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The High Imagination

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THE LAST AMERICAN COMBAT TROOPS were withdrawn from South Vietnam in August of 1972. The following year, President Richard Nixon's campaign promise of a "War on Drugs" was kept at last, when several small federal agencies were consolidated to form the Drug Enforcement Administration. The timing was not a coincidence. Someone had to be held responsible for America's first defeat in war. It would have been unseemly to condemn the soldiers themselves, after the enormous losses they had sustained, and it would not have been credible to blame the domestic antiwar movement or the counterculture. But scapegoating "drugs" was a way to get them all at the same time.

The War on Drugs, since its redeclaration by President Ronald Reagan, continues to be part of a broader campaign to discredit "the 60s," that last significant resistance to consumerism. But the counterculture, which seemed so radically new at the time, was at heart a mass Romantic revival, a reincarnation not only of domestic transcendentalism, but also of European doctrines of imagination and expressive art. Drug warriors and conservative cultural critics seem to remember better than literary scholars that our operative idea of imagination, dating back to the tail end of the eighteenth century, is inextricably linked to our history of intoxication. You might suppose that "War on Imagination" would have made a truer declaration.

FOUR YEARS AGO, *Harvard Magazine* reported that "In 1987 the Austrian-born Dr. Werner Baumgartner analyzed a lock of hair from the head of English poet John Keats . . . Even 166 years after Keats's death, Baumgartner could determine that the poet had ingested opiates—probably laudanum—within a few weeks of his demise. That finding demonstrated both the persistence of drug residues in human hair and the power of Baumgartner's lab technique, called radioimmunoassay of hair (RIAH). Later, the same year, he launched a company called Psychemedics to market the RIAH technique; its home base is now Harvard Square. . ."¹

The RIAH technique was (and is still) sold as a way for parents to drug-test their children in secret. Dr. Baumgartner, however, seems at first glance to have chosen an ancestor, not a descendant, for his demonstration. Was this a DARE case, a good Austrian child turning in his stoning English father right there in the cradle of New England Puritanism, proving that sin never dies, even if the sinner does?

What was Dr. Baumgartner's "probable cause"? Why did he finger John Keats, of all available ancestors? Perhaps he had read the *Life of John Keats* by the poet's housemate Charles Armitage Brown, who discovered Keats's use of laudanum in late 1819 or early 1820. Or he may have read the part of *Opium and the Romantic Imagination* that Althea Hayter calls a "chapter of speculation," where she is skeptical of Brown's chronology: "If. . . as soon as Keats started taking laudanum it was discovered by accident and at once reported to Brown, then Keats's laudanum-taking would have no importance for his work, as by then he had practically ceased to write. But I think Brown meant that Keats' laudanum-taking was reported to him as soon as it was discovered, not as soon as it started; and in that case it may have started at any time."²

But I doubt that the Cambridge drug warrior read any of this, or Keats' poetry for that matter. He didn't need to. Like any sharp-eyed narc, he was responding to a "profile." Keats's medical training would have given him early and easy access to a large apothecary, and then as now doctors and their students often make secretive use of it. Later Keats had a disease for whose symptoms opium was often prescribed. He had youth, temperament, opportunity, a motive and an excuse.

And then too the hair was available (though the article does not say how Dr. Baumgartner procured it). What item in all the reliquary of English poetry can be more poignant than a lock of John Keats's hair? Yet Baumgartner, instead of moistening it with his tears, wants it as evidence. Suddenly we realize that the poet is no sense a forefather of this technician. Keats is a suspect because as a figure for perpetual youth he needs to be monitored, just as our own children do. Or we may speculate that in collaring Keats Baumgartner was trying to bust a kind of aboriginal hippie.

