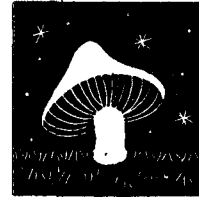


How to Avoid Mycophobia



One of the most curious and surely one of the most expensive works to be published in this country in many years is "Mushrooms, Russia, and History," by Valentina Pavlovna and R. Gordon Wasson. Three hundred fifty copies of this lavishly printed and illustrated two-volume work are being offered to the public by Pantheon Books at \$125 a set. The distinguished British novelist-poet Robert Graves writes about its curious contents below.

By ROBERT GRAVES

VALENTINA PAVLOVNA, now a doctor of medicine practising in New York, came to the States long ago as a white emigrée, and has never lost her inherited passion for eating mushrooms. Her husband, R. Gordon Wasson, a native American who started life as a newspaperman, and is now an active vice president of J. P. Morgan & Co., changed at marriage from violent mycophobia (fear of mushrooms) to tender mycophilia (love of mushrooms); and now preaches his new gospel with all the fervor of a convert. He has naturally pondered the strange phenomenon of *mycophobia*, an ancestral obsession which rules certain clearly defined areas on the world map, but not others. In Europe mycophobia coincides roughly with the Protestant confession, though also embracing Greece with its islands and

large parts of France and Spain. Why? Why?

In 1949, when I first began corresponding with the Wassons, they had not realized how expositively their theme would develop. They were still taking endless trouble to classify and extol edible mushrooms, but at the same time, in all fairness, calling attention to the toxic properties of the comparatively few non-edible varieties. This study included a review of names given to mushrooms in different countries, the sampling of rare varieties (I won a good mark by bringing them down a rare *cépe du pin* from the top of the Pyrenees), and the reading of countless travel books, botanical works, and histories. We corresponded mostly on Greek and Latin references to mushrooms.

Four years ago, the book—to be called "Mushrooms, Russia, and History"—seemed to be completed, with numerous full color plates of mushrooms painted between 1885-1895 by the great Jean-Henri Fabre; their originals were found lying unpublished and neglected on a top shelf in Fabre's home at Sérignan. The Wassons sent me galley proofs to read, and promised me my complimentary copy that autumn. But surprising discoveries delayed publication. A sudden light shone, and all the confusing and often contradictory lore that they had gathered, sifted, and tabulated, made sense at last. It should have

made sense hundreds of years ago, had the traditional scorn which most scholars feel for "disgusting toadstools" not blinded them to the central facts. "Mushrooms, Russia, and History" had, in fact, outgrown its title, and should now rather bear an ambivalent one provided by their discoveries: "The Food of the Gods." To be brief: though a great many "disgusting toadstools" taste divinely both cooked and raw, the prime reason for the wide and ancient ban on mushroom-eating—with the occasional exception of the common white field-mushroom—can only be a religious one. They were a food reserved for gods.

What direct evidence have we for mushrooms as a sacred food in ancient Europe? First, there is the Greek proverb quoted by Suetonius and others: "Mushrooms are the food of the gods." The third-century B.C. philosopher Porphyry seems to be referring to it when he calls mushrooms "theotrepheis"—"feeding the gods." This adjective is elsewhere applied only to ambrosia, a mysterious food denied to mortals, and for the vulgarizing of which Tantalus was condemned in Tartarus to suffer agonies of hunger and thirst. A rigid convention forbids the mention of mushrooms in Homer, Hesiod, or any of the Attic dramatists; and all later Greek writers but Porphyry, mention them only with fear. The indirect evidence for their

THE MUSHROOM HUNTER: What manner of man writes a \$125 book on mushrooms? *Wild mushrooms.*

