

THE JOHN ALLEGRO AFFAIR: Some Etymological Observations

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“I shall welcome criticism only with a certain distrust. It is an easy game to set up irrefutable objections to new ideas. That’s because, for the most part, what is new is disconcerting and is not exactly understood: the objections have bearing upon simplified aspects, that the author no longer accepts except as a self-styled opponent, or accepts only within the limits of a provisional simplification.”¹

It was some fifteen years go that I began to become interested in the relationship between drugs and religions. It was inevitable that I read John Allegro’s *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*, a book that left me very perplexed.²

Just recently, a mycologist colleague sent me an offprint of one of his publications. He called my attention to this book in his bibliography by adding a handwritten comment: “Either this book is the work of a genius, or the work of a madman.”³ That note gave me the impetus to write an essay that I had been thinking about for quite some time. Its purpose is neither the fanciful rehabilitation of John Allegro, nor an additional refutation, but rather a reexamination of his work in the light of my own areas of expertise, namely philology and psycholinguistics, among others, with

¹“L’Affaire John Allegro: Quelques considerations sur l’étymologie”

Translated by Carl A.P. Ruck

G. Bataille, *La Part maudite: Essai d’économie general* (Paris: Les editions de Minuit, 1967, 1990), 52: “J’inviterai la critique à quelque méfiance. C’est un jeu facile d’opposer à des vues nouvelles des objections irréfutable. C’est que, la plupart du temps, ce qui est nouveau déconcerte et n’est pas exactement compris: les objections portent sur des aspects simplifiés, que l’auteur n’admet pas davantaage qu’un soi-disant contradicteur, ou n’admet que dans les limites d’une simplification provisoire.”

² John M. Allegro, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970), translated into French as *Le Champignon sacré et la croix* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1971), which had the merit of reproducing all the notes, but, unfortunately, without translating them: editions in other languages omit the notes entirely. (!)

³ Anicet Fraselle, personal correspondence, dated January, 2002.

the purpose of putting his argument to the trial by fire, while at the same time proposing a new hypothesis.

I think now that the grammatical separation implied by the oppositional conjunction “or” in the mycologist’s note should be replaced by “and”: “This book is the work of a madman and a genius.”

The History of a Polemic

John Marco Allegro (1923-1988), philologist, with a doctorate from Oxford, a specialist in ancient Greek, Hebrew, and Semitic Studies, was Professor since 1947 at the University of Manchester in Great Britain.

Professor Godfrey R. Driver, an expert in the Semitic languages and his former thesis director, recommended him as a brilliant philologist to Father de Vaux, who was the head of the international team in charge of the translation and publication of the Qumran Dead Sea Scrolls. Allegro was entrusted with the Biblical commentaries and a corpus of “Sapiential” or non-historical texts, as they are called (comprised of proverbs, hymns, psalms, moral exhortations, etc.), which represents the very important finds from Cave IV. John Allegro was at this time a recognized and illustrious academic. He would write an excellent popularized account about the discovery of the famous manuscripts, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (1956), which would have 2 editions and about 20 printings.

Not only was Allegro the only agnostic on the international team, but also a non-conformist, with all the allure of a loose gun.⁴ After 1955, he would face critical controversy about the translations of his segment of the texts. The first polemical attack, printed in the *Times* magazine, was launched after the radio interview that Allegro gave on the BBC. Succinctly stated, Allegro was accused of spreading the idea that the Essenes were the direct precursors of Christianity. The Press, as is often the case, blew on the smoldering embers. Soon after, there was a second attack, this one concerning the famous copper scrolls from Cave III: Allegro’s translation appeared in 1960, ten years

⁴ One should understand that Biblical Studies in particular, and all scientific research on religions in general – and ever since time immemorial – have been conducted exclusively by true believers, and for a long time by ecclesiastics. There have been very few (in my opinion, far too few) scholars of the laity, in the sense of being agnostics and atheists, who have engaged in or wanted to occupy themselves with scientific studies involving religions.

after their discovery, and it was immediately repudiated, replaced by that of Father Milik in 1962. Allegro would claim up until the end of his life that certain of his colleagues had done all in their power to delay the publication of the texts. Apparently it is still the case that: “Allegro was the first member of the team to publish all the texts that he had received in their entirety, and his translation is still the only one to have done so.”⁵

Allegro seemed a man with an ax to grind,⁶ something that would eventually bring about his total break from the rest of the team. Two investigative journalists, Michaël Baigent and Robert Leigh, who looked into the whole affair of the publication of the Dead Sea Manuscripts, came to the conclusion, which if not exempt from controversy, turned out nevertheless to be very positive in favor of John Allegro: “One may not downright sympathize with the personality of Allegro as it is reflected in his letters, the cavalier discoverer, impudent iconoclast, but it is impossible not to adhere to the integrity of his scientific position.”⁷

Disappointed with the scientific community, Allegro withdrew and devoted himself to philological studies. In 1968, he published his own work on the texts and fragments from Cave IV.⁸ Two years later, he would quit the international team, turn his back on the academics, and abandon his post as Professor at the University of Manchester. What had happened?

In the '60's, he had worked for five years on a book that he considered revolutionary: in 1970, his *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* appeared. The scandal was immediate!

Here is what the book claims. Judeo-Christianity is nothing but an avatar of a primitive fertility cult, present everywhere throughout the ancient East, cults which very

⁵ M. Baigent and R. Leigh, *La Bible confisquée: Enquête sur le détournement des manuscrits de la Mer Morte* (Paris: Editions Plon, 1992, translated from the American edition), 70.

⁶ In a letter to John Strugnell (the man who replaced Allegro), undated, but written of necessity between the 14th and the 31st of December of 1955, Allegro calls into question the decision of Strugnell, who was planning to take Holy Orders: “In your place, I wouldn't think any more about this job of theologian. When I will have finished with it” [i.e., with my work] “there won't be any Church to take you in.”

⁷ M. Baigent and R. Leigh, *La Bible confisquée*, 79. The essence of my presentation of J. Allegro comes from this book: see, in particular, 61-85.

⁸ John M. Allegro, *Qumran Cave 4: Discoveries in the Judaean Desert V* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

often replaced rites in honor of the divine rain that inseminates and fecundates the earth, with a phallic cult, celebrated through the intermediary of a mushroom, the *Amanita muscaria* or fly-agaric,⁹ because of its hallucinogenic properties that open the gates to the otherworld. The mushroom, being thus the visible form of God on Earth, was the object of a cult, as widespread as it was secret. The Christians were only another of these sects, that, in order to escape Roman and Jewish repression, invented a history in the form of cryptograms, namely the Gospels: the story of Jesus, son of a Virgin, and so on, in order to pass on to their initiates this age-old knowledge. Little by little, the secret was lost and the Church Triumphant was born in its place. The Old Testament already contained this mushroom revelation or Gnosis.

Allegro claims to base his argument solidly as a work of philology, and more precisely, philological etymology. Thus one might uncover linguistic traces of this encoded message already in Sumerian, which could be deciphered later also in the Semitic and Indo-European languages. The author refers his reader to a mountain of notes on comparative philology, involving numerous ancient languages.

On the 26th of May, 1970, fourteen reputable English scholars rejected Allegro's basic thesis and its conclusions.¹⁰ Allegro will thereafter be unanimously stigmatized by his peers, academic Biblical scholars and historians.¹¹

The Errors and the Enigma

First of all, since he was a scholar, why didn't he *first* present his "discoveries" in professional journals in the form of articles addressed to experts in the ancient languages, before bringing them out in a book destined for the general public?¹²

⁹ The magnificent agaric with the red cap spotted with white scabs, to be found, for example, traditionally beneath every Christmas tree. See Ursula Hoffman and Mark Hoffman, "Erinnerungen an den Fliegenpilz": 9-12, in *Entheos*, vol. 1, n° 1 (summer) 2001.