IN KEATS'S CENTURY, no drug was prohibited in Western Europe or America. But the Drug War causes us to look backward in order to see who else would be on the wrong side of the law if they were

alive today. The list is a long one. Besides Keats, writers who tasted the “dull opiate” include James Thomson, George Crabbe, Thomas De Quincey, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Sir Walter Scott, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charles Dickens, Charles Baudelaire, Wilkie Collins, Francis Thompson, and Oscar Wilde. Adding other drugs lengthens the list. Around 1843 Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier, and Gérard de Nerval formed the Club des Haschischins at the Hotel Lauzun on the Ile St-Louis. Fitz Hugh Ludlow, John Greenleaf Whittier, Arthur Rimbaud, Friedrich Nietzsche, William Butler Yeats, Aleister Crowley, Gertrude Stein, and Henri Michaux also used hash. Dante Gabriel Rossetti liked chloral hydrate. Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Charles Cros, Ernest Dowson, Oscar Wilde, and Richard Burton sampled absinthe.³ Obviously the inclusion of alcohol and tobacco on the docket would turn this select group into a telephone directory.

Did Keats, whether binger or habituate, stop at opium? Hayter thinks that the opening lines of *The Fall of Hyperion* (“Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave / A paradise for a sect”) refer to “the fanatical sect of the Assassins, and the paradise into which they were transported, seemingly in a hashish dream.”⁴ If so, this would be unusual, since the use of hashish is rarely reported in Europe until the 1840s. In 1860, Baudelaire’s *Les Paradis artificiels* seems barely able to distinguish between hashish and opium, a blurring often ascribed to the haste of its composition, or to its near-plagiarizing of De Quincey. But as anyone who has ever bought hashish in Europe knows, almost all the darker varieties contain some opium, so the confusion may have arisen as much from the commodity itself as from its toastmasters.

If we toss in a couple of beakers full of the blushful Hippocrene, we could peg Keats as a polydrug user. This would hardly be surprising. As I argued in *On Drugs*, single-drug users are rarer than abstainers.⁵ And the apothecary of a nineteenth-century physician was remarkably well-stocked, unregulated as it was by an FDA or DEA. Even in America, so great a distance from the exotic sources of these medicaments, Fitz Hugh Ludlow, the author of *The Hasheesh Eater* and the man destined to be known as “the American De Quincey,” marvels at this abundance:

About the shop of my friend Anderson the apothecary there always existed a peculiar fascination, which early marked it out as my favorite lounging-place. In the very atmosphere of the establishment, loaded as it was with a composite smell of all things curative and

preventive, there was an aromatic invitation to scientific musing, which could not have met with a readier acceptance had it spoken in the breath of frankincense. The very gallipots grew gradually to possess a charm for me as they sat calmly ranged upon their oaken shelves, looking like a convention of unostentatious philanthropists, whose silent bosoms teemed with every variety of renovation for the human race. A little sanctum at the inner end of the shop, walled off with red curtains from the profane gaze of the unsanative, contained two chairs for the doctor and myself. . . [here] have I made upon myself the trial of the effects of every strange drug and chemical which the laboratory could produce.⁶

Perhaps the variety available to nineteenth-century physicians would explain the *mélange* of drug imageries in certain of Keats's poems. "Ode to a Nightingale," for example, mixes a poison like hemlock with the "dull opiate" and, in the second stanza, some sort of carbonated red wine, all to escape quotidian consciousness "where men sit and hear each other groan." The last stanza is as fine a rendering of a drug crash as anything in Baudelaire—"the fancy cannot cheat so well / as she is fam'd to do" might as well mean that no high lasts forever.

The third stanza contains the word "dissolve," and this no accident. Only a month before the poem was written in May of 1819, Keats had gone for a walk with Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge's canonical pronouncement on imagination in the *Biographia Literaria* had been written in 1815, a year when he was trying to moderate his opium dosage—quitting and using at the same time, and therefore honoring the drug both in the breach and observance—and the year before he turned himself over to medical supervision for the rest of his life. It is dripping with laudanum:

The IMAGINATION then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.⁷

This notion of secondary or transforming imagination established a model of artistic creativity in the West that lasted from 1815 until the fall of Saigon. It is predicated on annihilating what Keats called weariness, fever, and fret (or a world of fixed, dead objects) by just the sort of dissolution, diffusion, and dissipation that, “co-existing with the conscious will,” moves toward the realm of accident, improvisation, and the unconscious with “full-throated ease.” However criticism has tried to sanitize this process, however it has tried to accommodate the “Just Say No” silence of the twentieth-century’s War on Drugs, we have to face the fact that some of our canonical poets and theorists, when apparently talking about imagination, are really talking about getting high.

