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BY

ROBERT GRAVES



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considerations. How much Nero himself already knew about the plot is uncertain; but on a later occasion he laughingly quoted the Greek proverb: 'Mushrooms are the food of the gods', and added that mushrooms had, in fact, made a god of his predecessor.

Agrippina satisfied herself that Locusta's *amanita phalloides* was a wonderfully effective drug, when (according to Dio Cassius) she killed her enemy Marcus Julius Silanus with a dose of the poison that had been prepared for Claudius. Nor does this seem to have been her last use of it. Tacitus reports that Annaeus Serenus, Commander of Nero's Bodyguard (whom we meet elsewhere as an intimate friend of Seneca's) assisted Nero's secret liaison with a slave-girl named Acte; and that Nero appealed to Seneca for help when Agrippina got wind of the affair. But Tacitus omits to mention Agrippina's revenge on Serenus, and we must turn to Pliny's *Natural History* for the information:

The safest fungi are those, the flesh of which is red, the colour being more pronounced than that of the mushroom. The next best are the white ones, the stems of which have a head very similar to the cap worn by the Flamens; and a third kind are the *suilli* ('piglets'), very conveniently adapted for poisoning. Indeed, it is but very recently that they have carried off whole families, and all the guests at a banquet; Annaeus Serenus, for instance, the commander of Nero's Guard, together with all the tribunes and centurions. What great pleasure, then, can there be in partaking of a dish of so doubtful a character as this?

Pliny means, I suppose, that *amanita phalloides* can readily be smuggled into a harmless dish of *amanita caesarea*, with no chance of immediate discovery, and with spectacular success, especially if one does not care how many others, besides the intended victim, die horribly from it.*

¹ A limited edition of the Wassons' monumental work on mushrooms, *Mushrooms, Russia and History*, was published last year by Pantheon Books (New York), at \$125 a copy. It is available at the British Museum, if anyone wishes to supplement his knowledge of the Claudius case with a fascinating account of the similar Girard case early in 1918; few other copies have reached the British Isles.

What Food the Centaurs ate

I HAVE never in my life visited Athens, Corinth, Mycenae, Constantinople or Jerusalem. The truth is, I dislike sight-seeing and scheduled ancient monuments, and have no time to spare for leisured foreign travel. The Arabs are probably right in their view that the human spirit cannot fly faster than the trot of a camel and, if the body has gone ahead by Cadillac, plane or express-train, may take several days to catch up. It is bad enough when a modern elevator flashes me past twenty storeys. I always have to wait a minute or two at the top for my rustic spirit to follow by the stairs. But I do enjoy travelling full-speed in the wilder regions of my own, some say crazy, head.

'What song the Sirens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, though puzzling questions, are not beyond all conjecture,' wrote Sir Thomas Browne, some three centuries ago, in *Urn Burial*. Both these questions—the one about Achilles was, it happens, propounded by the Emperor Tiberius—are puzzling only in so far as the answers depend on knowing at which season of the year Achilles hid among the women, and how many Sirens sang: mythical facts not beyond anthropological conjecture. So, after first reading *Urn Burial*, I could not rest until I had proved to my own satisfaction that Achilles called himself 'Drosoessa' ('the Dewy One'), because it was Springtime when he hid among those girls on the island of Scyros; and that what the three-times-three Sirens sang might be reconstructed from slightly Christianized versions of their chant extant in Old Irish.

Three questions that have lately engrossed me still more are these: what food the Centaurs ate; by what name the God

Dionysus was known to the Maenads; and what lies behind the story of Samson and the three hundred foxes which he sent among the Philistine cornfields. Since every right-minded romantic has a warm feeling for Centaurs, Maenads, and Samson, a stage-by-stage report on my mental journey in search of the answers will perhaps amuse some of you.

It started on April 13th last year, when our Majorcan postman brought me a regal gift: a signed, limited folio-edition (Copy No. 2) of Valentina and Gordon Wasson's two-volume life-work on mushrooms. Hitherto I had read only the shorter, 1952 proof version, outdated by their sensational discovery in 1953 of an ancient Mexican mushroom cult, generally believed extinct, but still very much alive in Oaxaca province. Soon afterwards, *Life Magazine* published an account of their adventures, so I need say no more than this: that the eating of sacred mushrooms gave my matter-of-fact New York friends—her a physician, him a banker—visions of a heavenly kingdom so glorious and bejewelled that the warning of the *cuandero*, or oracular priest, did not seem exaggerated. He had said: 'This food will take you thither where God dwells!' The Wassons' experiences went far to justify a hunch which the three of us shared—after a correspondence lasting for several years—that the *mycophobia*, the irrational fear of mushrooms, felt by a great part of mankind, is a left-over from an ancestral religious awe.

A simple anecdote from childhood. My sisters and I spent a summer holiday on our grandfather's Bavarian estate. Mother, who had been brought up there, used to send us into the forest, most afternoons, with some young German cousins. The cousins taught us how to recognize by sight and smell many varieties of edible mushrooms which grew under the pines or in the clearings. Nobody seemed at all afraid that one of us might get poisoned: we soon knew the *Täubling*, the *Eierschwamm*, the *Pfifferling*, the *Steinpilz*, and the rest. Our finds would be served for supper with delicious sauces by fat Fannie, the cook. That must have been in 1906. Next year, spending our holidays as usual in North Wales, we came on patches of these Bavarian mushrooms growing abundantly near the house. Of course we filled every available basket and hat and hurried home in triumph. Mother, however, raised her hands in horror: 'Throw them away at once, dear children! They are deadly poison!'

'But, Mother, they look and smell exactly the same as . . .'

'Throw them away, I tell you! No, bury them in the garden, it's safer. The mushrooms in Wales may look and smell like those at Laufzorn, but they are poisonous for all that. Here one can trust only the common white field-mushroom.'

I have since wondered whether she really believed our Welsh *Täublinge* and *Eierschwämme* to be poisonous—which they were not—or whether she feared that Mrs Nelson, the irreplaceable cook, would give notice if told to serve them for supper with delicious sauces. But I am now pretty sure that Mother was not telling even a white lie; because the other day a Russian mushroom-lover assured me in all seriousness that some of the varieties he liked best at home were poisonous when picked in Czechoslovakia. He was, of course, mistaken; his information may have come from Sudeten-Germans, who had not quite so catholic a taste for mushrooms as the Czechs and Russians. In North Wales, I should add, we could pick as many common white field-mushrooms as we liked, since the villagers thought them no less poisonous than the rest.