¹⁰ *The (London) Times*, 9.

¹¹ T. Jacobsen and C.C. Richardson, "Mr. Allegro among the Mushrooms," in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, vol. 26, n° 3 (1971); P. Courcelle, "Comptes rendus (Allegro, J.M.) Le Champignon sacré et la croix (. . .)": 83-84, in *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* (Bruxelles, 1974).

¹² Jonathan Ott, *Pharmacotheon: Entheogenic Drugs, their Plant Sources and History* (Kennewick, WA: Natural Products, 1996), 334.

Secondly, the English version was published by a popular press.¹³ Even the cover of the book already arouses all the suspicions of the intelligent potential reader. It flirts with bad taste and ridicule: a Celtic cross intertwined in the design of a mushroom!¹⁴ In contrast, the French publisher chose instead the Plaincourault fresco for its cover – a good choice, but the title overwhelms the cover, blasted in enormous eye-catching typography.

Then, there is also the problem that the work contains mycological inaccuracies,¹⁵ although this is perhaps the least serious of the criticisms.

Also, the forewarned reader would have to be really interested in the inflated bibliographic references, especially in history, in order to substantiate or check the argument.

Obviously, however, the major error consists in contending that Jesus is only a myth. On this point, John Jacques, one of Allegro's earliest critics, is completely right.¹⁶ The New Testament actually is not a monolithic and deliberately organized volume, and only such a text could permit the hypothesis that it be a cryptogram; but, on the contrary, it is a collection, an anthology of texts that are very different stylistically, by various authors and from diverse times and locales. It is quasi impossible that the Gospels be an anagogic writing, except to propose the untenable hypothesis of a master author of a supernatural intelligence presiding over the redaction of the tales. The very fact that the New Testament was composed of such divergent texts proves that the story of the "life" of Jesus could not have been invented from all the pieces. It suffices to compare a literary biography from the same period, the pseudo-life of Apollonios of Tyana, for example, to recognize that one is dealing here with a text meant to be read, one that has been cleaned up, that is to say, without contradictions, literarily pure, simply because it is invented. A

¹³ Giorgio Samorini, *Funghi allucinogeni: Studi etnomicologici* (Dozza, Italy, Telesterion, 2001), 177.

¹⁴ The second printing replaced the Cross with a drawing of the famous Mushroom Tree, as depicted in the Plaincourault chapel. Allegro included a photograph of the fresco, bizarrely without comment, in the text of the book.

¹⁵ Clark Heinrich, *Strange Fruit: Alchemy and Religion, the Hidden Truth* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), 23.

¹⁶ J.H. Jacques, *The Mushroom and the Bride: A Believer's Examination and Refutation of J.M. Allegro's Book, The sacred Mushroom and the Cross* (Derby, UK: The Citadel Press, 1970), 88.

fictionalized story of Jesus would not have carried all the incoherence of the Gospels; this is one of the most convincing arguments for the historicity of Jesus.

In brief, the probability for the historicity of the man called Jesus is very high; there is little serious research at present that puts that in doubt. The solid arguments are legion. Furthermore, the text of the Gospels has been meticulously dissected, line-by-line, word-by-word, letter-by-letter, and we now know quite a bit about the Scriptures today.¹⁷ On the other hand, nobody claims that the existence, or not, of Jesus is, after all, a matter of such importance for judging Allegro's thesis.¹⁸

All this scenario that Allegro alleges, cryptographic texts, encoded writings, which would have been produced by a Judeo-Christian sect to preserve their secrets about the ritual ingestion of hallucinogenic mushrooms and intended for initiates, all with the aim of escaping the powers that be, etc., is nothing but hogwash. It is all totally too implausible.

A final criticism, and not the least: the references to the Sumerian language. Allegro uses Sumerian "words" that are often not attested; he makes up hypothetical words, built on actual Sumerian roots, although he does correctly designate them as such by an asterisk.¹⁹ According to Jacques, 315 words of the repertory of 869 are not attested.²⁰

To put it briefly, the Allegro case obviously raises a very intriguing question that is perfectly summarized by a reporter for the esteemed Spanish daily newspaper *El País*, in the context of the publication of the Qumran texts, but it applies equally well for *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*: "The case of Allegro, who ended up very bitter at the end of his life, is, without doubt, emblematic and difficult to digest: how can it be explained that a philologist like Allegro, a member of the important international team of

¹⁷ Concerning the historicity of Jesus, I refer the reader to the numerous books and articles edited by Emeritus Professor at the Free University of Brussels (Belgium), specialist in the History of Christianity and Greek Philosophy, and, as a matter of fact, an atheist, namely Robert Joly, whom I thank for the many hours that we have spent together discussing these questions.

¹⁸ Mark Hoffman, personal correspondence.

¹⁹ Allegro, *Sacred Mushroom*, 16: "This sign (. . .) indicates a verbal group whose constituent parts are known to have existed in Sumerian but whose grouping or combination in that precise form do not actually appear in literature so far recovered."

²⁰ Jacques, *The Mushroom and the Bride*, 12.

scholars of the Scrolls, could have been able to lie so monumentally.”²¹ In effect, how could such a highly reputable scholar, who had nothing to do with a lifestyle favorable to hallucinogenic drugs (such as his contemporary culture, which included the beat generation, the flower children, the hippies, etc.) – how could such a brilliant scholar have committed intellectual suicide by maintaining this shocking theory?

Nobody has offered any plausible answers. “Because he was nothing but a (dirty) atheist!”(?) No comment, but he did assume that his theory rendered Christianity an untenable belief.²² “Because he was nothing but a simple provocateur!” (?) Not very convincing: so much work just for that. “Because he wanted glory and money.” (?) How could he expect to earn (a lot) of money with so difficult a little book? Even if one assumes that it was directed to the general public. I cannot accept that explanation. It’s enough to have leafed through a just few pages at random to realize that. In short, to read it turns out to be a terrible *pensum*, which is the Latin word for the tedious assignment doled, or literally “weighed,” out to punish students, especially after you find that you have to hitch yourself up to the wagon of philological notes, which I suspect, besides, few, even among the group of academics, have really read – or at least, all the way to the end! As for his professional career, Allegro was at the summit: University Professor, on the team to study the Qumran Scrolls. Who can say more?

Perhaps more convincing: he was a psychopath. I have taken many courses with Professor Jean Hadot, a specialist in Judeo-Christianity at the University of Brussels and an authority in the apocryphal Judeo-Christian writings,²³ and a man who worked with

²¹ “*El caso de Allegro, que acabó muy amargado al final de su vida, es, sin embargo, emblemático y difícil de digerir: cómo puede explicarse que un filólogo como Allegro, miembro de la importante comisión internacional de estudios de los rollos, haya podido equivocarse tan monumentalmente.*” J. Arias, “El esperma de cabrito (con la interpretación errónea de un fragmento llega el escándolo,” *El País*, 7 of November, 1992, 7.

²² This is his argument in *The End of the Road*. Actually, much scholarship has since occurred demonstrating the existence of mushroom sacraments within the Early and Renaissance Church, and within various assimilations with pre-Christian traditions, without arguing that such renders the religion any more or less tenable than the whole range of shamanistic and animistic religions. See, for example: Carl A.P. Ruck, Blaise Daniel Staples, and Clark Heinrich, *The Apples of Apollo: Pagan and Christian Mysteries of the Eucharist* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2001).

