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ALBERT HOFMANN | B. 1906

Day Tripper

By ROBERT STONE

In the circles where LSD eventually thrived, the moment of its discovery was more cherished than even the famous intersection of a fine English apple with [Isaac Newton](#)'s inquiring mind, the comic cosmic instant that gave us gravity. According to legend, Dr. Albert Hofmann, a research chemist at the Sandoz pharmaceutical company, fell from his bicycle in April 1943 on his way home through the streets of Basel, Switzerland, after accidentally dosing himself with LSD at the laboratory. The story presented another example of enlightenment as trickster. As a narrative it was very fondly regarded because so many of us imagined a clueless botanist pedaling over the cobblestones with the clockwork Helvetian order dissolving under him.

At Sandoz, Hofmann specialized in the investigation of naturally occurring compounds that might make useful medicines. Among these was a rye fungus called ergot, known principally as the cause of a grim disease called St. Anthony's Fire, which resulted in [gangrene](#) and [convulsions](#). Ergot had one positive effect: in appropriate doses it facilitated childbirth. Hofmann set out to find whether there might be further therapeutic applications for ergot derivatives. Indeed, he discovered some for Sandoz, including Hydergine, a medication that, among other things, enhances memory function in the elderly. Most famously, of course, Hofmann's ergot experiments synthesized D-lysergic acid diethylamide tartrate, LSD. On April 16, 1943, he apparently absorbed a minuscule amount of the lysergic acid he was synthesizing through his fingertips. He went home (he doesn't say how) and subsequently submitted a report to Sandoz. This reads in part:

"At home I lay down and sank into a not unpleasant intoxicatedlike condition, characterized by an extremely stimulated imagination."

A few days later at work, Hofmann decided to adopt the Romantic methods of Stevenson's celebrated Dr. Jekyll. His experimental notes commence: '4/19/43 16:20 0.5 cc of 1/2 promil aqueous solution of diethylamide tartrate orally = .25 mg tartrate.' By 1700 hours he was reporting other symptoms along with a "desire to laugh."

The laughter was Mr. Hyde's, not Dr. Jekyll's, because for most of this occasion Hofmann was in the grip of what less cultivated experimenters would later call a bummer.

"A demon had invaded me, had taken possession of my body, mind and soul. . . . It was the demon that scornfully triumphed over my will."

Hofmann did make the journey home by bicycle, with the help of an assistant. Contrary to legend, there is

no record of his falling. As the hours of Hofmann's investigation passed, he felt progressively better. In the morning "everything glistened and sparkled."

On the basis of Hofmann's report, three other officials of Sandoz sampled LSD. A psychiatric researcher at the University of Zurich, Dr. Werner Stoll, repeated the experiment, and Sandoz came to the conclusion that modified LSD-25 was a psychotropic compound that was nontoxic and could have enormous use as a psychiatric aid. A decision was made to make LSD available after the war to research institutes and physicians as an experimental drug.

Hofmann was by no means a technocratic philistine. The amazing mystical elements activated by this strange fungoid compound were of particular interest to him, though he says he never imagined mere recreational inebriation as a goal for users. He did, however, anticipate self-experimentation by "writers, painters, musicians and other intellectuals." By people, in other words, as respectably educated folk used to say, "who possessed the background."

How could Hofmann, swathed in the cultural *Gemütlichkeit* of Switzerland, understand that shortly — in America in the '60s — we were all, all of us, going to be writers, painters, musicians and other intellectuals?

Actually Hofmann soon had his eye on America and its discontents. He associated "abuse" of LSD with what he called "materialism, alienation from nature through industrialization and increasing urbanization, lack of satisfaction . . . a mechanized, lifeless working world, ennui and purposelessness in a wealthy, saturated society."

Hofmann was a wise man, however, and no more judgmental than any scientist should be, and in his writings on the subject he treats the hippie acid culture with grandfatherly moderation. Meeting Timothy Leary, a figure who arguably turned his magic medicine into a social threat, he remonstrated firmly with him, tried hard to see Leary's ineffable good points and afterward called him "a charming personage."

As a highly valued executive researcher at Sandoz (now part of Novartis), he traveled the world to study psychotropic compounds. With his wife he went to Mexico to sample psychedelics at their practical source, as administered by the curanderos and curanderas of the Sierra Mazateca. It was Hofmann who succeeded in synthesizing psilocybin from the "magic mushroom" of the Mazatecas. He also isolated a compound similar to LSD from another Native American botanic sacramental, the *ololiuhqui* vine. As a scientist he was fascinated by the ritual practiced by the ancient Greeks at Eleusis each fall. These rites, honoring the grain goddess Demeter, celebrated antiquity's most profound mystery cult. Initiates described an intense life-changing experience in the course of the nighttime ceremonies. Hofmann believed that one of the components of the sacred *kykeon*, the potion distributed to adepts, was a barley extract containing ergot.

Hofmann was close to many of the artists and thinkers who shared his fascination with varieties of perception. He corresponded with Aldous Huxley and was also a friend of the German mystic and novelist Ernst Jünger. He came to know prominent members of the American Beat generation, including [Allen Ginsberg](#), whom he met in California in 1977. Hofmann never approved of mass intoxication or drug use in [adolescence](#). Contrary to assertions, however, he did not regret his discovery. No great scientist known to history can have been less fanatical or more serene. He was always a humanist committed to the spirit.

Over his long life, Hofmann took LSD many times. He developed a personal mysticism involving nature, for which he had a lifelong passion. One thing this very tolerant man decried in the Western drive for facile satisfaction was an alienation from the outdoors. The use of LSD made him more and more conscious of it. In nature he saw “a miraculous, powerful, unfathomable reality.”

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