People of British stock are quite content to dismiss mycophobia as a social phenomenon hardly worth discussing. 'After all,' they say, 'most mushrooms are poisonous, so why not play safe? There are plenty of other things to eat. Why grub around under rotten tree-stumps for nasty-looking fungi? Leave that to the Slavs. Life is cheap behind the Iron Curtain.' Yet only three European mushrooms, *amanita phalloides* and two others which experts alone can differentiate from it, are in fact lethal. You might as well refuse raspberries because the deadly-nightshade berry is poisonous; or apples because of the terrible manchineel.

A sound anthropological rule attributes any widespread disgust for wholesome food, such as horseflesh among Indo-Europeans, to its having once been taboo. What is tabooed becomes both very holy and very disgusting—and in accounts of ancient European sieges the besieged always eat grass, rats, and leather-jerkins before they slaughter their horses. During both World Wars, most Englishmen preferred going hungry to buying tender, ration-free horse-steaks at the special horsemeat shops set up.

And another important anthropological rule: every taboo once had its relaxation. Either all classes broke it on some

particular day of the year, or else it was generally binding on everyone except royal or priestly functionaries. In Classical Greece, even the general prohibition of cannibalism was relaxed on certain privileged occasions.

Why the English still abstain from horseflesh is that their Saxon and Danish ancestors (not to mention the Romans) had once participated in a sacramental October horse-feast, the greatest holiday of the year; though horseflesh was taboo at all other times. However, when the Church banned this feast as idolatrous—instead of legalizing its quaint customs, as in the cases of Yule and Easter—the awe it had inspired changed to revulsion. The Danish authorities even made forcible eating of horseflesh a deterrent to crime: by 1860, no other meat might be provided for felons in gaol.

Important taboos are often guarded by strict precautions against their involuntary breach. It was in this spirit that the Pharisees discussed the Deuteronomic injunction 'Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother's milk!'—originally a warning against Orphic sacrifices. 'To avoid so grave a sin, Israelites must not eat *any* kid seethed in milk, for fear this may be its mother's; nor any lamb either, for fear that a flayed kid may have been mistaken for a flayed lamb. In fact, they must never take meat and milk at the same meal.' The ruling became orthodox Jewish doctrine. The English aversion to frogs' legs, a great delicacy across the Channel, seems due to ancestral awe of the toad, the frog's cousin—a creature, by the way, closely associated with the mushroom taboo and treated with the same unreasoning hate. So the Wassons and I guessed that the sanctity of a particular mushroom, eaten only by privileged persons at rare love-feasts, for the sake of the divine ecstasies or hallucinations which it produces, may have caused the general ban on all mushrooms whatsoever. In parts of Wales and Brittany even the field-mushroom is not exempt.

This theory the Wassons strengthened by their exhaustive study of mushroom nomenclature in mycophobic areas. Now, most mothers discourage young children from trying food, by making grimaces of disgust, and calling it *ca-ca!*—an appeal to the toilet taboo, one of the few that children understand. The same principle has apparently been applied to mushrooms in all mycophobic countries. The ordinary Greek for 'mushroom' is

mukes, from which of course derive the words 'mycophobe', 'mycology' and, ultimately 'mushroom'. But *mukes* also means 'nasal mucous', or 'snot'. Some mushrooms have far coarser names—the sort of words one finds scrawled on the walls of privies in the worst quarters of the larger cities. Yet one need not feel surprised that growths with so foul a reputation are also regarded as divine. It is only, so to speak, Mother saying: '*Ca-ca!* Don't eat that, children!'

The English, Scandinavians, Dutch, Northern French, North-Western Germans, Celts and Greeks have inherited the general taboo on mushrooms; yet did any of these people ever worship a Mushroom-god, as the Mexicans of Oaxaca do? Another question: since the nine hallucinatory mushrooms eaten by the Wassons were all native Mexican varieties—four of them new to science—do mushrooms with similar properties grow in the Old World? Even before their Mexican journey, the Wassons could answer this second question by pointing to the *amanita muscaria*, or 'fly-amanite' of Europe. They were aware, moreover, that though this handsome, scarlet-capped mushroom with white spots was popularly held to be the deadliest fungus of all, it had never been known to kill anyone in reasonably good health. (I should add that the American variety is yellow, not red, though with the same white spots, and may be more powerful in its effects.) But the fly-amanite is hot as hot—as I learned at the age of twelve when I experimentally touched a piece with the tip of my tongue; it tasted like liquid fire.

The Korjaks of Kamchatka regularly excite themselves with fly-amanite, and will pay as much as a reindeer for a single dose. What happens then is that their faces turn puce, and they become possessed of an extraordinary muscular strength, often combined with a lust to kill, and an overpowering sexual desire. The excitement induces not only temporal and spatial delusions—of the sort that fascinated Lewis Carroll's Alice when she nibbled the mushroom—but also, it is claimed, the gift of clairvoyance. Moreover, responsible Scandinavian scholars have ceased to regard the mediaeval Berserk madness as a form of collective insanity; it was deliberately induced, they believe, by the individual eating of fly-amanite. *Berserkgang* ended suddenly, after Berserks had been outlawed by royal proclamation—in 1015 A.D. (Norway) and 1123 A.D. (Iceland); and the

clinical picture is characteristic of fly-amanite excitement as reported elsewhere—though, indeed, the sagas do not tell us how the Berserks felt when seized with ecstasy. Fly-amanite, by the way, does not grow in Iceland; it would have had to be imported from Scandinavia.

Now for those Centaurs and Maenads. The Wassons reproduce in their book the illustration I discovered for them in the late Professor A. B. Cook's *Zeus*: an Etruscan mirror-back dating from 500 B.C., which shows the Greek hero Ixion tied to a wheel. No one had previously noticed the mushroom growing at Ixion's feet—perhaps because Professor Cook, with his mind on higher things, asked readers to disregard the 'flower' in the foreground. Commenting on this mirror, the Wassons drew attention to the erotic symbolism of Ixion's mushroom, which is sliced lengthwise so that stem and cap appear as though in *coitus*. The Wassons are not cursed with a Freudian imagination, but know that Greek vase-painters and poets always portrayed Ixion—the mythical ancestor of two pre-Hellenic mountain tribes named Lapiths and Centaurs—as a sexual delinquent. In punishment for Ixion's attempt to rape the Goddess Hera, her husband the Almighty God Zeus soon sent him spinning through space, spread-eagled to a fiery wheel. Yet meanwhile Ixion had, in his delirium, mistaken a cloud for Hera, and begotten on it a son named Centaurus; which same Centaurus (an aberrant, rather than a delinquent) is said to have later fathered the Hippo-Centaurs—half men and half stallions—by debauching a herd of Magnesian mares. The Greeks derived the syllable *cent* from the work *kentron*, which means 'goad', or 'stimulation'.