²³ See his edition of *Les Écrits Intertestamentaires* (Paris: Bibliothèque de La Pléiade, Gallimard, 1987 4th edition).

André Dupont-Sommer.²⁴ I had the opportunity to interview Hadot on the subject of John Allegro. My Professor told me that Dupont-Sommer, who had up to then considered Allegro an excellent colleague, had only one brief disturbed comment to offer: “Allegro has become a madman!”²⁵ The hypothesis of madness has been taken up rather recently in a novel entitled *Qumran*, by the French writer Eliette Abécassis, where Allegro is disguised in the character of Thomas Almond, and presented as a “consumer” of mushrooms!²⁶ It is so grotesque (but since we are in a novel, excusable) because we know that Allegro was very much against the use of drugs, something, in addition, with which he had never experimented.²⁷ This idea of madness leaves me perplexed; in any case, this folly, if we mean by that a mental illness, I find a bit “facile,” too easy an explanation.

I find neatly more plausible to attempt a “contextual” explication, along the lines that Jonathan Ott implies: Allegro had capitalized on the thesis of R. Gordon Wasson, as revolutionary in scope as that of Copernicus.²⁸ Wasson’s investigations had led him to pose a fundamental question: at the dawn of humanity, could the religious or spiritual phenomena have been born from the consumption of natural hallucinogenic drugs, and in particular, mushrooms, perhaps the fly-agaric? Had Allegro decided to “verify a priori” this hypothesis with regard to Judeo-Christianity, in envisioning it once and for all as an

²⁴ A. Dupont-Sommer was Professor of Philology and Semitic Civilization at the Sorbonne (Paris) and has written one of the best works on Qumran: *Les Écrits esséniens découverts près de la mer morte* (Paris: Payot, 1959, revised in 1980).

²⁵ Jean Hadot, personal correspondence.

²⁶ Eliette Abécassis, *Qumran* (Paris; Ramsay, 1996): for example, p. 160: “[Thomas Almond] alluma une petite lampe découvrant dans son halo une sorte d’autel et, à côté, des petits champignons rouges à taches blanches (. . .) ‘– J’en consume chaque jour quelques-uns et respire la fumée qui s’en dégage. C’est comme ça que j’ai découvert ce que vous cherchez encore.’” “Thomas Almond lit a little lamp revealing in its glow a sort of altar and, beside it, some red mushrooms with white spots (. . .) ‘I eat some every day and breathe in the smoke that comes from them. That’s how I’ve discovered what you are still looking for.’”

²⁷ Heinrich, *Strange Fruit*. Heinrich reproaches Allegro for this lack of personal experience with the entheogen.

²⁸ See, among others, R. Gordon Wasson, Stella Kramrish, Jonathan Ott, and Carl A.P. Ruck, *Persephone’s Quest: Entheogens and the Origins of Religion* (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1986). Translated as *La búsqueda de Persefone. Los enteógenos y los orígenes de la religión* (Mexico, DF: Fondo de Cultura Económico, 1996); or an essay composed on the same subject: Vincent Wattiaux, “Des Plantes hallucinogènes à l’origine du phénomène religieux”: 6-13, in *La Garance voyageuse: plantes, religions et spiritualité*, n° 67, autumn, 2004.

avatar of the same phenomenon, and to see the Bible in its entirety as a fungal rebus? And this was the psychedelic age, which saw an explosion in the discoveries about drugs in general and about ethnomycology in particular. That would be partially my opinion.

We know that neither Wasson nor Carl Ruck, who both were intrigued by Allegro's work, were ever able to make contact with him, for he had become too disgruntled and misanthropic.²⁹ Alas!

The Factual Side

There are certain considerations of a historical nature that, if taken into account, should have moderated such an overly negative and unanimous criticism.

Even in the absence of absolute proof, it is highly probable that there was contact between the ancestors of the Indo-Europeans, the Semites, and the Sumerians.³⁰ Later, certain Semitic peoples, like the Akkadians, established themselves in Mesopotamia toward the end of the 3rd millennium, and little by little they displaced the Sumerians. As for the Indo-Europeans, they migrated everywhere, so to speak. The peoples of the Mitanni (Armenia, Syria, Assyria) were not Indo-European but they had Aryan kings by the middle of the 2nd millennium. The Mitanni peoples established relations with Babylon and Egypt – several of the pharaohs married princesses from the Mitanni.³¹ The cultural heritage of Sumer that was passed on by the Babylonians and the Assyrians reached the Hittites, the Hurrians, the Aramaeans, and the Hebrews. The Bible is completely filled with material of the Far East. The great Sumerologist S.N. Kramer has demonstrated, for example, that the Sumerian myth of Enki and Ninhursag is astonishingly close to the theme of Garden of Eden in Genesis: Enki sins by eating the plants made for the goddess, and so on.³² Sumerian literary and religious traditions survive in all the cultures throughout the Near East.

²⁹ Mark Hoffman, Carl A.P. Ruck, and Blaise Daniel Staples, "Conjuring Eden: Art and the Entheogenic Vision of Paradise": 13-50, in *Entheos*, vol. 1, n° 1 (summer), 2001, see p. 47, note 74.

³⁰ C. Sterckx, *Les Civilisations et religions celtiques et germaniques*, course notes, 1996. FORel (Faculté Ouverte des Religions), Charleroi, Belgium.

³¹ F. Blaive, *Les Mythologies comparée des peuples indo-européens*, course notes, 1996.

³² P. Amiet *et al.*, *Naissance et l'écriture: Cunéiformes et hiéroglyphes* (Paris: Edition de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1982), 260. S.N. Kramer, *L'Histoire commence à Sumer* (Paris: Payot, 1975, 2nd edition, translated from the English).

Apparently, they ate lots of mushrooms in Sumer! The decipherment of 600,000 account tablets spanning a period of around 3,000 years tells us that they ate *Mashai* (blewits, *Tricholoma personatum*), *Liligi* (amanitas), *Agan* (Lycoperdons), etc.³³

The idea that there existed a very strong taboo against the *Amanita muscaria* is perfectly demonstrated by the mycophobia of the scholars who ignore the fact that mushrooms are found throughout the Near and Far East, and would have been available, in any case, as items of a very profitable trade and commerce. There is no need here to go over the massive evidence compiled by the Wassons about this prejudice.³⁴

It has been proven for certain that there existed within the fold of primitive Christianity secret doctrines, that only the initiates knew, an elite who alone thought themselves “true Christians,” and were bound by an oath of silence. One example, among others, is found in the introduction of the pseudo-Clementine books of the second century.³⁵

Finally, it is not impossible that the verbal roots of the Sumerian language have influenced words in Hebrew, Aramaic, and other languages of the region. Even Jacques, the leading critic of Allegro, straightforwardly asserts: “It is not impossible that Sumerian roots did survive to influence Hebrew and Aramaic cult words.”³⁶

³³ M.V. Locquin, *L'invention de l'humanité: Petite histoire de la planète des techniques et des idées* (Strasbourg: La Nuée Bleue, 1995), 68. Marcel Locquin (a mycologist) believes that “the culture of India is, like our own French, derived from Sumer.” This is a very audacious opinion.

“Le Fond commun des langages et des écritures”: 52-63, in *Science et Vie* (La Planète des hommes), n° 1131, June, 1980.