THE COMMONPLACE OF THE MATTER, often repeated by people in the arts to excuse their drug use, is that getting high liberates the imagination from habit and constraint, so that dissolution and (re) creation can be facilitated. But it is a curious fact of history that the pioneers of pharmacography in England and America believed that drug use would enhance their philosophical, and not poetical, activity. De Quincey believed opium would add another dimension to the analytic activities of philosophy:

For amongst the conditions which he deems indispensable to the sustaining of any claim to the title of philosopher, is not merely the possession of a superb intellect in its analytic functions . . . but also such a constitution of the moral faculties, as shall give him an inner eye and power of intuition for the vision and mysteries of our human nature . . .⁸

De Quincey’s “intuition” eventually overwhelmed his “analytic functions,” as he succumbed to painting “that tremendous scenery which afterwards peopled the dreams of the opium-eater.”⁹ Coleridge in the *Biographia* arguably follows him there, to his benefit as a poet but to his detriment as a metaphysician. Fitz Hugh Ludlow under the spell of hashish had a quasimystical encounter with a philosopher of antiquity: “Suddenly there came a sense as of some invisible presence walking the dread paths of the vision with me, yet at a distance as if separated from my side by a long flow of time. Taking courage, I cried, ‘Who has ever been here before me, who in years past has shared with me this unutterable view?’ In tones which linger in my soul to this day, a grand, audible voice responded, ‘Pythagoras!’”¹⁰ But the dream

of a “stoned philosophy” was to be left fallow until the late 1950s. The drug-enhanced imagination emerged from theory into poetic practice with the publication in 1816 of Coleridge’s eighteen-year-old poem “Kubla Khan,” setting the stage for Keats to “drink, and leave the world unseen.”

AFTER THE DEATH of Brian Jones in 1969, Mick Jagger prefaced a July Rolling Stones concert in London’s Hyde Park with a reading of Shelley’s “Adonais,” after which he released butterflies to the crowd of (supposedly) 500,000 people. Here is an eyewitness account:

Suddenly, it was Mick. In a white, bow-buttoned billowing frock over tight white pants, a gold-studded leather collar, “NOOooo,” he shouted as the crowd began to applaud—(Sam had asked us to respect the Stones’ wishes and prepare ourselves for a minute of silence for Brian Jones)—but Jagger relented, screaming, “Yeah. We’re gonna have a good time.” But first a word from Shelley. “Cool it for a minute,” he said, “I would really like to say something about Brian.” And he began: Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep—he hath awakened from the dream of life... And the girl in the straw hat, along with many others in that front row of groundlings, wept unashamedly . . . Shelley was now dancing in his grave, as Mick whipped himself into a lathering frenzy, pumping, pouting, the veins running up and down his body like cables . . . The butterflies fluttered forth and Jagger began to disrobe.¹¹

Jagger’s identification of his late guitarist with Keats was an unusually explicit hotwiring of ’60s rock and Romantic aesthetics. Brian Jones had died in his swimming pool at home some weeks earlier, shortly after the band let him go because he was usually too high to play. Both Keats and Jones were artists who died young, and both used drugs. But the circumstances of their deaths were as different as their genres and temperaments. So where does the point of contact lie?

Jones was the X factor in the Stones’ early work. While never a pop band, their first songs were tightly arranged, and Jones’s slide guitar was an integral part of the texture. But he was also used on percussion, sitar, and a primitive synthesizer on *Their Satanic Majesties’ Request*. He could fill any irregular role that a song required. Though he looked the part of a Rolling Stone, his musical contribution and stage behavior were unpredictable. He was the band’s chronic improviser.

The Hyde Park concert marked the debut of his replacement, Mick Taylor. Taylor, never granted full status as a Rolling Stone, was hired to

take guitar leads in delimited spaces. This was what the Stones needed, since Jones's playing had begun to spill over into the truly unexpected. And as the crowds grew bigger, and the money with it, less and less could be left to chance.