Though Ixion's mushroom appears in cross-section on the mirror-back, so that the outside of the cap cannot be seen, it looks to me like a fly-amanite. Two further details of the design sustain the Wassons' sexual argument: Ixion is wearing a pair of wings, and the mirror's circular border is decorated with a length of ivy. The wings plainly refer to the famous erotic charm mentioned by Theocritus, which made a member of the opposite sex fall madly in love with whoever tied a live wryneck to a fire-wheel—the fire-wheel being an instrument for kindling fire by friction—and sent it whizzing giddily around. One of Pindar's *Odes* describes how Medea used this charm on Jason,

newly come to Colchis in search of the Golden Fleece. The wryneck (a peculiar bird, which hisses like a serpent) was sacred to the erotic God Dionysus, and gave him the surname 'Iynges' ('of the wryneck'). Ivy was likewise sacred to Dionysus, as can be seen in almost every vase-painting of Maenads and Satyrs. Thus the Etruscan engraver seems to hint at a close association between Ixion the sex-maniac, and Dionysus the Berserk.

Here it occurred to me that, according to certain mythographers, a very different divine punishment had been inflicted on Ixion and his son Peirithous, King of the Lapiths. (The name *Peirithous*—'he who whirls around'—suggests that he inherited his father Ixion's passions; and, of course, he is chiefly remembered for having tried to rape the Goddess Persephone.) Instead of being giddily whirled through space, father and son were condemned to sit together, starving, on a golden bench in Hell, and watch while delicious banquets were served them, but always tantalizingly whisked away again by the Furies. This form of torture, which does not seem to fit the crime, at once connects Ixion with his fellow-criminal Tantalus: for the Furies kept Tantalus tied for ever to a tree, waist-deep in water, dry-mouthed and empty-bellied, while rich fruits dangled tantalizingly about his head. And Tantalus, who had often dined at Zeus's table on Mount Olympus, was (it seems) being punished not only for the crime of having tried to trick the gods into cannibalism but, worse, for having set ambrosia, their sacred food, before his mortal friends. I wondered whether Ixion and Peirithous could have committed Tantalus's crime, since they suffered so similar a torture? Well, what *was* ambrosia?

The meaning of 'ambrosia', the food of the gods, like 'nectar', their drink, is: 'that which confers immortality'. The Greek grammarians define ambrosia as a thick porridge of honey, water, fruit, olive-oil, cheese and pearl-barley; though exactly what kind of fruit—whether grapes, quinces, apples, pears, pomegranates, medlars, strawberries, arbutus-berries, or figs—is, oddly enough, not specified. And why did they trouble to mention water among the ingredients? There is something funny here. Have we the least evidence, either, that Greek cooks, warned by Tantalus's fate, took care to keep these six common staples from being served together at the same banquet—as (for instance) orthodox Jews religiously keep milk and meat

apart, because of the *syeg*, or 'hedge', put by the Pharisee Sages around the text: 'Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother's milk'? Are the grammarians fooling us?

At this point, I wrote down the Greek words of the ambrosia recipe, as follows, one underneath the other:

MELI
UDOR
KARPOS
ELAIOS
TUROS
ALPHITA

Next, I wrote down the nectar recipe, namely honey, water and fruit:

MELI
UDOR
KARPOS

And also, while I was about it, the recipe for *kukeón* ('mixture'), the draught which the Goddess Demeter, during her search for the lost Persephone, accepted in the palace of King Celeus at Eleusis—thus breaking a prolonged fast—and which was thereafter downed in her memory by initiates of the Greater Mysteries. *Kukeón* is mint-water mixed with pounded barley:

MINTHAION
UDOR
KUKŌMENON
ALPHITOIS

Then I remembered how the Emperor Nero, after murdering and deifying the Emperor Claudius, his step-father, had joked about the drug employed by his professional poisoner Locusta: namely, juice of the lethal *amanita phalloides*, added to the *amanita caesarea*, an edible mushroom of which Claudius was extravagantly fond. Nero remarked how right the Greeks were to call mushrooms proverbially 'the food of the gods'. Two centuries later, the learned philosopher Porphyry, a sworn enemy of Christians, similarly described mushrooms as *theotrophous*—a

post-Classical form of the adjective *theotropheis*, a stock-epithet for ambrosia—which means 'god-nourishing'.

So, if mushrooms were ambrosia, and if ambrosia was mushrooms, be pleased to examine those three sets of initial letters—M-U-K-E-T-A; M-U-K; M-U-K-A. You are at liberty to call me crazy, but I read them as three clear examples of *ogham* (which was what the ancient Irish bards called the device of spelling out a secret word by using the initial letters of other ordinary words). MUKETA answers the question: 'What do the gods eat?'; for MUKETA is the accusative of MUKES ('mushroom'). (It may be objected that the E of MUKETA is long, whereas the E of ELAIOS, 'oil', is short; but the Greeks did not distinguish long E from short in their earlier alphabets.) MUKA answers the question: 'What grants me the mystic vision?'; for MUKA is an earlier form of the word MUKES ('mushroom'). In the nectar recipe, a terminal A for ALPHITA ('pearl-barley') seems to have dropped out; since 'Demeter' means 'Barley-mother', she could hardly have failed to include barley in her *kukeón*. MUKA again! Now I could understand the supererogatory mention of UDOR ('water'), and the too-general mention of KARPOS ('fruit'), in the ambrosia recipe: U and K happened to be represented by those words in the priestly food-ogham. The Irish bards had a food-ogham, too, called *biad-ogham* by the author of *The Book of Ballymote* (a fourteenth-century tract on Old Irish cryptology), and found it difficult to provide certain letters with familiar food-names.

