

Love Potions, Truth Serums

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for Pamela Gentile and Antonio Hudson

Many recent films which concern themselves with the after-life of the 1960s seem to have an obligatory scene in which two people, usually a man and a woman, now in the maturity of professional middle age, examine photos in which the “heady days” of their youth have been recorded. His hair hangs to his shoulders, a red bandanna tied around his head; the hem of her dress, printed with large stylized flowers, rests at mid-thigh. In the photos, their faces luminous, they flash brilliant smiles and peace signs at the camera. The man and the woman, confronted with the evidence of their bygone selves, smile and sigh a bit wistfully, as those who become suddenly aware of the gap between then and now are wont, nostalgically, to do. Something like the following dialogue then ensues:

A: Was that us?

B: We sure looked silly, didn't we?

A: We were young.

B: What did we want?

A: To change the world.

B: To get high.

A: Then change the world.

B: To get laid.

(They look at each other, laughter overtaking them.)

A and B (in unison, laughing): And then change the world!

In the scene that follows, they have set down glasses of Beaujolais on the coffee table, kicked off their shoes, and are shaking their booties, singing along to Steppenwolf's “Born to be Wild.” Everyone knows what will happen next. . . .

But it does *seem* a long way from here to there, from 1994 to, say, 1968. That period seems so far back, somewhere in the mists, before AIDS, before designer drugs, before

Crack, before PROZAC and “cosmetic psycho-pharmacology,” before the daily news brought reports of countless wars all over the globe. Now, those rallying cries of “Peace” and “Free Love” seem more than a little quaint and naive. They are easily packagable because, from the vantage point of the present, they seem to suggest an era that was simpler and safer, if faster, because untarnishably young: the present always dreams a past that is simpler and easier because free of its own fears. The 1960s was an era when, so goes one version of the story, people could, quite simply, love freely, resist openly, and “raise their consciousnesses” without limit. It was a period when there was a clear-cut line between friends and enemies: a world could be tossed, or shaken, or caught with both hands tied behind the back. A time attractively and deliciously naive, drunk on its own possibilities. Naïveté, especially its earnestness and its confidence, is a source of endless fascination for the chastened, hardened skeptic: it may, though bumblingly, be right. Nostalgia works for the skeptic by both comforting the hurt of absent, unrealized possibilities and by keeping them “back there,” reassuring, as if with lullabies, that they were never really possible. Nostalgia guards the skeptic’s sleep against bad dreams.

Return trip to “Madame Ruth’s”

It smelled like turpentine and looked like India ink.

I held my nose, I closed my eyes. I took a drink.

“Love and drugs”: the shorthand expressions for the attempts made by a young generation in the 1960s to dream themselves out of the dreams their parents had allotted for them and fully expected them to continue. “Love and drugs” designated not only the chosen means of those attempts but also something of the state of non-consciousness, or anti-consciousness, to be attained. That the desire for such a dream-state was clung to with such force in the sixties is not particularly surprising. (“The sixties” is widely recognized as a misnomer, since the period of love, drugs, and social activism did not actually begin until about 1965 and ended around 1975 when the U.S. military forces were defeated and withdrawn from Vietnam). After all, the previous decade has been well-chronicled not only as the period of Red Scares (The Army – McCarthy Hearings, the HUAC), Cold War, Hot Wars (from Korea to the invasion of Santo Domingo), and riots emerging from the attempt to put an end to racial segregation in mostly, but not exclusively, Southern U.S. cities and towns (Little Rock and Selma), but also of prosperity and the “surplus repression” that accompanied it. If the 1950s was the heyday of the Beats, it was also a time of institutionalized obedience, loyalty, and sober industriousness which, when carried out

with disciplined regularity, would lead to security and success: the whole society supposedly jog-trotting along, each member blithely indifferent to the others, merrily performing its duties in the coziness of the shadow of the Bomb.