Jones's impatience with boundaries was certainly related to his increasing use of drugs, particularly LSD. Did Jagger see in this, retrospectively, something like Keats's increasing discomfort with form in *The Fall of Hyperion*? Is it possible that Keats's inability to complete that poem had something to do with a desire to improvise that the poetic praxis of his day denied him? Is it possible that Keats was using opium heavily, dying to fly with his nightingale right out of the poem itself, "Past the near meadows, over the still stream, / Up the hill-side?"

Total improvisation, on the one hand, and the rote rendition of musical texts on the other, are absolutes, and as such are inaccessible to musicians. If perfect rote repetition were possible, how would we be able to distinguish between a good and a bad performance of a Beethoven sonata? And despite the proponents of "free jazz," improvisational music tends to gravitate to a specific key and time signature and is usually subject to generic conventions, however submerged. Western music has, after all, only twelve tones to play with. Bends, slides, quarter tones, and other deviations tend to resolve to recognizable pitch. Similarly, it is almost impossible for improvisation to be completely arrhythmic, since there is a strong gravitational pull toward 4/4, 3/4, 6/8, or 12/8 time signatures, a gravity accentuated in ensemble playing. There are also conventions for solos in all traditional popular genres, which function as elements of recognition and execution like oral formulaics in epic poetry.

The late Junior Wells, when I was playing with him, had the terrifying habit of counting off a song with "One. Two. You know what to do!"—no title, no key, no clue. And yet somehow the song began. How was this possible? It was a sensation of staring into a formless void, as if the first step forward would plunge us into free fall. But we knew, at least, that it would be a blues song, since we were a blues band, and that the key would likely be one of the common ones—A, G, or E. So there was something to go on.

Most blues songs follow the same couple of chord progressions, with incidental variants. These are known from memory rather than charts. Once a musician is indoctrinated into blues practice, there is no need for rehearsal. You can either do it or you can't. Partly this is a rote

matter of knowing the form, but it also has to do with an ineffable mode of consciousness that musicians call “the ESP.” This is the ability to know a split second in advance what the other members of the band are going to do. Once you’ve acquired the ESP, it becomes almost impossible to commit a major blunder, like playing through a stop or an ending. You can hear a rhythmic punctuation coming at least a beat or two ahead, even if it happens spontaneously. The ESP also senses dynamics, as the band’s volume goes up or down for dramatic effect.

Muddy Waters used to conduct an initiation into the blues family for those who were given the ESP. I received that benediction from Waters on a night when he came backstage, gathered the sidemen from Luther “Georgia Boy Shaky Snake” Johnson’s band, including myself, waved his arms over us, and said “You are all my children.” Two years later I was booked to play Tanglewood with John Lee Hooker, whom I had never met. When I was introduced to him in the back seat of a limousine minutes before taking the stage in front of 8,000 people, I was struck by Hooker’s confidence that musicians he’d never met would be able to back him effectively. I realize now that he recognized that initiation.

The ESP is complete internalization of a form, so that it becomes invisible. It is primary imagination, a “repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.” But in individual lead playing a space opens up where secondary imagination must dissolve, diffuse, and dissipate the melody and chord progression of the song, in order to re-create—something else. Improvisation dreams of escaping etiological form, to supersede it with “unheard melodies.”

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche claims that in Attic drama the individual character rises provisionally from the collective chorus, masks itself for its particular role, performs the action it is required to, then dissolves and is reabsorbed into the Dionysian group. This is precisely what happens when a musician takes an improvised lead. Even if the collective is primary and primordial, by the *principium individuationis* the “soloist” (as the term indicates) is momentarily alone. The consciousness that this musician assumes depends upon the group’s “ESP” just as a tragic character depends upon the chorus or secondary imagination depends upon primary. What is shared is now his or hers to diffuse, dissolve, dissipate, and re-create. This entails a transient but heightened awareness, a state of mind for which little phenomenological description exists but which is at the crossroads of

drugs and rock and roll. For drug users, like improvising musicians, want to dissolve quotidian consciousness in order to re-create—something else.