Learned scholars will, of course, dismiss my discovery as a mare's nest, or at best an odd verbal coincidence; on the ground that not a single mushroom figure in the works of Homer, Hesiod, or even any of the Attic dramatists. The first recorded mentions, they will point out, are Hellenistic, and made either by botanists or physicians. Yet, however strong the dramatists' scorn for the humble mushroom may have been, one would expect at least *some* admission that it existed: a metaphor, perhaps, drawn from its sudden rapid growth; or a term of comic abuse, as when Shakespeare disposes of a character in *Troilus and Cressida* with 'thou toadstool!' This looks to me, learned scholars, very much like a conspiracy of silence—a conspiracy natural enough if mushrooms were the hallucinatory agents

used by the mystagogues in the Eleusinian Mysteries (sacred to Demeter and Persephone and Dionysus)—the secret of which nobody ever blabbed in the course of all those centuries. There certainly *was* a secret: are we really expected to believe that the *epoptae*, or adepts, derived the visions that made them gasp for wonder from a soft drink of mint-flavoured barley-water? 'I trow not!' as St Paul saith. Besides, since the Attic drama came under Dionysus's own patronage, Euripides and his fellow-playwrights had to be careful what secrets they gave away. Do you agree? I fear most of you do not. 'The flower in the foreground may be disregarded,' you repeat obstinately.

Well, the Wassons' book arrived in Majorca on April 13th, 1957. On April 27th, reluctantly as usual, I left the island and set off with my wife and children for London, dawdling through France by car at a pace no greater than the trot of a fast camel. This was our annual visit: to buy books, see friends and relatives, re-stock wardrobes. Three weeks away would be quite enough. Since I don't drive, but leave that to my wife and my son William, I had plenty of time for some more wandering inside my head as France slid by. No need to describe our riverside *fêtes champêtres*; or the pleasant *auberges routières*, where we slept at night in preference to hotels; or the anxieties of a clutch that mysteriously kept slipping, or the wobble that later developed in the steering . . . I kept mentally turning over the folio pages of the Wassons' book; mentally, because the two volumes weigh thirteen pounds between them, and had to be left behind. An important point made there is that over a great part of the world—Greece, Palestine, Persia, China, New Zealand, Mexico—mushrooms are popularly connected with lightning. Plutarch's *Convivial Questions*, written at a time when the taboo on the mention of mushrooms had weakened—Plutarch was Nero's contemporary—records an argument between a group of philosophers on the subject of mushrooms; Plutarch's own contribution being that mushrooms are unlike any tree or herb, because they have no roots and are well known to grow not from seed, but from the simple impregnation of the soil by lightning. The Wassons had found this same belief among the mountaineers of Oaxaca, where the Mushroom-god is also the Lightning-god. 'Well,' I thought, 'in Classical Greek religion the God Zeus, who controlled lightning, had been conventionally sired by

Cronus on Rhea. But what about Dionysus—born from a flash of lightning that impregnated the Underworld-goddess Semele?

If my argument held, Dionysus, who played a part in the Mysteries not only of the Goddesses Demeter and Persephone, but of the Goddess Rhea too, may once have been the Mushroom-god. And the fly-amanite may have been the secret agent which sent his Maenads raging, with froth on their lips, across the wild hills, tearing in pieces men and beasts—among them Pentheus of Thebes and Orpheus of Macedonia. Pentheus, according to Euripides, had his head wrenched off by Maenads who included his own loving mother Agave. Orpheus suffered the same unusual fate. Since they died as representatives of Dionysus, did it perhaps refer to the necessary removal of the sacred mushroom-cap from its stalk? Dionysus's devotees at first drank beer, laced with the toxic juice of yellow ivy—hence the sacred ivy-wreath—and later took to wine. But they drank this, presumably, to wash down the fiery fragments of mushroom; because to tear even a kid in pieces, such fantastic muscular strength is needed as no beer or wine or mead can provide. Towards the close of the seventh century B.C., the tyrants of Athens, Corinth and Sicyon legalized Dionysus's worship in their cities, apparently as a means of exercising some control over the Bacchic orgies, which had caused serious breaches of the peace. A hundred years later, Dionysus was considered civilized enough for enrolment among the Twelve Olympians: the Goddess Hestia being presumed to have relinquished her Council seat in his favour. After that, no more old-type outbreaks of Bacchic madness are recorded; nothing worse than cases of vinous abandon.

One strange early myth concerns Dionysus's invasion of Bactria with his army of Satyrs and Maenads. This legend cannot have been a parody of Alexander's expedition to Bactria and beyond in 327 B.C., since Euripides had mentioned it in his *Bacchae*, some eighty years previously. Indeed, because the *Bacchae* was first staged at the Macedonian court, Alexander seems rather to have copied Dionysus. Yet no record exists of an earlier Greek expedition than Alexander's to the Far East. Then does the Dionysus invasion story refer to some small Berserk foray from Macedonia into Thrace—Midas, we learn from a sixth-century source, entertained one of the stragglers near the

Macedonian Mount Bromium—the members of which suffered from the delusion (characteristic of fly-amanite intoxication) that they had triumphantly covered many thousands of miles?

*

If so, the fly-amanite may have changed the course of European history, and even been the reason why the common language of Britain and the States is not a barbarous dialect of Greek. Let me explain this paradox. Alexander the Great had inherited from his father, King Philip of Macedon, the best army in Europe; equipped with a new tactical device, the phalanx, which could break any army opposed to it by bringing to bear a maximum concentration of spear-power at a given point. Philip had already conquered Thrace and overawed all Greece. Why did Alexander not fulfil Philip's dream of making Macedonia the ruler of the Greek world? True, he completed the subjugation of Greece itself and, after seizing the cities of Ionia from the Persians, moved south to occupy the Greek-speaking colonies of Syria and Palestine. But why did he not then add the Western Greeks to his dominions—cities of Sicily, Southern Italy, Campania, Southern France, Eastern and Southern Spain? Who could have stopped him? He had the infantry, he had the ships, he had a fine cavalry arm, he enjoyed complete sovereignty. The Romans were not yet a dominant power in Italy, but divided among themselves and still engaged in local campaigns against their Etruscan, Latin and Samnite neighbours. The phalanx would have gone through the Romans' rigid lines like a knife through pie-crust, and very soon Greek would have become the official language of Western Europe. Instead, Alexander marched far out of the Greek area in a seemingly idle progress towards the Far East. Why? Was it because, when he consulted the Oracle of Zeus Ammon in the Oasis of Siwwa, the priests confirmed him in his belief that he was not really King Philip's son, but (as his mother Olympias claimed) the offspring of her midnight love-adventure with Almighty Zeus who came in the guise of a serpent? Alexander wished to prove himself at last the equal of his divine half-brother Dionysus. Now Dionysus, according to Euripides, had destroyed the armies of the Persians, conquered all Asia Minor,

visited Arabia Felix, and roamed with his Satyrs and Maenads as far as Bactria; he had also punished the Thebans for a refusal to worship his godhead, by sending the women mad and encouraging them to murder their own children. Alexander improved on this record: when the Thebans disowned his power, he razed their city, butchered most of them and sold the rest as slaves; he also marched much farther than Bactria, founding cities in India itself; and the fleet which he built on the Euphrates for the invasion of Arabia Felix was prevented from sailing only by his death. Alexander's greatest mistake has been to compete with Dionysus as a drinker; he died after a three-day carousal.

