

SLEEPLESS NIGHTS

THE EXPERIENCE OF NARCOTICS IN THE PARISIAN ARTISTIC ENVIRONMENT DURING THE GREAT PERIOD OF EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Abstract

This paper approaches the problem of drug consumption by focusing on the experience of artists using psychoactive substances in general and on the situation of the Italian painter Amadeo Modigliani in particular. It also hints at the friendship between the Italian artist and the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brâncuși, who was, for a while, Modigliani's mentor, but who, in his turn, was 'initiated' into drug consumption by his young apprentice. However, the destinies of the two artists followed different paths and the experience with hashish had a particular significance in each case.

Keywords: psychoactive substances, Amadeo Modigliani, Constantin Brâncuși

1. Introduction

Artists have always tried to surpass the limits imposed by their bodies, the social or political context in which they lived, the environment they were born in, raised or determined to live. The act of creation is often perceived as a path to fulfilling such aspirations. It requires, nevertheless, much sacrifice and satisfaction is not easily obtained. For such reasons, artists have sometimes accepted the temptation of using drugs, in order to have access to the *paradises* such substances could open, though consciously recognizing them as *artificial*. Taking drugs to alter mood, perception and behaviour or to stimulate creativity was, in most cases, an openly accepted attitude, as many books, written by the artists consuming drugs themselves demonstrate. We will mention here only the famous *Artificial Paradises* (1860) by Charles Baudelaire, or Thomas de Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings* (1821).

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In this article we shall focus on the experience with hashish of the Italian painter Amadeo Modigliani, and on his relationship with the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brâncuși. The first part of this paper includes a brief classification of psychotropic substances and points at factors determining drug consumption. The second part hints at reasons determining artists to use drugs. The third and fourth parts discuss the meaning and effects of the experience of consuming alcohol and drugs for Amadeo Modigliani and, respectively, for Constantin Brâncuși.

2. Psychotropic substances. Classification. Factors determining consumption

Since prehistoric times, psychotropic substances have been used in different cultures for varied ends. Initially plants with psychoactive effects were ingested or inhaled by individuals, but later semi-synthetic and synthetic products were produced.

Drugs have been classified in different ways, in accordance to several criteria. However, one classification that is largely accepted belongs to L. Lewin, who identified five groups of substances, in relation to the effects their users want to obtain: *euphorica*, causing inner peace and a sensation of wellbeing (opium, cocaine), *phantastica*, producing changes of perception and feelings (hashish, mescaline), *inebriantia*, causing drunkenness (alcohol), *hypnotica* (sedatives) and *excitantia* (coffee, amphetamines, cocaine). To these a large number of medical drugs may be added, as a series of amphetamine-like substances, produced in laboratories (the so-called ‘ice’) and the ‘designer’ amphetamines (ecstasy, MDMA, MMDA, DOM, STP) [1].

Due to their sedative or stimulating properties, drugs have been and continue to be used for the benefit of people (to cure diseases, to calm anxiety or annihilate pain; in military applications, to help fighters manage the harsh conditions of war, the absence of food, water, sleep), but effects such as euphoria, changes in perception, mood and behaviour determined their consumption as means of enhancing experience, getting the sensation of pleasure and/or liberation from constraints. Unfortunately, the consumption of drugs, especially when taken without medical supervision, determines addiction and all the negative consequences associated with it: tolerance, symptoms of withdrawal (i.e. anxiety, irritability, craving, nausea, hallucinations, tremor), deterioration of health and position in society, financial problems or even death.

For such reasons, governments started to place restrictions on drug production, consumption and trade, and a number of organizations came into being, with the view of limiting drug use and abuse.

Despite the efforts united in the fight against this plague, the trade and consumption of drugs continues to proliferate, making victims all over the world, among individuals of different ages, coming from all social layers, though perversely luring, as Gheorghe Grigurcu has pointed out [2] teenagers and immature persons.

In a study dedicated to *The Personality Profile of the Drug Addict*, Ruxandra Răscanu [3] argues that drug addiction results from a combination of environmental, educational and personality-related factors. Among environmental factors the author mentioned above includes social and economic problems (poverty, disorganised communities, disunited families or single parent families, family antecedents of alcoholism or drug use, the angst associated with the separation from a valued person/group, unemployment). To these we might also add the changes of political regimes, as it happened in our country, Romania, where the problems associated with drug consumption came to the fore only after 1989.