The rejection of a generation's values by its progeny is the stuff of old songs and stories. Nevertheless, what gave the generation of the sixties its own unique specificity was the totalization of its refusal. If the sins of the fathers were not to be visited upon the heads of their children, those sins, and the fathers themselves – and the mothers, too – along with all they endorsed had to be rejected completely, not merely refashioned or retooled. Such disavowal, at once critical and negative, sought both a freedom and an innocence in its distancing from the moribund regulation of “the good life.” At the same time, the positive aspect, which complemented the critique, was to be found in the very element the prosperous society lacked in abundance, a lack which made all its riches falsity, its plentitude lies, its wealth the cold currency of impoverishment: love. Love was writ very large indeed in the 1960s in order to fill the hole its absence had created and signified.

A beginning, to be truly new, calls for a tabula rasa, and every beginning has, in its fresh promise of previously unimagined experiences and possibilities, its own charm and allure. The figure of the slate wiped clean has a dual fascination; for it is not only in all its blankness the wide open space of a freedom to create; its emptiness is also that of all that has been, in the blink of an eye or the turn of a head, destroyed, or erased. It manifests creation and destruction at once, inseparable, paradoxical: the creation of creation, the destruction of destruction. Its blankness, swirling with susurrus, invites the traces of the unwritten words, the yet-to-be-breathed breaths, of hope. Its “newness” is such that it cannot but be purchased by amnesia. In its most radical form, the so-called “revolution” of the 1960s (a term ubiquitous in those years) was not so much an attempt to change history but rather to put a halt to it, to its progressive, catastrophic forward motion – to stop it, to forget it, to start all over again, but differently. That so-called “revolution” was an attempt to bring about a cessation in time itself. Love can do that; so, too, can drugs – both of them offering bite-sized pieces of eternity.

Hug me till you drug me, honey.

Love's as good as Soma.

The image of almost an entire generation of young people medicating itself several times a day with substances such as marijuana, hashish, cocaine, MDA, LSD, psilocybin, belladonna, mescaline, peyote, Dexedrine, Benzedrine, Methedrine, Quaaludes, opium,

morphine, and heroin is, admittedly, a curious one. To judge by the then-current reports, thousands – perhaps hundreds of thousands – of young people were sending themselves completely out of their minds. But the condemnation that was hurled from pulpits, offices, legislatures, and teachers’ desks against “drug-crazed pinko hippies” managed not only to miss the significance of that mass, self-administered funkification. It also managed, but inadvertently, to reveal it as a response to the hell the elders of society, as its self-appointed spokespersons, defended as the terrestrial paradise-in-the making. From that inferno, the generation that was “handed the world on a silver platter,” and, hence, destined to be the “brightest and best,” set out, guitars and tambourines in hand, tabs of Orange Sunshine or Purple Haze secreted in pockets, for an extended, even permanent, holiday: refugees off to seek asylum in the Republic of Love. Not only the past, as Marx had divined, but the future, too, pressed upon the shoulders of that generation with the weight of a nightmare crouching.

Surely, drugs and love provided the escape routes from that regulated and institutionalized nightmare of happiness, complacency, normalcy, and progress. Under the conditions of modernity, they had, either separately or in conjunction, done this, provided consolation for the mutilations by which modernization is achieved. However, against the background of the socioeconomic rationalization and technologization that stamped the years following the Second World War, love and drugs could not but appear wild, unpredictable, unruly – in a word, anarchic – and the force with which they were coupled not only squeezed them into clear visibility but also brought out into the open their undeniable affinity for mutability. Herein lay their potential for disturbance. Perhaps this affinity, much more than those entertainingly spirited caperings, like “love-ins” and “be-ins,” brought into living rooms across the continent by television, accounted for the horror and the violent reactions which these two monosyllables provoked. “Love” was getting beat up – and often by righteous Christians, too – cudgels in one hand, Missals in the other, especially if those who spoke that word loudly and openly were Black.

If the mere thought of “love,” in any of its forms, stiffened necks and set teeth on edge, the revulsion and scorn paradoxically heaped upon that little four-lettered word had their sources in the panic that arose from the suspicion that it had got out of its cage and was now walking, loosely, freely, curiously. No longer, it appeared, could love be content to remain behind closed doors, confined to fulfilling the obligations, the dutiful contortions, of the marriage bed, or to cushioning the private property relations of the family. If love had ever knit together the family fabric, it was now unravelling that self-same fabric.