It is true that later mythologists—Strabo, Arrian and Diodorus Siculus—credit Dionysus with the conquest of India, the founding of cities there, and the spread of his worship; but this reads like a pious attempt to make Dionysus the equal of Alexander.

*

Dionysus's own feasts were called 'the Ambrosia'—repeat, *the Ambrosia*—and took place during the mushroom season. Were they originally mushroom orgies? By eating the divine mushroom, did Ixion, Tantalus, the Centaurs, the Satyrs, and the Maenads become as gods? And, later, did the religious leaders of Greece, meeting perhaps at the Olympic Games which Heracles had founded, impose a ban on excitatory mushrooms (as the Norwegian Eric Jarl seems to have done in 1015 A.D.), and make wine the sole permitted intoxicant for the Dionysus cult? An official all-Greek ban on mushroom-ambrosia would explain Tantalus's and Ixion's punishment—the sacred mushroom being thereafter reserved for persons of good birth and reputation who could qualify as adepts in the Mysteries. Heracles was himself initiated into the Mysteries by King Erechtheus of Athens . . . 'If only I could find a Greek vase,' I thought, 'showing Maenads in the act of eating their god! But perhaps this sacramental rite was banned too early.'

The Wassons have gathered mushroom nomenclature from all over the world. 'Toad' and 'serpent' occur frequently in the popular names; so does 'fox'. Toads, when irritated, exude a poisonous sweat; serpents sting; foxes bite. I remembered now that toad, serpent and fox are mentioned together by the

mythographer Apollodorus as badges of the three divisions into which the Peloponnese was divided—the name ‘Peloponnese’ commemorates Tantalus’s son Pelops, the one who got eaten—with toad for Argos, fox for Messene, serpent for Laconia. What is more, the Peloponnesian capital, where Agamemnon ruled as High King before he sailed to Troy, was Mycenae. Agamemnon claimed divine descent from Zeus through his ancestor Perseus; and Perseus, according to the historian Pausanias, gave the city its name because he discovered *mukai* (‘mushrooms’) growing on the site.

Mycenae stood in the territory of Argos, earlier known as Phoronium, in honour of its founder, Phoroneus, a shadowy demi-god said to have taught man the use of fire and first made this tripartite division of the Peloponnese. Since his mother was the nymph Melia (‘ash-tree’), and since ash-trees were believed to attract lightning more than other trees, he may have had the same spectacular nativity as Dionysus, the Lightning-god. Mythographers make *Phoroneus* mean ‘bringer of a price’, because he also ‘invented markets’; but surely markets invented themselves? Besides, a god so holy as Phoroneus the Fire-giver might well conceal his real name and expect his worshippers to address him by a periphrasis, or else retain only the consonants of his name while changing the vowels—as the Israelites did with the name ‘JHWH’, which was not really pronounced ‘Jehovah’. And since the emblem of Argos was a toad, could ‘Phoroneus’ perhaps represent PHRYNEUS, ‘toad-spirit’? ‘Toadstools’, or ‘toad’s bread’, is a generic term used in England and the Low Countries for all tabooed mushrooms, and a German chemist has lately announced that the fly-amanite contains the very toxin, *bufoninin* (from the Latin *bufo*, ‘a toad’), which is secreted by the toad’s sweat glands! According to Pliny, the Latin historian, a hush of awe descends on any company when a toad is placed in their midst, but he fails to explain why; maybe he just did not know. However, one of the Guatemalan mushroom-stones shown in the Wassons’ book, relics of a divine mushroom cult extinct for perhaps three thousand years, represents a toad-god sitting beneath his mushroom. Did Phoroneus teach his folk the use of the fiery fly-amanite? Ordinary fire had already been given to mankind by the Titan Prometheus. Now, birch, the fly-amanite’s favourite host in

Northern Europe, does not grow south of the forty-fifth parallel, which runs through Roumania and Yugoslavia; and though Phoroneus is called ‘son of the ash-tree’, because of its association with lightning, the fly-amanite in Greece grows only under conifers. Dionysus’s cone-tipped thyrsus probably commemorates this botanical fact.

In Russian, Czech and Hungarian, ‘little foxes’ is the name given to *chanterelles*—the small, yellow mushrooms, like back-blown parasols, which the Swedes and Norwegians, for some reason, exempt from their ban; as the Anglo-Saxons exempt *psalliota campestris*, or the field-mushroom. ‘Little foxes’ is a strange metaphor, since the fox always figures in myth and folklore as the sly enemy of man, and Oriental legends invariably associate it with magic. All over China, little red foxes are said to gather in circles around some old white fox, from whom they learn how to disguise themselves as human beings and insinuate themselves into unsuspecting families. African and European legends echo this fear of foxes; which become ‘cute’ only after easy means of trapping them for their fur are available. The Greeks thought their man-eating Teumessian Vixen very far from cute. So it may be that ‘little foxes’ was once a deliberately terrifying term for mushrooms in general (with a hint at magic properties), but that famine taught Slavs and Scandinavians to cook and eat a particular variety of ‘little foxes’—just as Frenchmen have gradually learned to eat horribly named varieties: ‘devil’s flatus’, ‘snot’, ‘corruption’, ‘dog’s urine’, and even worse. The Thracians, by the way, Dionysus’s sturdiest supporters, wore caps of caracal—the caracal is a spotted fox—which, in vase-paintings, closely resemble fly-amanites.

‘There are no mushrooms at all in the Christian religion,’ the Wassons regretfully state. But is that really so? What about Samson in the Old Testament? When the spirit of the Lord came upon him, he used to go berserk and perform sensational feats of strength and valour. Samson is described as a Nazirite, which meant that wine was tabooed to him; yet in those days every taboo had its annual relaxation. For instance, Egyptian priests ate pork at their mid-winter feast in honour of Osiris; and the Jews, before their reformation, doubtless did the same. Samson, I was sure, must have drunk wine by the skinful at the Feast of Tabernacles in honour of the local Dionysus.