Some educational factors determining, according to Ruxandra Răscanu, the inclination to use drugs are: strict family control or exaggerated tolerance, violence, disagreements between parents as regards the education of children, the absence of communication between parents and children).

Personality factors are probably crucial in determining the debut and continuation of drug consumption. Lack of self-confidence, anxiety, inclination towards hedonism and satisfaction of desire, psychic problems predispose to drug use. There are also certain stages in life, i.e. adolescence, when the use of psychoactive substances may be regarded as a way of better coping with reality, or when curiosity and the attraction for something that is prohibited and may produce new sensations is predominant. The attempt to identify with the members of a certain group may also be a central factor in drug use at this stage in life. To these we might also add the belonging to a certain ethnic group [4].

3. Artists and drugs

Returning to Gheorghe Grigurcu's observations, the elements compounding the portrait of the addict are: pronounced sensitivity and inclination for introspection, a rich and colourful mental life, a certain immaturity and/or androgynous nature, which differentiate the subject from the large mass of people and determine the difficulty to adapt to outside circumstances, often perceived as hostile, limiting and therefore rejected. All these personality traits are characteristic of artists, who often identify the world of creation with a means whereby fulfilment may be achieved [2].

At particular moments in time, artists experienced or made use of drugs for different reasons: intellectual interest, attempt to stimulate creativity and productivity, desire to amplify consciousness, the temptation to get beyond reality and reach euphoric states. If analysed carefully, it becomes obvious that the idea behind all these reasons is that of *liberation*, of escape from a reality perceived as limiting and frustrating.

Drugs were described to open access to deeper insights and visions of beauty, truth and the divine. The French poet Charles Baudelaire is famous for presenting in detail his experience of using hashish, opium, or wine, which extend the artist's individuality, stimulate the process of creation, help one's senses become more keen and acute and eventually take the individual into a

state of complete happiness, of “calm and placid beatitude”, when „every philosophical problem is resolved. Every difficult question that presents a point of contention for theologians, and brings despair to thoughtful men, becomes clear and transparent. Every contradiction is reconciled. Man has surpassed the gods.” [Charles Baudelaire, excerpt from *Artificial Paradises*, available at <http://www.angelfire.com/ky3/swim/writings.html>, last date of access 2.12.2012]

Several studies were dedicated to the relationship between artists and drugs, linking addiction to psychotropic substances to their artistic careers. Robert Hines-Davenport, in a study dedicated to *Writers and Drugs* [5] shows how drugs influenced writers and scholars, as well as their creation, starting with the French novelist Charles Nodier who, towards the end of the 18th century, was among the first to describe the intake of drugs as a means to have access to revelations that otherwise could not be obtained.

Later on, especially after the French occupation of Algeria, the intake of hashish became attractive for writers such as Flaubert, Arthur Rimbaud or Balzac. The artists of the 19th century discovered the pains and pleasures of drugs.

In England, Thomas de Quincey published, in 1821, his famous book entitled *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, where he argued that drugs intensify existing intellectual abilities and create fantasies that help one transcend the banality of everyday life. Romantic poets (Coleridge or Keats) emphasized the idea that one is freed from the control of consciousness under the influence of opium. The Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning was also an opium-addict.

Later on, Proust and Edgar Allan Poe also preferred opiates.

Chloral, taken initially to cure sleep disorders, had negative effects upon Friedrich Nietzsche, Dante Gabriel Rossetti or Evelyn Waugh.

The list of 20th century writers, musicians and painters who used drugs is long and the substances taken are more diverse. The same Robert Hines-Davenport speaks of W.H. Auden’s or of the Beat poet Jack Kerouac’s addiction to benzedrine, of Jean Paul Sartre’s preference for amphetamines, of Alan Ginsberg’s experience with mescaline, LSD and heroine.

To these we may also add Huxley’s experience with mescaline, or Tennessee Williams’s, Hemingway’s, William Faulkner’s, Eugene O’Neil’s or F. Scott Fitzgerald’s consumption of alcohol [6-8].

Such books show that the number of writers, painters, sculptors, or musicians using drugs is not limited. All were tempted by the illusion of fulfilment induced by the use of psychoactive substances. But, to quote again Gheorghe Grigurcu, ‘the impure delight of imposture’, the ‘shadowy satisfaction of usurpation’ induced by drug consumption soon demand their price, ‘dissipating the veil of apparent perfection’ [2]. For, as indicated by the critic mentioned above, nothing of real value was produced under the influence of drugs. Artistic creation, just like any other attempt to achieve fulfilment and happiness, generally requires sacrifice, the choice of the long and difficult path.