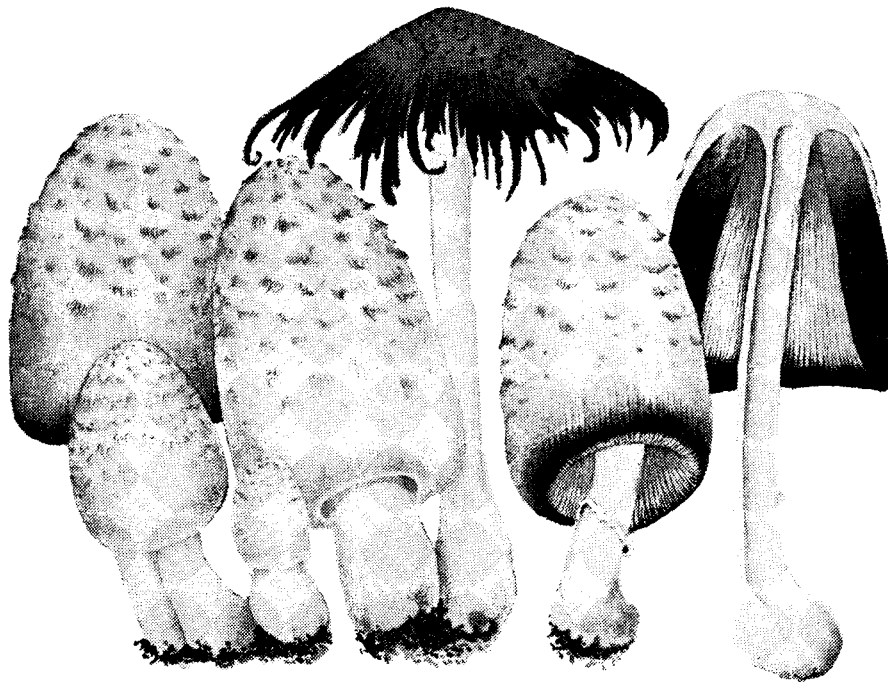
In the author's library, a Guatemalan mushroom statue peering stonily over his shoulder, surrounded by Japanese *Kakemono*, Chinese paintings of mushrooms, and a vast fungal bibliotheca (ranging from Basque to Lapp), R. Gordon Wasson logged for us some of his voyage into mycophilia. It began in 1927, when Wasson was a financial reporter for the *New York Herald Tribune*, and he and his Russian-born bride went for a brief holiday at a friend's lodge in the Catskill mountains. To Wasson's horror, his wife kept running off to pick all manner of unfamiliar fungi, exotic to him but as much a part of Valentina Pavlovna's gastronomic heritage as peanut brittle is of any reasonably red-blooded American boy's. His wife's survival (she ate a mess of what she called *lisichki*) fortified Wasson's courage, and eventually epicurism won out over his Anglo-Saxon prejudice against "toadstools."

The years have taken the Wassons a long way from the Catskills, but never very far from mushrooms. On vacations from their respective careers (Mrs. Wasson is

a physician; Mr. Wasson an investment banker) they have combed the mossy corners of the fungus producing world in quest of mushroomic lore. Together they have ridden their hobby to Friesland, Lapland, Provence, the Basque country (with a Bordeaux professor as interpreter); they have ranged into the remotest corners of Guatemala in search of vestiges of mushroom worshipping cults and have eaten of lotus-like inebriating mushrooms in Mexico. The fruits of their thirty years of labor are pooled in "Mushrooms, Russia, and History"—a fascinating and sumptuous excursion into cultural history.

As a footnote, Kurt Woolf of Pantheon Books informs us that "Mushrooms, Russia, and History" is the most intricately fashioned and costly book his house has yet produced. The book was designed by Hans Mardersteig, and the text printed at the Stamperia Valdona, Verona. The Fabre paintings were reproduced by Jacomet, Paris; other illustrations by Alinari, Florence. The paper was made by hand by Magnani, Pescia; the binding by Torriani, Milan.

No paperback reprint is planned. —MARTIN LEVIN.



—From "Mushrooms, Russia, and History."

The *coprinus comatus*—"a food reserved for gods."

sacredness rests precisely on this fear—the foolishness of which, except as a religious taboo, is proved by the extremely high prices paid for mushrooms in mycophilic regions, and by the rarity of deaths there from mushroom poisoning. Most interesting are the evil names given to highly colored or eccentrically shaped varieties. "How poisonous they look!" cry the mycophobes—as though tomatoes, peppers, oranges, red currants, and aubergines did not look even more poisonous! Tasty and nutritious mushrooms are named for demons, hobgoblins, and succubae, for various loathsome reptiles, insects, and animals, for unmentionable human organs and their disgusting by-products—so that the Wassons' index of mushroom nomenclature reads in part like a catalogue of pornography. The second syllable of "toadstool," by the way, refers to excrement; and even "penicillin," that life-saving, Nobel Prize-winning fungoid drug, has been formed from a word tabooed in ordinary speech.