Then I remembered those three hundred foxes! Samson is credited with having caught three hundred foxes, set fire to their tails and sent them, in pairs, among the Philistine cornfields. I had always thought this a most implausible story, even for the Bible. Consider the labour of catching three hundred separate foxes—foxes do not hunt in packs—the inconvenience of caging them when caught, and the difficulty of tying lighted torches to their tails, and making them run among the corn! How far simpler to use men with torches! Now: suppose that this was what Samson actually did? Suppose that he enlisted a combat-group of Israelites—300 was the regular number, to judge from the story of Gideon's choosing his force to fight the Midianites—and dosed them with pairs of 'little foxes': not the tasty and harmless *chanterelles*, but little foxes with fire in their tails, namely a delirium-inducing species of mushroom? (The Mexicans invariably eat mushrooms in pairs, not singly.) That would make military sense. The after-effect of fly-amanite is to leave one utterly flat and helpless. The Berserks were easy meat for Orvar-Odd in *The Hervarar Saga*, when he caught them on the aptly named island of Samsö after one of their orgies; the Philistines also had no trouble in binding the somnolent Samson as soon as Delilah gave them the word; and King Lycurgus the Thracian, armed only with an ox-goad, routed and captured the whole of Dionysus's Berserk army on their alleged return from Bactria.

Another happy thought—the little foxes of *Solomon's Song*! The Shulemite has been amorously addressing Solomon, calling him the turtle-dove in the clefts of her rock, glorifying his beauty and prowess. Then she cries: 'Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines; for our vines have tender grapes!' Grapes have already been used in his erotic imagery—'thy breasts are as a cluster of grapes'—and I think she is saying: 'Now that Spring is here, let us go delirious with mutual desire, as though after a fiery dose of "little foxes", and wash them down with, plenty of wine!' It will have been no more than an 'as though' however, because the mushroom season had not yet come.

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Having broken my journey across France at Paris—where I ate some delicious if unidentifiable mushrooms at a Chinese restaurant (Chinese ideograms baffle me)—I reached London only a couple of hours ahead of my spirit, and was soon discussing little foxes with my niece Sally Chilver and her husband Richard in their house at St John's Wood, where I lodged. Richard, an Oxford Classic, asked: 'Do you remember the Spartan boy who brought a fox into school unknown to the Ephor, and uttered no sound, though its teeth were gnawing his vitals? It has always struck me as a very odd story.' I agreed with Richard that the boy would have found it far harder to disguise the presence of a fox under his short tunic than to throttle it quietly. But what if he had eaten fiery little foxes for a wager—and the poison began to work in his stomach, yet he managed by a great effort of will to control himself before the Ephor, like a true Spartan? *That* would make a more intelligible moral tale!

And again: that passage in *The Book of Kings*, about the Philistines sending golden mice and golden emerods as a placatory offer to Jehovah, after being smitten with emerods. My old friend Joshua Podro, a Hebrew scholar, whom I consulted in London, told me that the original word in the Massoretic text, glossed as 'emerods', is *ofelim*—elsewhere used to mean 'a cloud of noisome flies'. *Emerods* are simply *haemorrhoids*, and there is something amiss with this story. The terracotta, or metal, *ex voto* offerings to gods, made by devotees who had been cured of a physical affliction, never showed the limb or organ in a diseased state—it was always sound; the same tradition continues today in Catholic shrines such as Lourdes, and Monte Allegro, and our Majorcan Lluch. If the Philistines had in fact suffered from haemorrhoids, surely their votive offerings would have shown healthy little pairs of buttocks, rather than the swellings themselves? Yet there is a widespread semantic connexion between mushrooms and malignant swellings on the human body. So, since learned Greeks were pleased to identify Jehovah with Dionysus, and the Feast of Tabernacles with Dionysus's Ambrosia, could this emerod story be a variant of the one told by the grammarian Athenaeus? He records somewhere that the Athenians were once smitten with haemorrhoids for insulting Dionysus. I mean, could the Philistine 'emerods' have repre-

sented the caps of mushrooms? Thus: 'We send these golden images of divine swellings, oracular instruments of the lightning-born God, whose power has been revealed in the malignant swellings with which he afflicted us. By our complimentary gift of golden mice we testify to the truly curative power of the God's oracle.' And if the Philistines, originally a Cretan people, still spoke Aeolian Greek, and had not yet gone Phoenician, could the Greek word for 'mouse', namely MUS (as in Latin), and the Greek word for 'fly', namely MUOS, have identified the swellings as also beginning with MU—namely MUKETES, or MUKAI? At this point I felt the elastic of my argument stretching a little too tight, and relaxed the pressure. I told myself: 'More hard fact, less speculation, please!'

Then my niece Sally thought that she remembered, not long before, seeing an Attic vase-painting of Maenads, with a mushroom in the foreground. She, Richard and I pulled down from the shelves all the books on the subject we could lay hands on, but found only a black-figured vase-scene of two Centaurs grasping a single fawn, which they were clearly about to dismember under Dionysus's influence. The caption read (ineptly, we thought): 'Two Centaurs hunting'. When Maenads dismembered kings or princes whom Dionysus marked out for slaughter, I am convinced that they devoured them too. Certainly, the three daughters of Minyas tore in pieces and ate one of their own sons, chosen by lot. His name is given as Hippasus, which seems to mean 'foal'. Did the Maenads of the early Dionysus cult disguise themselves as mares—the wild mares said to have devoured Glaucus, Diomedes, and Lycurgus, the enemy of Dionysus? Horses are not carnivorous. 'Omophagia', eating of raw meat—fawn, bull-calf, or kid—was a well-known feature of Dionysus's later worship.

An all-Greek ban on cannibalism is a main theme in the Tantalus legend, which I have already mentioned. Here is my version of it in *The Greek Myths*:

Tantalus was the intimate friend of Zeus, who admitted him to Olympian banquets of nectar and ambrosia until, good fortune turning his head, he betrayed Zeus's secrets and stole the divine food to share among his mortal friends. Before this crime could be discovered, he committed a worse. Having called the Olympians to a banquet on Mount Sipylus, or it may have been at

Corinth, Tantalus found that the food in his larder was insufficient for the company and, either to test Zeus's omniscience, or merely to demonstrate his good will, cut up his son Pelops, and added the pieces to the stew prepared for them; as the sons of Lycaon had done with their brother Nyctimus when they entertained Zeus in Arcadia. None of the gods failed to notice what was on their trenchers, or to recoil in horror, except only Demeter who, being dazed by her recent loss; of Persephone, ate the flesh from the left shoulder.