³⁴ In the past century, this taboo was still active in Western Europe. In the monumental work of Doctor Cazin – who was one of the best authorities on the therapeutic use of botanical agents – and who published in 1868 the celebrated *Traité pratique et raisonné des plantes médicinales indigènes*, one reads: “*La Fausse oronge [= l'amanite-tue-mouches] est très vénéneuse (. . .). À dose élevé, l'agaric moucheté cause des empoisonnements (. . .). Il est fréquent de voir mourir ainsi successivementt une famille tout entière.*” (Sic) “The fly-agaric is very venomous. (...). At elevated dosages, the fly-agaric causes poisonings. (. . .). It is often that one observes an entire family die one by one.” F.-J. Cazin, *Traité pratique et raisonné des plantes médicinales indigenes* (Paris: P. Asselin, 1868; Mane, France: Editions Envol, 1997, facsimile republication). By contrast, only two deaths have been recorded, and they are questionable. See Ott, *Pharmacothéon*, 336.

³⁵ J. Hadot, *La Formation du dogme chrétien*, Cahier de la FORel n° 3 (Faculté Ouverte des Religions) (Charleroi, Belgium, 1990), 12.

³⁶ Jacques, *The Mushroom and the Bride*, 20.

On the Etymological Side of the Debate

Meanwhile, this whole affair, the quasi-lynching of John Allegro, leaves in the shadows a nevertheless fundamental aspect, namely the field of linguistics and, more precisely, the area of etymology upon which rests the whole philological argument. But we often read from the pen of Allegro's critics the bald-faced confession of their own total incompetence in this domain. A few examples will suffice. Jacques furnishes an entire well-justified critique, as mentioned above, but he recognizes, with regard to the philological argument: "I am afraid that this is a matter I am not competent to follow up."³⁷ In a review of the book, negative, of course, but perfectly honest intellectually, Courcelle writes: "Few people, assuredly, have a background varied enough, going from Sumerian to the Greco-Roman texts of the 1st century CE, to be able to follow and appreciate the author in all the details of his demonstration."³⁸ Even the very diligent and dedicated Italian ethnomycologist Samorini, with regard to the man whom he denigrates as "the founding father of fantastical ethnomycology,"³⁹ has to partially concede: "Of course, it is difficult for someone not involved in the study of the cultures of the Near and Middle East to judge critically step by step Allegro's work, a work based exclusively on the data and suppositions of a linguistic nature."⁴⁰

Here is where the saddle galls, it seems to me. The criticisms appear to have put aside, too often in any case, the book's linguistic argumentation. We should notice, furthermore, that very little time passed between the publication of *The Sacred Mushroom*, which appeared at the beginning of the year 1970, and the salvo of rejection by the fourteen English scholars in *The Times*, for the 26th May of 1970. They barely had time to read the book, let alone digest and check the evidence for its argument, before they set themselves to writing! Several months, more or less, seem to me too little time to

³⁷ Ibid., 88.

³⁸ Courcelle, "Comptes rendus," 83-84: "*Peu de personnes, assurément, ont une culture assez variée, allant du sumérien aux textes gréco-romains du premier siècle après J.-C., pour suivre et apprécier l'auteur dans tous les détails de sa démonstration.*"

³⁹ Samorini, *Funghi allucinogeni*, 24: "*il padre fondatore della fantaetnomicologia.*"

⁴⁰ Ibid., 178: "*Certo, è difficile per chi non appartiene alla cerchia degli studiosi delle culture vicino e mediorientali criticare passo per passo il lavoro di Allegro: un lavoro basato esclusivamente su dati e supposizioni di carattere linguistico.*"

VERIFY such a work of philology, involving languages such as Sumerian, ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, not to mention, Akkadian, Ugaritic, Semitic, Sanskrit, Syrian, Arabic-Persian, Greek, and Latin. Heinrich, a quarter century later, summed up the chill imposed upon any further speculation: “Allegro’s views elicited such a venomous response that no one has dared to entertain or reexamine them until recently.”⁴¹ I will long remember the words of an eminent academic at the University, a specialist in Comparative Indo-European, with whom I had spoken about the Allegro affair: “I don’t know this ‘dossier,’ I can’t say anything about it, but it wouldn’t be surprising that no one has dared take the effort of verifying in depth a thesis so crazy ...” Such *a priori* prejudicial rejection of a fellow scholar leaves one dumbfounded! Nevertheless, I refuse to become paranoiac, with theories of theological conspiracies, and the like, which seems to me too facile an explanation. Nonetheless, I would like to pose a blunt question: are there so many academics who were or are capable easily of checking step by step such a work of philology? Would it not be shameful if Allegro had fallen victim of his own exceptional knowledge, like some misunderstood Einstein in the study of the ancient languages that he alone had managed to master? I am reluctant to go that far.

In reading *The Sacred Mushroom*, I was immensely intrigued inasmuch as I am myself a philologist.⁴² So I take here the liberty of introducing a reexamination of Allegro’s etymological argument, under the aegis of my own knowledge of General Linguistics, in order, in all modesty, to propose a hypothesis that seems to me pertinent. I do not pretend in any way to dispute the justifiable criticisms that have been directed toward Allegro, whose errors I am among the first to denounce. Thus I reiterate that Allegro’s thesis – that the Bible is a mycological encoded message for initiates – is nothing short of ridiculous.

⁴¹ Clark Heinrich, Carl A.P. Ruck, and Blaise D. Staples, “Jason the Drug Man”: 27-69, in *Eleusis*, n.s., vol. 3, 1993, 65 (note 69).

⁴² I am Licencié (Belgium Licentiaat), roughly equivalent to an American MA (although the ranks are not the same, since the doctorate in the European system is usually not awarded until much later, typically when the candidate is in his 40’s, and only after the publication of a major work) in Roman Philology from the Catholic University of Louvain (UCL, Belgium) and I have acquired a double major: in the History of Religions (Free University of Brussels, ULB, and the Open Faculty of Religions, FORel, Charleroi, Belgium) and in Psychoanalysis.

Nevertheless, by a strange “coincidence,” Allegro was responding to the *Zeitgeist* in implicating Judeo-Christianity with a hallucinogenic drug, a fundamental intuition, probably as a result of Wasson’s discoveries, effectively that the phenomenon of religions or the visionary experience of the supernatural, that is inherently their most primitive origin, arose from the consumption of psychoactive drugs, more appropriately now termed entheogens. Linguistically speaking, if that were the case in the preliterate period of oral tradition, I think that the various languages could be expected to have preserved more or less some traces, of this great adventure of humankind, in their sounds, or, more semantically phrased, in their “signifiants,” which are the sounds of words, apart from whatever they may refer to.⁴³ This is similar to the psychoanalytic process in which repressed memories emerge out of the collective unconscious. Languages carry very ancient remnants of this original rapport between the supernatural and the *pharmakon* or “drug” – with the latter being what engendered the former. It is as if there existed an unconscious of the language itself, woven at the very heart of the *logos*.⁴⁴ This is a theory, unique with me, that I wish to propose, the collective storehouse of memory recoverable through linguistic archaeology.

It is thus that unknown even to the religious congregations, among the first Christians as still today, the language of religion is totally replete with involuntary allusions to drugs. For example, Christianity from the Greek *Khristianos* is derived from *Khristos*, which means consecrated by “chrismation” or “anointment,” from *khriein*, “to cover and smear with oil;” *khriein* itself is a word of unknown origin,⁴⁵ but we know from the works of Wasson, Ott, and others, that anointment or chrismation is an efficacious

⁴³ One should understand here the word *signifiant* in the meaning defined by the great linguist Ferdinand de Saussure with regard to the dichotomy signifiant/ signified, which has opened the way to the science of Semeiology or Semantics. In short, the signifiant corresponds to the actual sounds (and only minimally, to the written representation of those sounds) of the language. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Payot, 1972, originally published posthumously in 1916).