Moreover, the partnership ascribed to “drugs and love” made obvious the fact that love – not to mention sex – had long performed the services of intoxication and consolation for the hidden disfigurements and wounds systematically inflicted by the turning wheels of modernity: the wife, the mother, the nurse, the whore – a sisterhood of service. The function assigned to both love and drugs was that of making bearable the process of complete functionalization. That particular little secret got out, as if through an upstairs window: love *was* a drug, had long been a drug, one which, when administered behind closed doors in small, measurable doses allowed persons to get up in the morning and function properly as family members, workers, and citizens. In the 1960s, however, love quit that service, deserted that post. Feminism’s refusal of the twin role of consoling and reproducing meant not only an escape from Fortress Love. It meant love’s re-invention: that blood, those breaths, those hands and fingers – all were changed for something wild and strange. Consolation and reproduction were cashed-in for experimentation and self-experimentation – in short, for creation. The old images were to be left behind. Feminism, Stonewall, the Selma March: just a few of the signs that love had abandoned the sanctuary of the family home, that castle replete with secrets, closed lips and denials, the walls that protected it to death, to inhabit public streets and parks. Instead, it now resided in trusting glass houses where nothing can be hidden because all that is inside is outside and plainly in view, and where, therefore, such distinctions no longer command much importance – until, that is, a rock is thrown.

But that seismic shift would have remained mired at the level of an inter-generational Oedipal drama (drama loves love, and love loves drama), were it not for the claims to knowledge and freedom made on behalf of love and drugs. That “experience” had become, almost by definition, “inner experience,” meant that it had gone underground. And that it was quite deliberately and energetically sought there presupposes the impoverishment, and for that reason the rejection, of all the vacant husks that passed for experience in a normalized life. To seek “inner experience” strongly suggested not only the disparity of inner and outer; it also suggested that the exterior, had become, in its opacity, merely a facade, a false front, a poor masquerade that had already been exhausted. Whereas the inner, what was going on beneath the surface, was endlessly, truly rich with all that grew there and inhabited its depths, rocked by ceaseless tides. The ability to turn everything and everyone, oneself included, inside out: this was the desire and the claim to knowledge, the insight, sought through the curriculum at the University of Love.

It was also, not surprisingly, the rub. For such “knowledge” not only exceeded all

officially established and accepted concepts but pierced through them, vaporizing the ego along the way. Such knowledge denied the privileged enthronement of the cogito and deposed it in favour of a *sensu*, and an *amo*. The ecstatic experiences provided by love and by drugs greatly attenuated both “the self” and its “certainty,” its hard edges and clear demarcations. By reconfiguring what counted as “knowledge”, this “unofficial knowledge” posed questions to knowledge identified as ratio, which it did not and could not, for all its epistemic categories, adequately answer. Thus, this official knowledge was forced to recognize, even if it could not openly admit, that its riches, its possibilities – touted, adopted and copied far and wide – were merely mythical, the stuff of make-believe: high-jinks, for all their white-coated seriousness. For such “knowledge” cannot answer the question of its own *why*. The writing-large of Reason simply obscures the fact that, by appearing completely “neutral,” it cannot give reasons for itself, and that its “neutrality,” or “value-freeness,” is not only an ideological disguise, but one seen through without much difficulty. The professional minds of “The Greater Living Through Chemistry” school who, under the banner of “advances in scientific understanding,” busied themselves with solving the “problem” of the precise temperature at which a human body of a certain height and weight would combust or explode made it clear that such “neutrality” excused a horrible, criminal indifference that was glorified as achievement, advance. But Reason as ratio and calculation knows no guilt: it goes continuously and autonomously forward in search of more knowledge. Nevertheless, that Reason cannot give sufficient reasons for that which sets its sufficient reasons in motion has always been a source of its frustration: why its final words to the child’s seemingly endless “Why?” is the authoritarian “Because that’s just the way it is!” Perhaps that is why Reason, in all its supposed richness, can never be taken by surprise, is always on guard against it: it has a method; it gets what it orders – and because there are those who serve it, it flatters itself into believing that it knows itself, that knowledge is self-knowledge. Paradoxically, the “counter-knowledge” (for lack of a better term) provided by the experience of love and drugs aimed to dispel the illusions of ratio while, at the same time, making knowledge not only purposeless but also harmless. Everything would, quite simply, have to be learned anew, afresh with the Edenic work of beginning: the provision of a name for that which was still nameless.