4. „Vice reigns here as a sovereign...”

In the early twentieth century, the place where artistic creativity, manifested with unprecedented intensity, often blended with the picturesque and the dramas that deeply marked the lives of artists, creating a unique and disturbing picture, even for the sensitivity of our time, was without doubt the bohemian district of Montparnasse, the mountain-temple of the art school in Paris. “Say ‘Montparnasse!’, Jean-Paul Crespelle urges us... and you say ‘Open up, Sesame, to memories!’” “The first figure that will arise is certainly that of Modigliani, the “bohemian exhibitionist, emphatically reciting stanzas from *Vita nuova*, staggering along the boulevard” [9]. This story-like character, a beautiful young prince, called by his friends Modi, in a way that somehow predicted his cataloguing by posterity as a doomed artist – ‘peintre Maudit’, the second that Paris had, after Van Gogh, gradually corrupted his companions, with an irresistible charm, drawing them into the poisoned depths of vice. Among those who, for a while, listened to his siren song was his closest friend and mentor he had in Paris, the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brâncuși.

Amadeo Modigliani came to study arts in the French capital in 1906, at the age of 22, coming from Italy, Livorno. For a while he lived, as any other provincial student, a quiet life, intimidated by the bustle and splendour of the European capital, then at the height of Belle Époque. He lived in Montmartre, in an environment where the memory of old masters who made the district famous at the end of the last century, Pissarro, Toulouse-Lautrec and Van Gogh, was still alive. He did pretty well, as long as he was able to manage with the two hundred francs his mother sent him every month from Livorno. His artistic talent, especially the ease with which he could draw, quickly made him noticed in the studios he frequented, recommending him to a young art collector, Doctor Paul Alexandre. The latter would encourage him to participate with works at *Salon d'Automne* (1907) and then at *Salon des Indépendants* (1908) and would introduce him to one of the Parisian artistic and literary societies. Thereafter Modigliani’s circle of acquaintances widened day by day, among others because of his attractive physical presence and neat, even elegant attire, despite the modest accessories composing it: corduroy coat with a red scarf around his neck and sunshade [10]. It became increasingly obvious that he was not the lonely type and that his initial shyness had disappeared, revealing his true sociable, even voluble nature, which blossomed stimulated by the cheerful atmosphere of cafes, where his new group of friends held their weekly meetings. Coming from a family of Sephardic Italian Jews, the Mediterranean spirit was so strongly manifested in his character that the melancholy characteristic of the Jewish soul, a feature so obvious at the Jewish artists who arrived in Paris from the East, especially from Russia and Poland, was totally foreign to him.

Further supported by Dr. Alexandre, Modigliani got the permission to paint, in exchange for only few drawings and works in oil, in one of the studios that the doctor used to rent to a small community of artists, in a building in Rue du Delta. Although during that period he was intensely preoccupied to develop

his artistic career, shaping with every painting a style that was to become unmistakable, Modigliani failed to attract other supporters, apart from Paul Alexandre. Overcome by disappointment, he refused to accept for too long the burden of un-fulfilment and sought consolation in alcohol. He was never alone and among those who usually accompanied him was Maurice Utrillo, the future famous painter evoking the picturesque of Montmartre streets, who became his favourite drinking companion. Moreover, a “bohemian nature par excellence”, Modigliani began even then, being under the influence of his companions from Rue du Delta, “to take trips in the imaginary worlds where hashish directed him” [11].

For the young painter, the drug became an effective way to get rid of anxiety, and a stimulus, fuelling his creativity with an unexpected impetus. He worked quickly, seemed really inspired and became much appreciated, even if especially by already well-known artists and too little by the public, still unable to guess his genius. But he no longer cared, as before, about people’s reaction. As if to prove it, he ignored or knowingly violated, in a defiant way, social conventions. Or could it be that the effect of disorder which began to take grip of his life? “This man, who is not vulgar at all, has the mania, when drunk at a party, well, to undress completely, to the astonishment and embarrassment of those present. Thus, those who know him must watch him closely from a certain moment on and, at the first signs ... immobilize him.” [11, p. 137] As his person started to be perceived as troublesome, he found it appropriate to add a further touch of contempt to his behaviour, by willingly emphasizing his Jewish origin when introducing himself to others.

It was probably for such reasons that he chose to move, in 1909, in the Montparnasse district, which had recently become the centre of the Parisian artistic avant-garde.

