nd ed. (Oxford 1886) at 9.94; also W. B. Stanford, ed., *The Odyssey of Homer*, 2nd ed. (London 1959) at 9.84.

⁴ That we may speak of it as a drug experience seems to me indisputable on any reading of the passage.

⁵ First published in 1954, rpt. New York 1963.

⁶ Through Huxley's account is of course only that of a sensitive layman, and pertains principally to his own personal reactions, a standard pharmacology textbook confirms (indeed quotes) his description of those reactions: Michael C. Gerald, *Pharmacology: An Introduction to Drugs*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1981) 361-63.

⁷ Huxley, 25.

they were expected to report back, “but they wished [(e)boulonto] to remain there eating lotus with the lotus-eating men. . .” (*Od.* 9.96-97). In short, they are—like Circe’s barnyard pets later—as mentally alert as “at ordinary times.”

“(2) Visual impressions are greatly intensified and the eye recovers some of the perceptual innocence of childhood. . . . Interest in space is diminished and interest in time falls almost to zero.”⁸ —What the men in Homer actually experienced is not indicated. That it was at least pleasurable in the way Huxley’s enhanced visual impressions were (by and large) can be construed from their reluctance to exchange it even for the homecoming, the *nostos* that these veterans of a ten-year overseas expedition so yearn for. From Odysseus’ uncompromised perspective, the men seem “to forget their homecoming” (*Od.* 9.97). But, given the earlier reference to their *decision* to remain, it may be that, from the perspective of their own altered consciousness, the men are simply unable to differentiate (or to care to differentiate) between a moment spent with the Lotus-Eaters and an eternity.⁹ The bedazzling intensity of present experience has obliterated, along with sense of time, any concern about other experiences remote in time, viz., in this case, the day of homecoming.

“(3) Though the intellect remains unimpaired and though perception is enormously improved, *the will suffers a profound change for the worse. The mescalin taker sees no reason for doing anything in particular and finds most of the causes for which, at ordinary times, he was prepared to act and suffer, profoundly uninteresting* [my italics]. He can’t be bothered with them, for the good reason that he has better things to think about.”¹⁰ —This is the key point: loss of will. The men in the *Odyssey* were no longer willing (*Od.* 9.95: *ouket’*. . . *ethelen*; note imperfective aspect) to report back or to return. The effect of the lotus is thus to interrupt, for the duration of its action, the “will to return”—to the ship and, with it, to their homeland. This is most sinister in an epic devoted to the heroic quest for home. For the men may see Ithaca only by exertion of will—the will to survive and surmount various physical and psychological threats and temptations.¹¹ The lotus interferes with just this property of mind. (A similar specificity of effect can be seen in Homer’s description of the powerful anodyne administered by Helen in *Od.* 4.219 ff., where the grief reflex alone is obstructed.) Because its operation is so narrowly limited to this essential mental prerequisite of the whole enterprise of the return, the lotus is more disruptive and menacing than any purely physical enervation or emotional disturbance.

“(4) These better things may be experienced. . . ‘out there,’ or ‘in here,’ or in both worlds, the inner and the outer, simultaneously or successively. That they *are* better seems to be self-evident. . . .”¹² —Again, we do not know what exactly about ingesting lotus made it an activity preferable to—so it would seem—any other whatsoever. The men do not argue about it or attempt to persuade Odysseus, nor does he try to reason with them. They are simply borne off willnilly. Perhaps, as in Huxley’s case, we have to do with a transcendent vision, one finally ineffable because it is of another order of existence. Huxley’s own record of the “inscape” of this other universe was of course made only after

⁸ Huxley, 25.

⁹ Huxley, 22.

¹⁰ Huxley, 25.

¹¹ When Odysseus finally reaches Ithaca, Athena praises him for, among other things, his firm-mindedness; see *Od.* 13.330-32 and W. B. Stanford’s excellent discussion of the adjective *ekhephrôn* in *The Ulysses Theme*, 2nd ed. (1963; rpt. Ann Arbor 1968) 33 ff.

¹² Huxley, 25-26.

the benefits of sensory enhancement and indolence had been exchanged for those of the self-possession and composure attendant upon "ordinary times."

Huxley observes that "All the vegetable sedatives and narcotics, all the euphorics that grow on trees, the hallucinogens that ripen in berries or can be squeezed from roots—all, without exception, have been known and systematically used by human beings from time immemorial."¹³ Yes, and Homer in his account of the Lotus-Eaters drew on knowledge of the action of some hallucinogen or other. He did not produce only a multiform of a "common folktale motif," adapting it to "realistic settings."¹⁴ Homer knew of the deprivation of will suffered by those under the influence of the hallucinogen, and saw that this quality of the drug lent it intriguing possibilities as another in a series of challenges confronted by the hero of his *Odyssey*. He used those possibilities to good advantage in the engaging and vaguely sinister tale of the Lotus-Eaters.¹⁵

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¹³ Huxley, 62.

¹⁴ Page, 20.

¹⁵ I am grateful to Reinaldo B. Pérez and to *CW*'s anonymous reader for several useful suggestions.

REFLECTIONS ON CATULLUS 13

Students of Catullus' poetry are well aware of his virtuosity as a poetic technician. His use of metre, choice of words or imagery, to heighten the meaning of line, or even an entire poem, can easily be illustrated throughout the corpus; a ready example is *tremulique quassa lecti/Argutatio inambulatique* (6.10-11) where metre and image overtly unite to give vividness to Flavius' sexual athletics. Other conceits are not so overt but, once discovered, reveal how clever a poet Catullus truly was. Poem 13 is such an example of Catullus' covert use of poetic architecture. Here, he wishes to create an image apropos of the poem's theme—a symbolic mirror with which Fabullus might admire his nose.

The poem has a simple plot. It is an invitation to Fabullus for dinner, though it is an unusual one, since the poverty of Catullus compels the guest to furnish the dinner and its trimmings. In return for his generosity, Fabullus is to be given a smell of perfume which will make him want to become "all nose" (*totum nasum*) in order completely to appreciate the perfume.

Catullus implants within the poem a pattern of word relationships in which an initial word of a sentence modifies, or relates to, the final word in it. In all of these, an initial adjective is dependent upon a final noun or, vice versa, giving a certain mirroring parallelism to some sentences of the poem. In v.2, *paucis* . . . *diebus* frame the sentence, as do *plenus* . . . *araneorum* in v.8. v.14 similarly is surrounded by related elements: *totum* . . . *nasum*.

To complement these lines, similar word patterns occur in Vs. 1, 7 and 13. V. 1 has the initial verb *Cenabis* and the final pronoun, *me*. The same verb is repeated in V. 7, but *Catulli* has replaced *me*. The repetition of *Cenabis*, however, and the person of Catullus implied by both the noun and the pronoun, make the similarity of these two lines emphatic. Likewise, in V. 13 the same framing devices emerge, through the verb/noun (pronoun) pattern is reversed and the pronoun is not initial, though still part of the initial metrical foot: *quod tu* . . . *regabis*. This change perhaps can be attributed to poetic variation, but the use of the pronoun as subject of the final verb implies a conscientious repetition of word positions