⁴⁴ I would like to thank here the psychoanalysts, Jean Morlie and Jean Delcoux, who in the course of long conversations gave me a profound understanding of “that which speaking wants to say.”

⁴⁵ This verb may come from one of the languages of India: in Hindi, one finds the word *KRIS* (as in *KRISHNA*), which is a designation for the sun. (NB: *chrishna* in Irish-Gaelic means the “sun.”) The verbal idea of chrismation in Greek, moreover, involves the related ideas of “goading,” “stinging,” “pricking,” as means of administering a “drug”: see Ruck *et al*, *The Apples of Apollo*, 53-54.

manner of absorbing certain toxins or drugs. But let us make this clear! The Christ, called Jesus, probably never took a drug: it was His role awaiting Him as the “Anointed.” I am speaking only of the LANGUAGE. Another “sample” among a plethora⁴⁶: what is the narthex? An architectural term designating a part of the vestibule of a church, and etymologically a reed plant (as a botanic term) which was the *thyrsos* of Dionysus and the maenads, but also a box for drugs, and used as such for the title of several ancient medical books.⁴⁷

Sumerian is an agglutinant language which appears to be totally unique and isolated, without demonstrable parental ties to any other language, either living or dead. It survived in the form of an archaic liturgical language.⁴⁸ Where then did John Allegro seek his family etymologies? Because he tells us that: “Most of the secret names of the mushroom go back to ancient Sumerian,” and he adds, “it is now possible to find a bridge between the Indo-European and Semitic worlds,” which include the languages of the Old Testament, Hebrew and Aramaic.⁴⁹ To cite a single example is sufficient to understand what Allegro did: “The Sumerian ShUSh or Sh U-A appeared⁵⁰ in the name of Joshua or Jesus and was attached as an epithet to Yahweh.”⁵¹ Allegro is employing what is called folk etymology. Most of his examples, if not the entirety, are exercises in folk etymology. So what is that?

There are two types of etymology.

The scholarly or scientific etymology, which is based on the rules of phonetics (or the evolution of the sounds of a language over time) and semantics, in order to trace back the actual state of a word in its most ancient accessible form.

Another “method,” long scorned by most linguists, has been termed folk or ‘false’ etymology. One attaches, either consciously or not, a word to another or to a group of others by apparent resemblance – most often by analogous sound – without its having a justifiable (scientific) etymological relationship. The relationship comes into being

⁴⁶ This is an idea that I will probably pursue more fully elsewhere.

⁴⁷ Etymologically, the narthex is the “narcotic-container”: see Ruck *et al.*, *Apples of Apollo*, 133-134.

⁴⁸ Jacques, *The Mushroom and the Bride*, 20.

⁴⁹ Allegro, *The Sacred Mushroom*, 18.

⁵⁰ Underlining is mine.

⁵¹ Allegro, *The Sacred Mushroom*, 54, 59-60.

generally from semantic effects. I propose that we rename this folk etymology *phonetic etymology*, since the former has too pejorative a connotation. I will attempt to demonstrate its usefulness.

It is first of all important to know that, up until about the 19th century, this was the only type of etymology practiced by the lettered and erudite. In that, Allegro is following in the footsteps, for example, of Plato, of Isidore of Seville, of Jacques de Voragine (the author of *La Légende dorée*), and of the Cabbalists. Generally, in medieval thought “when two words resemble each other, what they designated also were similar, so that one can always pass from one of these words to the significance of the other.”⁵² That is exactly the path that Allegro takes: “Words that resemble as we think by chance were, in fact, thought to be connected. It was consequently quite legitimate, for the ancient commentator of the Scriptures, to draw a moral conclusion of religious teaching from a single word of the sacred text, even if the interpretation was totally different from the text and untenable philologically (. . .).”⁵³ But after the development of the modern empirical sciences, a number of philologists rejected this etymological technique because they considered it false – that is to say, not justifiable by the laws of phonetics that they had put in place. The dictionary definition says: “procedure by which one connects, incorrectly, one word to another” (Le Robert’s dictionary); and the example given is the word *choucroute* (“sauerkraut”), derived from *chou* (“cabbage”) and *croûte* (“crust”). Linguists have shown, correctly, that *choucroute* is a borrowed word, via the Swiss French (Suisse Roman) *surcrute* (1699), from the Alsatian *sûrkrût*, corresponding to the German *Sauerkraut*, meaning literally “sour herb,” from German *sauer* (“sour”) and *Kraut* (“herb”). One learns therefore that *sauer* doesn’t at all have the meaning of “cabbage,” which is the reason that the folk etymology was inexact! However, everyone has always known the word designated a dish whose principle ingredient is cabbage and “uncooked” or *cru*. Therefore, the folk etymology has a great deal of truth in the common sense! It expresses, thus, a “true verity” a propos of the word. Its sounds are not fortuitous: it is because the dish in question has always been composed of uncooked cabbage (white cabbage, *Brassica oleracea capitata*) that the borrowed word *surcrute* is transformed in French into this particular signifiant: namely, *choucroute*. In reality, the

⁵² E. Gilson, *Les Idées et les lettres* (Paris: Vrin, 1932), 166.

⁵³ Allegro, *The Sacred Mushroom*, 78.

phonetic etymology is a necessary complement to the scientific etymology. If one truly wants to take into account all the dimensions of a language's life, in all its complexity, one must be very attentive to the phonetic (folk or false) etymologies.

The same thing goes for proper names. The scientific etymology of the town of Mycenae does not connect it with *mykes*, the “mushroom.”⁵⁴ But the explanation of Pausanias, who justifies the foundation of the famous city by the fact that Perseus picked a mushroom there to calm his thirst,⁵⁵ testifies just as much – if not more! – than the scientific etymology. In fact, the two etymologies are not contradictory, but complementary. It is about time that we become involved in the magisterial lesson that the French ethnologist and folklorist Claude Gaignebet provided us when he wrote: “We would prefer to not to solve (. . .) and propose several etymologies for a word and to recognize that a language doesn't evolve for *the supreme glorification of the philologists*, but just as well for the greatest enjoyment of those who use it. In this perspective, we love to recover in all these etymologies, like echoes, assuredly ideological, repetitions over the centuries of a vocalized sound that finds in each epoch, greatly reinforced by punning, more or less a satisfactory meaning.”⁵⁶

Phonetic etymology uncovers a fundamental aspect in the formation and evolution of the language: an uncontrollable force that is found in all those who use a language.⁵⁷ It works at the very heart of the evolution of languages in the collective psycholinguistic processes, both diachronic and synchronistic, apart from what the linguists are able to practice in any kind of empirical verification: given the extreme complexity of these phenomena, certain of which, one supposes, may have taken place no more than once. For example, why does such a play on words or such a *hapax legomenon*⁵⁸ (or idiosyncratic formulation) created by a single speaker spread like an oil stain and extend finally throughout an entire society?

The analogy of vocalized sounds is one of the most important, but least

⁵⁴ G. Donnay, an authority in ancient Greece at the ULB, personal correspondence.

⁵⁵ Pausanias 2. 16. 3 *et sq.*; Valentina Pavlovna Wasson and R. Gordon Wasson, *Russia, Mushrooms, and History* (New York: Pantheon, 1957), 154; see also *Ruck et al., Apples of Apollo*, 45.

⁵⁶ C. Gaignebet, *Le Carnaval: Essais de mythologie populaire* (Paris: Payot, 1974; Fayard, 1979;), 162. YOU DIDN'T UNDERLINE.

⁵⁷ C. Brucker, *L'étymologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988). 52.