He was especially attracted by the fame of La Ruche artistic colony where, in a kind of mixture of genius and poverty, housed in over a hundred workshops, many artists of all nationalities, but mainly from Eastern Europe, were working. Although he lived there only by accident, when he had no other studio to work in, his image was always associated with La Ruche, a legendary place for the School of Paris and for the history of modern art [9, p. 93]. There the solidarity of artists who proclaimed their independence from any aesthetic constraints was fully manifested being, as mentioned before, the headquarters of the artistic avant-garde. The idea of life without constraints and the drunkenness of freedom attracted Modigliani like a magnet. Every night he prowled the streets, visiting bistros and pubs, present in large numbers in Montparnasse. But more often he spent his time in a place specialized in Italian cuisine, whose patron was a former model, Rosalie Tobia. Many of the best known artists, literati and philosophers of the time used to gather there, but Modigliani, due to his volubility, soon became ‘the-devil and master of the place’, even if he had to pay for drinks each time, giving the patron some of his works, who was unable to appreciate them at their right value. The same procedure applied to other pubs in the area, for example in the café La Rotonde, whose owner, Victor Libion,

entered into the possession of dozens of drawings signed by Modigliani, though we don't know whether conscious or not of their value [9, p. 88, 91; 11, p. 144].

5. Modi and Brâncuși

This way of living, which may be considered miserable, was in fact deliberately assumed by the Italian painter. It was his way of choosing, as he put it himself, for 'une vie brève mais intense' (a short but intense life). This idea was also emphasized by the words of the painter Moses Kisling, with whom Modigliani shared an apartment in Montparnasse: "when you get two hundred francs a month to live and spend one hundred and twenty on alcohol and drugs, it is clear that you are living in misery" [9, p. 84]. From time to time there were, in the hallucinating rhythm in which days and nights dissipated in Modigliani's life, some breaks when his consciousness tried to put things in order. In this respect, an opportunity was the meeting between Modigliani and the sculptor Constantin Brâncuși, who also worked for a short time in one of the studios in La Ruche. The one who mediated the meeting between the two was the same Dr. Paul Alexandre.

Impressed by the genuine nature of the Romanian sculptor, maybe trying to balance, by compensation, the frivolity of his daily living, Modigliani decided to keep a close eye on Brâncuși, staying, patiently, for hours on end, in the studio of the Romanian artist, in order to better understand his art, eventually dedicating himself to sculpture. In turn, Brâncuși was surprised by the candour which shrouded the creations of his disciple, whose sensitivity and sincerity was revealed, beyond the passion that mastered his life. It's obvious that, artistically, their human proximity proved providential and the friendship that was to last forever remained one of the memorable events in the history of modern art. A series of portraits of Brâncuși, painted by Modigliani, testify this and demonstrate the latter's deep affection for his friend. But beyond the positive aspect of their relationship, there is also a tragic side. In the period when Modigliani visited his master every day, like a conscientious student, Brâncuși found and rented out for him a studio not far from his, in Cité Falguière, at number 14. "This address became, by the gathering together in the studios there of a large number of foreign artists, especially young people, another La Ruche, smaller but no less famous in the neighbourhood. But the place gained fame rather by the parties organized there, where alcohol and drugs were consumed, than by an outstanding artistic activity. And Modigliani's libertine lifestyle, which had already made him well-know first in Montmartre and then in Rue du Delta, was perfectly matched to the new environment" [11, p. 136].

The conscientiousness with which Modigliani appropriated the secrets of direct carving in stone was disturbed, as expected, by the temptations that arose everywhere in the heterogeneous neighbourhood. But he was not content to 'evade' alone from the serious atmosphere of the studio, and tried to tempt Brâncuși to join him. Few times the Romanian accepted such escapades, especially when he felt exhausted and needed to compensate for the too intense

nervous concentration experienced during his hours of working. Parties with much wine made him lose control; he got drunk and caused public disorder, together with Modigliani, for which he ended up being arrested and taken to the police headquarters. But the Italian had relations among policemen. It was the case, for example, of Commissioner Zamaron, deputy director of the municipal police, an avid art collector, who many times freed Modigliani, when he was arrested and taken to the police centre in Delambre Street [9, p. 90].

The two were accompanied, in such experiences, by the Portuguese painter Amadeo Souza-Cardoso, who became a good friend of theirs, or by an Italian artist, highly prized by Brâncuși, Gino Severini. Modigliani was the one who introduced him to the group, but also the one who managed to push him into an experience with hashish and absinthe [11]. Obviously he was so steeped in vice that he became intensely concerned to find proselytes among all his acquaintances and all those he loved.