In the instant before the lead begins, there is an internal silence. Within this quietus the player feels a momentary vertigo relieved by foreknowledge of the structure the lead must have within the song—deriving mainly from the melody and chord progression, but also from the projected duration: is it a short transitional lead, one chorus, two choruses, or more? Or is it indeterminate? If the soloist knows there are two choruses to fill it is likely that the first one will be less loud or fast than the second. If there is only one chorus to do, it is likely that the player will “jump on it.” The melody always lingers as an afterimage, since it is the thing to be dissipated by the secondary-imaginative act that follows.

Just as clocks run day and night at an even speed, a rock song has a time signature and an unvarying beat. Improvised solos begin with that tempo and try to develop a countertime of some sort, involving anticipation, syncopation, triplets, or other devices. The song’s spatial aspect, melody, is completely redrawn. Some soloists (Neil Young, for example) begin by simply playing the melody before transforming it. Others (like Frank Zappa) seek a more immediate dissolution. While the number of variables is limited (to pitch, rhythm, timbre, volume), the soloist (if not an egregious hack) does not feel the process in a mechanical way. Improvisation points at the infinite, since it moves in a zone of pure possibility. The improviser is in a privileged and altered state of consciousness, like De Quincey closing his eyes upon “that tremendous scenery.”

The improvisational expanse must be filled. The soloist cannot do nothing. Whether occupied in a minimalist manner (like Miles Davis) or with an aspiration to fullness (like Johnny Winter), the area appears four-dimensional, with highs, lows, and silences as the three spatial coordinates and the passage of measures as time. An inept improviser will try to plot the lead in advance, but an adept will surrender all projections and let what happens happen (“co-existing with the conscious will”). The range of possibility at any given moment is enormous, but you can do only what you are doing, so that is what you do. As projection fails, so does retrospection. Time cannot be reversed to amend what has been done, so if something goes “wrong” all you can do is do it again, since repetition creates an illusion of intentionality.

Although lead players in bands are thought to be more egotistical than, say, bass players, the act itself involves a dissolution of ego, a willful transparency to let some unheard melody come through.

DURING THE HEYDAY of rock improvisation in the later 1960s, epitomized in the guitar work of Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy Page, Eric Clapton, Johnny Winter, Jerry Garcia, and Brian Jones, drug use was presumed to enhance the imaginative act of playing a lead, as if a drug's capacity for dissolving, diffusing, and dissipating quotidian consciousness could by analogy potentiate the improvisational dissolution of the "straight" melody. We should count the performance-oriented vocalists of the era, particularly Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison, among these improvisers, since their shows were "happenings" rather than reproductions of their recorded songs.

Since an improvising musician is already in an altered state of consciousness, using any drug while engaged in this kind of playing in effect creates a drug combination. And a drug combination is a not simple addition of one thing to another but something more on the order of a square or cube. You might suppose that it would be simpler and easier to perform sober. But this is not necessarily the case. Intention, habit, technical or mechanical problems with the PA or the instrument, self-consciousness, over awareness of the room or the audience—all these dangers can be more easily overcome with the help of alcohol or marijuana. Alcohol allows you to swashbuckle through a chorus or two the way a happy drinker prances down the street. Pot makes improvisational space virtual, opening dimensions and possibilities so that the apparent infinity is interesting rather than terrifying. Marijuana, the most user-constructed of all drugs, is the great yea-sayer, supporting and encouraging whatever is going on anyway and introducing little or nothing of its own. It helps you understand that there is no predetermined right or wrong thing to do with the enormous space at your disposal. There is only what you do.

Stimulants, however, can cause you to get ahead of yourself, rush the beat, and generally dislocate the perpetual present in which improvisation takes place. Since cocaine and the amphetamines are drugs of desire rather than drugs of pleasure they live only in a future where satisfaction always waits and thus never comes to be. Every beat of every bar in improvisatory consciousness should be its own excuse for being; it should never grasp for any other beat or measure. Stimulants,

those runaway engines of desire, override the already altered state that improvisation is, just as they override alcohol. The reason musicians use these drugs has more to do with what happens offstage, with the fatigue caused by moving equipment and driving, or by bad road food and the constant use of alcohol, or with the necessity of aftergig partying when the body is quite properly exhausted. I suspect that heroin is used in performance for similar reasons: to relieve the pain of “bluesman’s disease,” and to calm the vertigo of improvisation’s encounter with infinity.