⁵⁸ *Hapax legomenon (idiolectal)* indicates a word attested only once in a language.

understood, processes in the formation and development of languages. Certain original terms, certain sounds, procreate over the passage of time and space; like a droplet of soap that begins to lather in the shower. Thus words become reciprocally contaminated. A simple example: the French word *girouette* (“wind vane”) comes from the Norman *wirewife*, but it turned actually into *girouette* probably through the influence of the Latin *girare* (“to turn”).⁵⁹

Once one understands the “mechanism” of phonetic etymology -- “every word is haunted by those that it resembles,”⁶⁰ as the writer Michel Butor said – one can ask oneself about these sonic analogies of words and groups of words, and in certain cases set them up in a profound and necessary interrelation, something that allows us to uncover some semantic parentage between certain words (that have no scientific etymological rapport between themselves) and the realities that they designate.⁶¹ Is it always totally by chance that some words resemble each other? All languages produce homophones ad infinitum; for example, in French: *mère / mer, mots / maux, on est / on naît, saprophyte / ça profite, sédentaire / c’est dans terre*, etc; or paronomasia or similarities like *ombrelle / ombelle*, etc. So, have fun finding any related meanings in the pairs chosen above; it can prove surprising. I am well aware that since the number of sounds in a language is limited, these verbal analogies are inevitable. But even if it is a matter of chance that produced, for example, in French: *tumeur / tu meurs* (“tumor” / “you die”), it remains no less significant that this trick of language tells us something, you may die of a tumor. Let’s never forget that *bambins, nous baignons* (“babies, we bathe”) first in the sounds! And this phonetic dimension of our maternal tongue influences considerably the effects of meaning (the “signified”). This is something that psychoanalysis has well demonstrated; Freud at first, but above all Lacan. Certain linkages of signifiants comprise the subject’s unconscious, by repression, and then the Freudian “return of the repressed” (*retour du refoulé*). There is therefore a primacy of the signifiant. This sort of autonomy that makes a signifiant “rebound” over another is well illustrated, for example, in the alphabetic unrolling of the semantic dictionaries, a veritable cascade of words, apparently

⁵⁹ Bruckner, *L’étymologie*, 56.

⁶⁰ Michel Butor, *Répertoire IV* (Paris: Editions Minuit, 1974): “*Tout mot est hanté par ceux qui lui ressemblent.*”

⁶¹ U. Eco, *L’Oeuvre ouverte* (Paris: Seuil, 1965, translation from the Italian of 1962) 282: A.A. Abehsera, *Babel: La langue promise* (Paris, Jerusalem: Editions Collectives, 1999).

with no regard to meaning, in most cases, except for the similarity of letters and sounds. The words enter into relationships, become contaminated with one another, via phonetic and/or semantic resemblance. Language lies sleeping in the individual – like the sediments in the ocean’s depths – “upon” the unconscious, which can manifest itself in drawing upon a vast network of puns, probably because the words engrave themselves upon our brain by sonic analogies. It is perhaps interesting to note in passing that LSD often provokes one to take words in their literal sense, “*au pied de la lettre*” (“at the foot of the letter’), as one says.⁶²

Poetry is one of the demonstrations of the importance of the language’s sonic dimension. And so, too, is literature in general. James Joyce, who leans heavily upon . . . Isidore of Seville and Giambattista Vico, uses verbal punning like a melody, creating effects of meaning, a veritable music of ideas.⁶³ Language learning in small children proves to be equally instructive, with regard to the primacy of sounds. And who has not sing-songed his way through a childish nonsense ditty like: “*J’en ai marre, marabout, bout de ficelle, selle de cheval, cheval de course, course à pied, pied de cochon, cochon de ferme, ferme ta gueule, gueule de rat, rat d’égout, dégoûtant, temps pluvieux, vieux faucon, conclusion: j’en ai marre!*”⁶⁴ (It defies translation, but: “I’ve had enough, ascetic Muslim cleric, end of string, horse’s saddle, racecourse horse, footrace course, pig’s foot, farm pig, shut your mouth, rat’s mouth, sewer rat with exquisite good taste, disgusting, rainy weather, aged falcon, conclusion: I’ve had enough!”) Gaignebet again perfectly sums up the question: “This immense network of puns, more or less, of words for spiritual entities, at work in psychoanalysis, molds the evolution of beliefs. Everyone, *with the exception of the consciousness of the philologist*, lives in a system of the language’s similarities of sounds, in the tumultuous exchange of sounds and meanings.”⁶⁵

And let us not forget humor, whenever there is a play on words. Everybody more

⁶² J.C. Bailey, “Le Grand secours”: 130-140, in *Mandala essai sur l’expérience hallucinogène* (Paris: Editions Pierre Belfond, 1969).

⁶³ Eco, *L’Oeuvre ouverte*, 282.

⁶⁴ This an actual ditty that all Francophone children in Belgium can recite by heart.

⁶⁵ Gaignebet, *Le Carnaval*, 163, italics mine. “*Cet immense réseau des calembours, des à-peu-près, des mots d’esprit, en oeuvre dans la psychanalyse, modèle l’évolution des croyances. Tout homme, à l’exception de la conscience du philologue, vit dans un système de proximités sonores du langage, dans le tumultueux échange des sons et des sens.*”

or less practices the “art” of punning: a verbal play founded on the similarity of sounds, because every speaker perceives other words in words. The proof of it is that the great French grammarians of the 17th century, Vaugelas and Malherbe, hoping to “purge” (*épurer* sic) the French vocabulary, went so far as to condemn as vulgar certain effects of the “signified” which resonated in words like *convainçu* (“convinced”), *consistoire* (“consistory”) (because in them one heard *con*, “cunt!”), and even certain very common forms of the verb, for example the present indicative of *vivre*, *je vis* (“I live”) or the passé simple of *voir*, *il vit* (“he saw”), because one heard (and saw!) the old word for the penis: *vi(t)*!⁶⁶

John Allegro bases his argument on verbal puns: like that of Simon called Peter, for which the Greek *petros*, *petra* (“stone”) goes back to the old Semitic name for mushroom, *pitra*; he does the same with *cephas*, etc.⁶⁷

Hebraic culture is, by tradition, very attentive to plays on language. The poet, and French translator of Hebrew, Henri Meschonnic emphasizes this in all his books: the words are echo chambers -- in a Hebrew word, one can always hear other words.⁶⁸ Puns have influenced the interpretation of texts; for example in the Bible: it is a play on words from a Sumerian poem that explains the creation of Eve from a rib of Adam (Genesis 2. 21). The god *Enki* is sick. The goddess *Ninti* can cure him. The Sumerian *ti* means “make one live” or “life,” *Ninti* “the woman who makes live.” But *Enki* is suffering on one side, also *ti* in Sumerian. By a pun, the Sumerians identified “the woman who makes one live” with “the woman from the side.” “And this play on words was able to pass into the Bible, where it lost its significance, since in Hebrew, the words “side” and “life” are pronounced and written differently.”⁶⁹ The Celtologists Alwyn and Brinkley Rees had the idea of

⁶⁶ G. Molinie, *La Stylistique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 3rd edition, 2001), 74-75.

⁶⁷ Allegro, *The Sacred Mushroom*, 76.

⁶⁸ H. Meschonnic, *Poétique du traduire* (Paris: Verdier, 1980). This translator of Biblical texts writes: “The experience of the Bible puts in evidence a problem with which we are confronted each time that we read a poem: it is that we hear and we don’t know what it is that we are hearing.” “*L’expérience de la Bible met en évidence un problème auquel nous sommes confrontés chaque fois que nous lisons un poème: qu’est-ce que nous entendons et que nous ne savons pas que nous entendons?*” Compare H. Meschonnic, *Au Commencement. Traduction de la Genèse* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2002).