More or less seriously, it seems that Brâncuși gave way to his friend's insistent temptations and experienced hashish. And not only once. "The sorcerer-apprentice – as Petre Pandrea has pointed out - tempted Brâncuși. Amadeo also quoted Baudelaire, another proponent of artificial paradises 'Why should we care whether it is heaven or hell? Let's plunge into the abyss. We shall find novelty in the depths of the unknown'". Petre Pandrea, one of the most perceptive interpreters of Brâncuși's creation, argued that the sculptor "accepted the provisional temptation out of pride and desire not to appear a coward in front of his apprentice. He wanted to prove his fearlessness and the strength of his temperance, once the temptation offered had been accepted." [12]

This turbulent episode in the life of the Romanian artist was mentioned in the famous novel the writer Peter Neagoe dedicated to him. Pouring the poison of hashish in the glass with absinthe, Modi first shrouds his master in the shadow of his own seduction, uttering an incantation that sounded almost like a liturgical hymn "Drink, Constantine! Let's drink for the loss of lucidity! Let's travel towards the lights of gold, in the blue spheres. Let's allow the wild winds of freedom to take us to other worlds. Tell me, who has the greatest need of wings to take him towards infinity?" [13] The next day, Modigliani, completely sober, as he was used with the drug, told Brâncuși, who seemed devastated: "What a wonderful journey in hell. It was a deep dive but we fished something good." [13, p. 144]

Between 1912-1913, while Modigliani lived in the colony of Falguière, the connection between the two artists continued to be very close. Despite his disorganised way of life, the Italian's creativity had unleashed, and he made decisive steps towards a very personal art of expression. Professionally, he was still indebted to Brâncuși, but the relationship between master and apprentice tended to balance and, in some respects, it was obvious that the mentor was also influenced by his apprentice. But what separated them was the way in which they valued intuition as a means of perceiving the artistic form. Brâncuși was convinced that the soul could not see beauty unless it became beautiful itself. For that reason intuition was not enough, but it had to be "completed and

sharpened by meditation and discipline. The plunge into an artificial paradise could not help the artist either. That one had to purify and improve his heart. Some ascetics had written that no one could go to heaven choosing the path of sin. The blessing of heaven had to be earned through a daily routine, and good deeds.” [13, p. 147]

For a while Brâncuși continued the experience of drugs consumption, though taking them in moderate doses, in an attempt to eliminate the fatigue caused by his hard work in the studio and to dispel the oppressive feeling caused by his dissatisfaction with the results obtained. He never managed to carve in stone the image intuited in his imagination and the struggle to subject matter, which stubbornly remained matter, exhausted him. He was also determined, ever since he had left his country, never to become overwhelmed, and his strength of character helped him come through. The responsibility for the work he had to accomplish encouraged him to master fear and break free from the grip of vice. For Modigliani, however, this way of life had become an addiction. Drugs had affected his behaviour seriously, and his presence became almost unbearable, even for those close to him. Exasperated by the violent behaviour of the artist, the owner of the studio rented by Modigliani in the house from Falguière ordered him out of the place. And in Impasse Ronsin, the area where Brâncuși was living, one of the studios attended by Modigliani became a meeting place for drug users; therefore the owner was forced to demolish the building in order to eliminate the place inhabited by insolvent addicts [11, p. 137].

For Modigliani life took a tragic turn. His plunges into the abyss, more and more frequent and risky, made a return to normality very unlikely, if not altogether hopeless. And not long after, at the age of only 35, Modi was to get lost on the path towards light. The bohemian who had turned La Rotonde into a theatre for his exhibitionism, died of tuberculosis meningitis [9, p. 132] in La Charité hospital. He was buried in Père-Lachaise cemetery.

6. Conclusion

Analysing the specific atmosphere in which the Parisian art school was founded, the historian Bernard Dorival observed that for many of these future masters of modern painting and sculpture, who did not belong to the French culture, the difficult experience naturalization determined them to believe that human condition was essentially miserable, “sentenced to death, soiled by vice, mourning the inevitable succession of sorrows” [9, p. 82]. Absence of fulfilment often pushed them to rebellion against social and religious conventions. Their belief, as expressed at a time by Amadeo Modigliani, was that ‘the creative artist was a privileged being, existing beyond the morality of this world’. Liberation from the shackles of reason and norms sometimes took the form of sinking into the ecstatic delirium caused by excess of absinthe and a dose of hashish.

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