My comment there was:

When the mythographers recorded that Tantalus was a frequent guest on Olympus, they were admitting that his cult had once been dominant in the Peloponnese; and, although the banquets to which the gods invited him are carefully distinguished from the one to which he invited them, in every case the *pièce de résistance* will have been the same: human flesh.

In short, the disgust which we still feel for cannibalism seems analogous to the disgust we feel for 'toadstools' and also for horseflesh or mouseflesh (the Romans failed to make the British share their addiction to fat dormice), because all four were once strictly tabooed foods. I cannot believe that Demeter was so absent-minded as the mythographer pretends; surely she habitually ate human flesh with her mushrooms? We know, at least, that cannibalism flourished among the backward shepherds of Arcadia until the Christian era; one notorious cannibal and werewolf named Damarchus even won the boxing prize at Olympia in late Classical times.

The horse-totem tribe of Centaurs earned a somewhat contradictory reputation in Greek myth: for wisdom and for sexual irresponsibility. Though Cheiron, their King, taught Aesculapius the art of medicine, and tutored in turn the heroes Jason and Achilles, his subjects created a dreadful scandal at the wedding of Hippodameia ('horse tamer') and Ixion's criminal son Peirithous, by drunkenly trying to rape the bride and all the female wedding guests. Nessus the Centaur had made a similar attempt on Deianeira, wife of Cheiron's friend Heracles. And Heracles had previously been forced to kill several Centaurs who got fighting drunk, in their leader Pholus's cave, on drink supplied by Dionysus—which suggests that Pholus was Diony-

sus's local agent. Pholus who, it should be noticed, was a son of the Ash-nymph Melia by Dionysus's tutor Silenus the Satyr, is said to have eaten raw flesh on this occasion. Dionysus, in fact, had covertly instigated the Centaurs' anti-social behaviour. But by what name did the Maenads call Dionysus? When the Titans captured and ate him shortly after birth, he had been crowned with serpents, which suggests that his name, for the Titans, was Ophiothrix, or 'the serpent-haired'; yet I prefer to think that the toad was his prime emblem, and that, among themselves, the Maenads called him 'Phryneus'.

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A stroke of luck! Ransacking Richard and Sally's book-shelves while they were at work, I came across a small book on Attic vase-painting by the late Dr Charles Seltman, which we had overlooked. It contained the picture Sally had remembered: a reproduction of a vase (now at the Metropolitan Museum, New York) dated 630 B.C., and showing Heracles's murder of Nessus. And there was the mushroom, plain as life, though not in a Maenad context, as Sally had supposed: it sprouted between the hind hoofs of the dying Centaur! Nor, to my surprise, was it a fly-amanite but clearly a *panaeolus*—a small type of mushroom with a slender, wavy stalk ending in a neat cap. Many varieties of the *panaeolus* grow all over the world. Few make pleasant eating and consequently the properties of the genus have not been explored; but some varieties, at least, are strongly hallucinatory and cause a delirium in which everything one says or does seems extraordinarily funny. The Wassons believe the *Narrenschwamm*, or 'Fool's mushroom', of German and Hungarian proverb, to be a *panaeolus*: perhaps the *panaeolus papilionaceus*, a native of Europe and also of North America.

A typical case of *panaeolus* poisoning recorded from Oxford, Maine, appears in an American learned journal: *Science*, vol. 40, No. 1029, of September 18th, 1914, headed 'The Narrative of Mr "W".' Early in July of that year Mr W. gathered about a pound of *panaeolus papilionaceus* mushrooms, and fried them in butter for himself and his niece. The immediate effect was that both felt a little tipsy, and soon their surroundings seemed to take on bright colours, in which a vivid green predominated.

Next, both experienced an irresistible impulse to run and jump, which they did hilariously, laughing almost to the point of hysteria at the witty remarks they exchanged. The niece's husband who was present but had not, however, eaten the mushrooms, thought their jokes pretty poor. He noticed that his wife had a light froth of saliva on her lips, and that the pupils of her eyes and of the uncle's were much dilated. When they left the house to take a walk with him, they lost all sense of time—a long period seemed short, and contrariwise; the same with distances. The uncle reports that, on his return, the wallpaper patterns appeared to creep and crawl about, though at first remaining two-dimensional, then began to grow out towards him from the wall with uncanny motions. He looked at a bunch of large red roses, all of one kind, which lay on the table; and at another on a writing-desk. At once the room seemed to fill with roses of various red colours and many sizes in lavish bunches, wreaths, and chains; further banks of roses spread beyond, but set off by green leaves, as in the real bouquets.

Feeling a sudden rush of blood to his head, he lay down. Then followed an illusion of countless hideous faces of every sort and size, extending in multitudes over endless distances, all grimacing at him rapidly and horribly, and coloured like fireworks—intense reds, purples, greens and yellows.

On standing upright, he had the unpleasant experience of feeling his body shoot upward to the ceiling, which receded; he followed it, growing still taller, like Jack's bean-stalk, but retained his natural girth. Suddenly the illusion failed and he collapsed to his own height. When he lay down again, his hands seemed to shrink and become as emaciated as a mummy's; whereas (so the niece said afterwards) her fingertips looked like the heads of snakes. The uncle then believed himself gifted with clairvoyance for a while; but presently both of them reverted to their earlier hilarious joking. Six hours later, they were normal again. No headaches or digestive disturbances had been experienced.

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When I examined the vase again, with this case history in mind, I found that Nessus seemed to be undergoing much the same sort of delusions; because, quite apart from the shadowy

addition of the horse's body and hind-quarters, which are distinguished from his human body by a neat white line, he has an enormous leafy branch growing from his rump, and a nightmarish owl, with the pupil of its Cyclopic eye hugely dilated, flies above him. Several more mushrooms are shown elsewhere on the vase: one pair between a horse's hoofs, and another between the paws of a panther who is devouring a white-spotted red deer. Each of these wavy-stalked mushrooms has a curious thin extension protruding downwards from the cap: it could be a *centron*, a sting, or goad, to demonstrate their excitatory properties. Behind Nessus rises an imposing phallic mushroom, shaped like an Indian club—the famous *ithyphallus impudicus*, no less—evidently a reminder of his delinquency. Then there are designs of erect snakes, and pairs of snakes coupling, with further erotic elements. Thus it looks as if the Centaurs of Magnesia, before their conquest by Heracles's Dorians, ate both the fly-amanite (pictorially associated with their ancestor Ixion) and the *panaeolus papilionaceus* (pictorially associated with Nessus, who so foolishly offended Heracles). I should not be surprised to find that this *panaeolus* grew under ash-trees; but this has to be checked botanically.