⁶⁹ Amiet et al., *Naissance et l’écriture*, 260: “*Et ce jeu de mots a pu passer dans la Bible ou il perdit sa signification, puisqu’ en hébreu, les mots côte et vie se prononcent et*

establishing a rapport between *Peter de Fal* of Celtic mythology and the *linga* (=“phallus”) of ancient Indian tradition: they base it on the phonetic analogy: *Fal* and *phallus*.⁷⁰

The philological thesis of Allegro rests therefore on an established fact. The teachings of the religious authorities are always transmitted from an initiate to a disciple, as something quite apart from the public rites. Thus, every religion is comprised of an *exoteric* part for the general public and an *esoteric* part reserved for the initiates. The “true” name of God is usually dissimulated, up to the point of there being an absolute taboo imposed upon naming it. It was the same in the Indo-European world, where there were word plays and riddles in the gnomic poetry, for example, of Hesiod, among others. The use of metaphors for metaphors makes the original name disappear, with everything reinforced by the interacting complication of the languages, sometimes provoked, as in the case of Sanskrit, by the letters themselves.⁷¹ According to the Wassons, sonic slippage of metaphors, because of taboos, is very ancient.⁷² On the other hand, the etymons (or literal meanings according to their origins) in non-related languages seem identical, for example in the Eskimo languages and the Indo-European. This is exactly this the case for the word that signifies “mushroom,” where a linguistic root seems to persist across millennia of time and in distant languages, belonging to different linguistic families (Indo-European, Ural-Altai, for example).⁷³ Certain lexical areas – like those that are concerned with charged “signifieds” like mushrooms, drugs, and deities – can now be compared in a great number of languages and of diverse idioms, with the aid of computer search engines and specialized programs.⁷⁴ But again, the fungal vocabulary presents *s’écrivent différemment.*”

⁷⁰ F. Le Roux and C. Guyonvarc’h, *Les Druides* (Rennes, France: Editions Ouest-France, 1986), 222 and note.

⁷¹ B. Sergent, *Les Indo-européens* (Paris, 1995), 390.

⁷² Wasson, and Wasson, *Russia, Mushrooms, and History*, 99.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 143-144. Compare the Comparative Table of Languages in Wasson, *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*, 167.

⁷⁴ One should call attention here to the works in paleolinguistics – very controversial – of a . . . mycologist, namely François Marcel V. Locquin, who recalls, very pertinently, that language is much older than its writing. “—700,000 years: *Homo erectus* (. . .) is probably the man speaking a true language grossly articulated with some thirty separate phonemes.” “—700.000 years: *l’Homo erectus* (. . .) est probablement le premier homme parlant véritablement un langage articulé grossier d’une trentaine de phonèmes isolés.” Locquin, *L’Invention de l’humanité*, 45.

certain common semantic echoes in northern and southern Europe: denotations and connotations concerning the swelling, the sponge, tinder, the womb, sack, toad, elves, the penis, etc.⁷⁵

So to sum it up, vocalized language was put in place long before its written form, dozens of thousands of years earlier, or more like it, hundreds of thousands. Before any graphic sign, there came into being this sonic secretion of the human organism, which has played a determinative role in the association of humans into groups, then into societies, which have then “made religion” in “tying” human being together.⁷⁶

The logos “lives,” which is to say that it isn’t reduced to “citations” in semantic dictionaries, however inclusive they may pretend to be. Every dictionary is nothing but a graveyard of words, the repertory of their principally agreed upon meanings; hence the undertaking, in the somewhat Kafkaesque purifying environment of the French Academy, which, just after it completed a new edition of its celebrated dictionary, had immediately to go back to the beginning, right back to the letter ‘A,’ in view of this Satanic development! A lexicon represents just the tip of a semantic iceberg, which is potentially made up of the entire past of the language. The dictionaries lack, therefore, forever, all the idiosyncratic meanings, for example. As far as the semantic associations engendered by the sonorities – puns, emotions, syntactic turns of phrase – they cannot be catalogued!

Decidedly, a language is not *solely* what the majority thinks it is It churns up its signifiants at the very heart of the formulaic network and semantic hyper-complexes,

The audacious proposal of Locquin is based on the idea of a permanence of these sounds during 40,000 years: “In creating a word, and this once and for time, men project into this word, by virtue of the phonemes [Locquin in advance defines a series of prehistoric and pan-linguistic phonemes!] the archetypal signification of each of these phonemes; and the word doesn’t take on a life unless the archetypal signification is in accord with its ordinary meaning.” “*En créant un mot, et ceci de tout temps, les hommes projettent dans ce mot, grâce aux phonèmes, la signification archétypal de chacun des phonèmes; et le mot ne vit bien, que si cette signification est en accord avec le sens trivial.*” Marcel V. Locquin, “Le Fond commun des langages et des écritures”: 52-63, in *Science et Vie* (La Planète des hommes) n° 131, June, 1980. His thesis places back on the table the examination of the theory of onomatopoeia, as well as the – interesting – hypothesis of a common tree from which all the languages would have branched. See also, Marcel V. Locquin, *Quelle langue parlaient nos ancêtres préhistoriques?* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002).

⁷⁵ Wasson and Wasson, *Mushrooms, Russia and History*, 111-117.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 375.

Paul-Laurent Assoun, *Psychanalyse* (Paris: PUF, Collection Premier Cycle, 1997).

so well that it proves to be impossible to retrace the process completely. “A language is not an independent reality existing by itself, ‘canted’ or districted in the ghettos of a dictionary, conglomerated by a grammar and dropped from heaven like a manna on the desert of rough and unpolished intelligence. Like the sphagnum in a peat bog that dies at one end, regenerates at the other, and lives between the two, language is an unstable process,” as the philologist Cambier says con brio.⁷⁷

If the etymologies of John Allegro in *The Sacred Mushroom* are “false,” it is because he is performing phonetic etymology, in putting his finger while doing this on an aspect of the logos otherwise not apprehensible: the faculty that languages have to echo each other. Gaignebet was one of the first to formulate this clearly: “The folklorist, like the psychoanalyst, has to penetrate such a system of *folk* etymology. That which is transmitted to him is a system of beliefs and thoughts in use for centuries, even if is ‘inexact’ in the eyes of a science.”⁷⁸ “Inexact” here merely means “indemonstrable.”

To hear one language in another . . . to attend in its words . . . – and don’t forget that *attend* signifies first and foremost listening comprehension, from the Latin *attendere*.⁷⁹

That in my opinion is what John Allegro wanted to do in *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*.

The Allegretto Taboo

It occurs to me sometimes to ask myself if the “Allegro Affair” hasn’t taken on, with the passage of time – like the *Amantia muscaria* itself which is its subject – something of the aura of a taboo. Subjective projection, on my part? Let’s see.

I have discussed the Allegro case, person to person or via correspondence with a

⁷⁷ “Une langue n’est pas une réalité existant par soi, cantonnée dans un dictionnaire, bétonnée par une grammaire et descendue du ciel comme une manne sur le désert de l’intelligence fruste. A l’instar de la sphaigne des tourbières qui meurt par un bout, se régénère par l’autre et vit entre les deux, la langue est un processus instable.”

⁷⁸ Gaignebet, *La Carnaval*, 162: “Le folkloriste, comme le psychanalyste, se doit de pénétrer dans un tel système d’étymologie populaire. Ce qui lui est transmis est un système de croyances et de pensées en usage pendant des siècles, même s’il est ‘inexact’ aux yeux d’une science.”