The seemingly unbreakable bond that linked thinking to doing, knowing to acting, was loosened, if not dissolved, in the intoxicating experiences offered by love and drugs. These experiences were marked by a kind of superlative passivity, a trembling excess. Here there is agency, subjectivity, but the agent is not the origin, the author, of itself. It is, rather, through and through responsive to those things and those persons it is in the midst

of and encounters there, and it is responsible to them. Such intoxication brings things and persons closer while leaving them intact. And its apparent richness lies in its capacity for shedding: not only old and trusted concepts and their relations, but the shedding of layers of one's own skin, as if burned off by another's skin, the loss of oneself and the restoration of self with a touch, a glance. The sense that occurs, in such loss, is one of having been found by another: recognition, but without judgement – and without the hierarchies and the trivializations on which judgement thrives. The body is no longer armoured but made sentient through knowledge. Both love and drugs desubstantialize the ego, the self of the cogito, placing it under a question mark where it continues to remain, not cancelled but simply itself despite itself. This plane of knowledge, wholly ethical, hence wholly different from ratio, is yet prior to it; the knowledge denied by ratio but which sustains it: the no-place, the u-topia in which knowledge, freedom, and experience, indivisible and irreducible, take place. It is the site where “peace research” was carried out.

**But when I kissed the cop down at Thirty-Fourth and Vine,
He broke my little bottle of Love Potion Number Nine.**

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But to claim that something that was no more in certain eyes than a little roll in the hay had significance beyond that of gratuitous pleasure, the relief of a persistent itching between the legs, or that the ingestion of chemical substances and the hours spent staring into the near distance while listening to Pink Floyd's “Don't Come Near Me with That Axe, Eugene,” had brought one to a state of sudden illumination concerning the workings of society and the fears of human beings, – these experiences entailed, if they were to make good their knowledge-claims, proof. This proof could not, of course, be delivered. To the sober and the industrious, the bliss of intoxication is hardly convincing. In that sense, the blissful are hardly communicative, try as they might, with their limited and overburdened vocabularies. Besides, the sober and the industrious do not speak or understand the language of the blissful, the happy, who appear to have dropped in from a planet with a different level of gravity.

Nevertheless, love and drugs could be elevated to the status of principles, rendered programmatic and promoted through the incantation of magical, formulaic slogans. The 1960s, in fact, seemed to demand it. If one were to meet the police or the Army – and the boys in blue and green, their rifles and sticks at the ready, were never very far away – one had to go prepared not to knock them out but to try to kiss them into submission. Daisies fit smoothly into the muzzles of Springfield rifles, but they did not melt them

back to trees and lumps of iron. Nor did they prevent the young men who had smiled only minutes ago from shouldering their guns and aiming them, nor did they prevent a small amount of lead from exploding out of them to turn someone into a fetid mass of welling blood and leaky flesh. “Make Love Not War Free Love Now Legalize Pot” – love and drugs became, in short order, their own opposites: advertisements for and recruitments into disciplined ranks organized on the basis of their possession of pre-formed answers to any and every question. In short, the thuggery of the dogma of love and like all dogma which, whether it concerns the mysteries of a loving or a wrathful deity or the mysteries of orgasm, always proves to be especially susceptible to the caperings of the commodity form. Drugs and love were always not just commodifiable but, as the 1960s demonstrated, perfectly so (not the only characteristic they shared with religion). In their gentleness lay not only consolation and relief but an invitation to the promise of happiness, the body and the mind released forever from their sufferings and delivered over to their capacity for endless pleasure inseparable from knowledge. Yet the elevation of love and drugs to the status of principles signalled a new apotheosis of the act of commodity consumption itself: the bite-sized piece of paradise, wholly and easily absorbed into the commodity form, was smothered there, where it found its future and its home.

Notes

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First and third sections begin with quotes from *Love Potion Number Nine*, written by Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller (1959). The second section begins with a quote from *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley (1932).