Sacred foods are usually protected by what the Pharisees technically called "a hedge." Not only is the food itself holy, but one must avoid even second-hand contact with it—as in Catholic churches only a priest dares handle pyx or chalice. Thus swineherds were untouchables in Pharaonic Egypt, where pork was eaten sacrificially once a year at mid-winter by the priests alone, but tabooed at all other seasons. The Israelites seem to have learned the pig-taboo in Egypt; and the orthodox Jew will not touch even Kosher beef if it has been in the

same refrigerator with bacon. It therefore seems probable that the ban imposed on all mushrooms in mycophobic areas was designed to keep unauthorized persons, especially children, from eating sacred mushrooms by mistake for ordinary ones.

The sacred mushroom of the Old World is the fly-amanite, a handsome, conventionally-shaped variety with a white-spotted scarlet top. "The deadliest of all toadstools," mycophobes say in a whisper; and some have written detective stories about fatal brews artfully concocted from the fly-amanite—unaware that cooking removes its toxic properties! Nor does this mushroom kill healthy adults, even when eaten raw, though the juice burns the mouth. The awe which it excites depends rather on the resultant delirium; which is startling enough to be regarded as evidence of divine possession.

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: not so much conquerors like Alexander the Great, as religious adepts like Pythagoras and Empedocles. It is unknown what sacred food was eaten at the Great 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" (*mysterion*) may throw light on this problem, because the Mysteries were secret autumn ceremonies, held in the mushroom season; and the compli-

mentary Spring ceremony was called *anthesterion*, from *anthos* ("flower"). Does the *my* syllable in *mysterion* perhaps refer to the fly (*myos*), which gives its name to the fly-amanite in many languages beside English? Or even to *myces* ("mushroom") itself?

The discovery which delayed the publication of the Wassons' book, and added another fully illustrated folio volume to it, was prompted by my casually sending them a clipping from a Canadian pharmaceutical journal which discussed an ancient mushroom cult in Mexico. Sixteenth-century Spanish missionaries had reported, on hearsay, that perverted Mexicans were revering certain mushrooms, which caused a horrible inebriation, and ascribing the resultant visions to "God's flesh" which they had sacramentally eaten. "Devil's flesh, rather," protested the friars.

Following this clue, in 1953 the Wassons went with their sixteen-year-old daughter Mary to a village thirty miles from the nearest high road, in the high mountain of Oaxaca, and there found far more than they had ever hoped to find. Nine different varieties of hallucinatory mushrooms were in secret use among the Indians. The cult, though discountenanced as witchcraft by the local Catholic padre, had taken on Catholic disguise, and the toxic mushrooms were now described as "Christ's flesh," his particular gift to Oaxaca. The two elder Wassons witnessed a night-long mushroom-eating ritual, and were allowed to ask questions of the presiding priest, who claimed oracular powers. That his answers proved uncannily correct was by no means the greatest surprise the Wassons had; for on a second visit to Southern Mexico, Gordon Wasson and Allan Richardson, his photographer, dared eat the mushrooms themselves.

Here is a brief excerpt from Gordon Wasson's account of his experiences:

At first we saw geometric patterns, angular not circular, in richest colors, such as might adorn textiles or carpets. Then the patterns grew into architectural structures, with colonnades and architraves, patios of regal splendor, the stone-work all in brilliant colors, gold and onyx and ebony, all most harmoniously and ingeniously contrived, in richest magnificence extending beyond the reach of sight, in vistas measureless to man. For some reason these architectural visions seemed oriental, though at every stage R.G.W. pointed out to himself that they could not be identified with any specific oriental country. They were neither Japanese nor Chinese nor Indian nor Moslem. They
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