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche extols “brief habits” as heuristic devices, as

inestimable means for getting to know many things and states, down to the bottom of their sweetness and bitterness This is what happens to me with dishes, ideas, human beings, cities, poems, music, doctrines, ways of arranging the day, and life styles.

Enduring habits I hate. I feel as if a tyrant had come near me and as if the air I breathe had thickened when events take such a turn that it appears that they will inevitably give rise to enduring habits; for example, owing to an official position, constant association with the same people, a permanent domicile, or unique good health . . .

Most intolerable, to be sure, and the terrible par excellence would be for me a life entirely devoid of habits, a life that would demand perpetual improvisation. That would be my exile and my Siberia.¹²

Improvising musicians would share these sentiments. The generic conventions of rock, blues, country, or folk can be just the sort of “enduring habit” that must be broken, while “brief habits” are rather like the style of expression a musician develops during a single lead, or perhaps a night’s performance. The kind of improvisation Nietzsche dreads in the last paragraph above would be just as intolerable for musicians. Since drugs have no fixed effects but are active only within the context of the user’s consciousness, polydrug improvisation is a series of unique occurrences. The same musician with the same band playing the same songs and using the same drugs should have a completely different experience on Tuesday than she had on Friday. You never enter the same river twice.

DURING THE LATER 1960S, transcendental improvisation sold concert tickets and created legends. In a poll conducted by students at the University of Massachusetts in the early 1970s, Eric Clapton,

whose pharmacomaniac lead playing with Cream set a standard for dazzling energy, was voted the most important person on earth. Jimi Hendrix, in whose hands the electrified guitar became the electric guitar, made his improvisations under the ideological aegis of LSD but used marijuana for his performances.¹³ The Grateful Dead, who early in their career were actually able to perform while tripping on LSD, championed both altered states and pure improvisation through all their long and lucrative career. The drug experience most prized at that moment in history was not the one that dims consciousness but the one that “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create.”

The fall of Saigon in 1975 marks the fall of the metanarrative, both primary (God bless America) and antithetical (peace and love). It begins the “death of the subject.” It also signals the end of the centrality of rock and roll improvisation, and eventually of rock and roll itself. Despite the efforts of Bruce Springsteen and Patti Smith to carry on the improvisational tradition, three streams diverged at that point—heavy metal, punk, and disco—and each of them revalued drugs and imagination in a different way.

Heavy metal and its sanitized pop epigones (Deep Purple, Heart, Kansas, Kiss) dominated the post-Vietnam charts. Durable new bands like Aerosmith, AC-DC and Van Halen rose from the ashes of Led Zeppelin. All of them featured guitar leads of dazzling speed and complexity, but they became technical displays rather than imaginative acts. While the myth of transcendental improvisation persisted, there was an economic factor that undermined it. Bands were commercially re-gearred to play arenas and football stadiums rather than clubs or auditoriums. Their mass audiences came to expect note-for-note renditions of the recorded songs, including the solos. With so much money at stake, improvisation became too risky an activity for the stage. In addition, many bands began running tapes concurrently with the live performance in case of disaster (an amp blowing up or a drunken drummer) or any other deviation that could disappoint the presumptive literalism of the audience. This circumstance detached drug use from its imaginative pretenses. While many heavy metal bands had hard-earned reputations as polydrug users, most of this activity took place offstage, since the financial investment in their shows could not brook distracted players.

Punk, the new antithetical, outlawed the guitar lead, and in fact solo playing of any kind. It denigrated the notion of “talent” in favor of a

nihilist democracy in which the inability to sing or play, coupled with the courage to do so anyway, became the hallmark of its rebellion. Valuing effort more than inspiration in a compressed spatio-temporal field of high speed and lethal volume, punk actualized the danger that has always lurked in the ideology of imagination—an impulse to dissolve, diffuse, and dissipate with no interest in re-creating anything. Heroin became the drug of choice, perhaps to anesthetize the pain of all that noise and effort, but amphetamines and nitrous oxide were also common. Because technical impairment was considered a sign of authenticity, these drugs were frequently used directly in performance but were not justified by the rhetoric of imagination.