Another discovery connecting Dionysus's serpent with mushrooms. The Elgin Marbles illustrate the *Scirophoria* ('parasol-carrying'), a mad-merry Women's Festival in the last month of the year—July—which honoured the Goddesses Demeter and Persephone, when the priestess of Athene carried one white yarasol, and the priest of Erechtheus carried another. Erechtheus was a legendary king of Athens who conquered Eleusis, initiated Heracles into its Mysteries, and was represented as a crowned serpent. *Sciros* in Greek means 'tumour, or swelling' as well as 'parasol'; which suggests that the *Scirophoria* may once have been a mushroom-carrying ceremony, and that meals of the parasol-like *panaeolus* enlivened the proceedings—at least for members of the royal house of Erechtheus, who were privileged to wear golden serpents as amulets. The secret 'tokens' carried in covered baskets at the *Thesmophoria* Festival, of which the *Scirophoria* formed a part, may well have included mushrooms. Highly speculative thinking? Yet thought (as my old nurse used to say darkly) is free.

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On our way back to Majorca from England, where we left William at school, we made a detour through Switzerland: not for sight-seeing, but to place two of the younger children, Lucia and Juan, in school there. At Geneva, I met Dr Sinclair-Loutit, an Irishman working for the World Health Organization, who had spent several years in West Africa. He had read Gordon Wasson's *Life* article, and told me: 'This heavenly-kingdom mushroom sounds like a valuable psychiatric drug; especially if it is as non-habit-forming as the Wassons claim . . . But two odd things occurred to me as I was reading the story. First this: about ten years ago a terrible scandal rocked Western Canada. At a Protestant Church bean-feast in British Columbia, organized by persons of the highest respectability, the Catholics were (I am sure, unjustly) accused of sabotage: introducing hallucinatory mushrooms into the stew. The presiding minister was found in the camp bathroom jumping barefoot from the edge of the bath into the toilet-pan, shouting with the utmost glee: "Oh, how beautifully it splashes!"—while the staid deaconess who controlled the women's side of the show lay giggling helplessly, stark naked, on the floor . . . Could it have been that Korjak mushroom?'

'I hardly think so,' I said. 'The active principle of fly-amanite is destroyed by cooking. Besides, if it had been fly-amanite, the staid deaconess would probably have gone raging purple-faced over the hills, dismembering mooses and papooses. It sounds more like a *panaeolus*—which has a less deleterious effect.'

'I'll turn up the story in my files,' Dr Loutit said. 'But the second thing that struck me is perhaps even more to the point. When I was working in Northern Nigeria—Ibo territory—I made a study of what is called "vicarious eating".'

'Explain, please!'

'A jargon term used by anthropologists, meaning food that one eats casually, as one walks along a road: berries, buds, roots, insects, and so forth . . .'

'I suppose the word they were trying for is "viatical"?''

'Probably: some anthropologists aren't too hot on Latin. Anyhow, I asked whether casual Ibo travellers eat mushrooms, which are plentiful in season. No, they never do. And when I wanted to know why, they explained that mushrooms are

reserved for witch-doctors, who go off into the bush and eat them with human flesh. There appeared to be quite a market for human flesh in up-country villages, where witch-doctors abound.'

'Promise you'll look up both reports and send them to the Wassons.'

I felt I was making progress!

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Home again in Majorca, I was asked to review the Wasson book for the *Atlantic Monthly*. My piece contained this passage:

In the phrase 'food of the gods', 'gods' did not necessarily mean a disembodied spirit. The Greeks applied the term even in historical times to outstanding live personages: particularly to such religious adepts as Pythagoras and Empedocles. It is unknown what sacred food was eaten at the Greek Mysteries, food that apparently caused the initiates to gasp with wonder at the supreme moment of revelation; but the accounts suggest some toxic agent. Could it have been fly-amanite? The very word 'mystery' (*musterion*), may throw light on this problem, because the Mysteries were secret Autumn ceremonies, held during the mushroom season; and the complementary Spring ceremony was called *antheserion*, from *anthos* ('flower'). Does the *mu* syllable in *musterion* perhaps refer to the fly (*muos*), which gives its name to the fly-amanite in many languages beside English? Or even to *mukes* ('mushroom') itself?

My friends Hedy and Al Frasca read this review and sent me a postcard photograph of Exhibit No. 701 at the Paris Louvre: a fifth-century B.C. bas-relief found at Pharsalus in Thessaly, close to the Centaurs' stamping grounds. A woman, generally regarded as the Goddess Demeter, with her left hand, is laying a leather bag of the sort used to hold prophetic dice on the breast of her daughter Persephone. Persephone holds a sizable mushroom aloft in her right hand; and Demeter is about to eat another; they exchange solemn glances. Hedy Frasca wrote on the back of the postcard:

Why is this group called *L'Exaltation du Fleur*? Flowers aren't umbrella-shaped, with the typical mushroom frill half-way up the stalk. This one looks like the fly-amanite you mention.

To me it is reasonably clear—though I have not yet examined the bas-relief itself—that the sculptor was blabbing a secret: 'Fly-amanite is the source of prophetic inspiration at Eleusis.'

Gordon Wasson hopes that I may be right—for mycophobic Classical scholars seem to be in the habit of calling mushrooms 'flowers'—but being rather more cautious than I, hesitates to commit himself on a point of such importance, until he has taken expert advice. He also tells me that vase-experts usually describe Nessus's mushrooms as 'wading birds'. Yet no Greek wading bird has a silhouette like a *panaeolus* mushroom, and Greek vase-painters keep the proportion of their animals fairly exact—it is hard to believe that even in the seventh century B.C. they would have shown a wading bird between those hind-legs, reduced by distance to the size of a small mushroom. I have now visited the Metropolitan Museum to check up and if those are wading birds, then I am a Centaur; but the Museum authorities insist that they are, and that Nessus is merely 'carrying' that branch—as his friend Pholus, on a black-figured *crater* in the same museum, is 'carrying' the live hare which sprouts from the middle of his back while he drinks with Heracles. Also, that the mushroom in the Pharsalus relief is a rose; or, alternatively, the shank-bone of a sheep.

All right, all right! Disregard the flower (or shank-bone) in the foreground! Observe the pretty wading birds! And whatever else you do, don't introduce any sort of toadstool into our serene Classical atmosphere?