⁷⁹ Wattiaux uses *entendre* and the Latin *intendere*: the basic meaning of both *intendere* and *attendere* in Latin is “stretch.”

great number of people: anthropologists, historians, philologists, mycologists, psychoanalysts . . . university academics or ‘loose gun’ and freelance⁸⁰ scholars, young and old, believers and atheists, In these encounters, I have often sensed clearly what I would call *hostility*. I have thus had to determine at what point the people who responded (or not!) to my letters, for example, took up a tone of annoyance, offense, scornfulness – all simply because I was questioning them about Allegro.

At first, not a single one of them responded: nothing! Was it a matter of their lack of the most elementary politeness?

Then, there were those who replied – very – briefly. Or even, that they were busy, and they suggested that I contact them again later: which I did . . . in vain. Such was the case, for example, with the novelist Abécassis, who had had enough time to fictionalize the whole affair scandalously, or even libelously.

After having read an article by the Catalan ethnologist J. Fericgla (where I read: “Despite the secrecy maintained for more than twenty centuries,” [he is speaking of the Eleusinian Mystery] “we know today that such *epopteia* [vision] or sacred ecstasy was achieved by the means of the ritual ingestion of entheogenic mushrooms (Wasson *et al.*, *Persephone’s Quest*) and that that constituted the central mystery and was later adopted by the early Christians in their ritual ceremony, the Mass (Allegro, *The End of the Road*); although with the passage of time, such consumption of sacred intoxicants was changed to that of a placebo.”⁸¹). I contacted him via e-mail, hoping to engage him in a dialogue, given my surprise to find a scientist perhaps ‘favorable’ to Allegro’s theses. Fericgla responded: “Agreed to discuss this, even in French if you wish!”⁸² Which I hastened to

⁸⁰ How many people are aware that a freelance is a “loose gun” or *franc-tireur*, in the era before guns replaced lances?

⁸¹ J.M. Fericgla, *El Peso central de los enteógenos en la dinámica cultural*, 1999, 2:

<http://www.muscaria.com/CIPRES/columbia.htm>

changed to www.imaginaria.org/columbia.htm “A pesar del secretismo mantenido durante más de veinte siglos, hoy se sabe que tal *epopteia* o *éxtasis sagrado*, era conseguida por medio del consumo ritual de hongos enteogénicos, y que ello constituyó el origen del misterio central ulterior adoptado por los primeros cristianos en su ceremonia ritual, la Misa; aunque con posterioridad, tal consumo de embriogantes fuera cambiado por el de un placebo.”

The ethnographer makes reference to another book by Allegro, *The End of the Road*, (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1971).

⁸² E-mail from J. Fericgla, dated 03/14/2000: “If you like, still, you can write me to this e-mail address with your questions. Also you can write me in your language, in French

do, asking him clearly his opinion about the Allegro case. I am still waiting for his reply.

Many serious scholars don't have time – to waste. The case with Samorini, for example⁸³: “It's true that I don't have much time to respond to you and to all the people who think that they see mushrooms everywhere.”⁸⁴

It's even ridiculously more bizarre, almost comic. I wrote to the French publisher of *Champignon sacré* in December 1991 to buy another copy of the book, which at that time was still found in the general catalogue of books available for sale on the Francophone market. The publisher Albin Michel responded to me immediately, scrawling this “pearl” as reply on my own handwritten letter: “Are you sure that it is a book published by Albin Michel?”⁸⁵ I had to get my second copy of the slim volume elsewhere secondhand.

One last example, and not the least: I wrote very courteously, as always, to a French Sumerologist, Jean Bottéro. He sends me his reply: “The work of J. Allegro (. . .) is absolutely worthless on the level of a serious and intelligent study of psychology or history of religions, even less of Sumerian or linguistic studies.”⁸⁶ It is an opinion that I respect; I have taken full notice of it elsewhere. But why did he add at the end of his letter: “This doesn't keep me from offering you and your work all the best wishes, as Henry IV said to the lover of his own mistress: *everybody has to have a life!*” As it turns out, why did he have to show himself unpleasant and, to say it bluntly, scornful toward someone who had only posed a question and expressed his personal opinion? But what hadn't pleased my correspondent in my letter was that I had dared connect “religion and drugs.”

I think that the attitude of rejection – and sometimes of hostility – with which some people, scholars or others, have received the work of Allegro is a very significant symptom of the malaise that overtakes them as soon as someone dares put in question, in one way or another, one of the great established religions of today: something that I have

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⁸³ Giorgio Samorini, whose work I much admire, and who has always very amiably always sent me copies of his articles and books.

⁸⁴ E-mail from G. Samorini, dated 04/03/2000.

⁸⁵ Les Editions Albin Michel, personal correspondence, dated 12/12/1991.

⁸⁶ Jean Bottéro, personal correspondence, dated 08/12/1/996: “L'ouvrage de J. Allegro (. . .) ne vaut strictement rien sur le plan d'une étude sérieuse et intelligente de psychologie ou d'histoire des religions, pas plus que sur le plan sumérien ou linguistique.”

never encountered when I broach the same subject with regard to the animist religions and / or the cults of long ago. And there is besides an obvious paradox in this position: why then is it necessary to become “aggressive” toward the interlocutor, since one is certain, for oneself, that he is right? Science has an answer.⁸⁷

One could just as well consider at leisure what Heinrich wrote about Allegro: “Allegro was attacked on every side and ridiculed mercilessly, *as if his hypothesis were more ridiculous than believing*, for example, that a human being created the universe, revived from a horrible death and floated bodily up to heaven. Actually his contentions are *far more reasonable* than the accepted versions of Christian and Jewish mythology (. . .).”⁸⁸ I would like to emphasize exactly two words: *hypothesis* and *reasonable*.

Conclusion

John Allegro’s method sets itself back upright, in the order of a “return of the repressed.” Granted that his central thesis is nothing but a bagatelle and that he has committed many an error in *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*, Allegro managed to make apparent what Wasson strove to show in all his works: to acknowledge that whenever it is a matter of religions, it is almost always a question of drug(s),⁸⁹ sometimes only on the level of residual remnants in the language.

The final summation: Allegro brought to light, with much awkwardness and incoherency, the very complex synergies that run through the evolution of a language. He was applying what certain psychoanalysts, writers, and linguists (like Freud, Lucan, Joyce, Barthes, Meschonnic, and others) were experimenting with: the sound of language, the “hearing” of one language in another; a work of sounding the depths, which implies the regurgitation of words.

In any case, it is a HYPOTHESIS, and I think it is defensible.

This method allows us to “comprehend” (in its etymological sense: “to bring it along with oneself”) why the slang for the synthetic psychedelic drugs, MDMA, or

⁸⁷ See the recent issue of the journal *Science et Vie*: “Pourquoi on croit en Dieu? Les étonnantes réponses des neuro-sciences,” n° 1019, August 2002.

⁸⁸ Heinrich, *Strange Fruit*, 3; italics mine.

⁸⁹ One ought to add also of *sex*, but that is matter that I have chosen to avoid here in order not to burden the argument.

Methylene-Dioxy-Meth-Amphetamine, called *ecstasy*, has been termed, in the parlance of its consumers, Adam,⁹⁰ and MDEA or 3,4 Methylene-Dioxy-EthylAmphetamine, Eve.⁹¹

Finally, should we perhaps note the advice of François Rabelais? “If you don’t find the truth with the wise, go look among the madmen.”⁹²

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⁹⁰ It is curious that ADAM is also an anagram of MDMA.

⁹¹ M. Rosenzweig, *Les Drogues dans l’histoire entre remède et poison* (Brussels: De Boek and Belin., 1998), 172-175.

⁹² “Si tu ne trouves pas la vérité chez les sages, va voir chez les fous.”

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