Disco, with its electronic percussion, close vocal harmonies, and tight arrangements, allowed little room for individual expression. Live performance, although still practiced by groups like KC and the Sunshine Band or the Bee Gees, was clearly secondary to the bass-and-drum-heavy recordings produced for DJs to play in discothèques. While cocaine was the favorite drug of its audiences and producers,¹⁴ no one much cared what the musicians used, since they were by now interchangeable parts in a corporate artwork.

It was in a form of dance music descended from disco that the most significant scandal of late rock history occurred. Ted Friedman, in his article “Milli Vanilli and the Scapegoating of the Inauthentic,” summarizes: “In the summer of 1990, the American music industry performed a bizarre ritual. At a press conference, it was announced that the winners of that year’s ‘Best New Artist’ award, Milli Vanilli, had had their prize revoked for misrepresenting their contributions to their own music; it had been discovered (though there was never much of a secret about it) that the group’s putative members, Rob Pilatus and Fab Morvan, had not performed any of the vocals on their album.” Not only did it no longer matter what substances musicians used to exercise the imagination, it now turned out they weren’t even expected to play.

Friedman continues, “Pop music-making in the 1990s has more to do with filmmaking than jamming in a garage: every song is a collection of tracks laid down by assorted musicians, edited together by producers, and fronted by charismatic performers. But while most viewers recognize the complex division of labor in moviemaking—nobody gets upset that actors don’t do their own stunts—pop music hangs on to the folk-era image of the individual artist communicating

directly to her or his listeners. Milli Vanilli became martyrs to this myth of authenticity. They were the recording industry's sacrifice, meant to prove the integrity of the rest of their product—as if the music marketed under the names U2 or Janet Jackson WEREN'T every bit as constructed and mediated, just because the voices on the records matched the faces in the videos.”¹⁵

After the fall of Saigon, rock and roll became rock. Bands that once traveled with their own drug dealers now tour with drug counselors provided by the record companies. A musician's part in the corporate artwork that commercial rock has become requires sobriety and not improvisation. Rock has no room for the stoned or unexpected. It dissolves, diffuses, and dissipates nothing, affirming corporate hegemony and replacing sexual and spiritual aspiration with consumer desire. After an arena-rock concert the audience goes home not to the chimerical cobwebs of a waning acid trip or the still-deafened memory of a soloist stretching for the impossible but to a band cap and T-shirt and a world untransformed.

COLERIDGE'S RADICAL DOCTRINE of imagination was mass-marketed for a short time during the neo-Romantic counterculture. But once an audience reaches a certain size, art requires collective effort to produce, and improvisation becomes too dangerous for its high budgets. Yet poetry remains low budget, and during the 1960s the practice of free verse became almost universal in the United States. Keats's dream of following the nightingale out of form came true, and remains true today despite a brief Reaganite revival of formal verse. With all art forms successfully corporatized, poetry remains dangerously unprofitable and individual.

Dr. Baumgartner could have gone after a musician. Hector Berlioz, for example, was an indulger in opiates, so why not him? Perhaps Baumgartner realized the anachronistic persistence of imagination in verse and was serving notice that this too must be criminalized. For the drug warriors remember how tightly freedom of expression is joined to freedom of consciousness. By convicting John Keats, Baumgartner fingered not just a long-dead poet but the archetype of the young drug-using artist with a world-transforming imagination, a recurring cultural icon that no drug warrior can abide.

The visions are all fled—the car is fled
Into the light of heaven, and in their stead
A sense of real things comes doubly strong,
And, like a muddy stream, would bear along
My soul to nothingness: but I will strive
Against all doubtings, and will keep alive
The thought of that same chariot, and the strange
Journey it went.

Is there so small a range
In the present strength of manhood, that the high
Imagination cannot freely fly
As she was wont of old?¹⁶

NOTES

¹Vol. 98, #1, September–October 1995, p. 18.

²London: Faber and Faber, 1968, p. 311.

³This list comes from Hayter, and from Dale Pendell, *Pharmako/Poecia: Plant Powers, Poisons, and Herbcraft*. San Francisco: Mercury House, 1995, pp. 103–113.

⁴P. 314.

⁵Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995, pp. 159–164.

⁶Chapter 1.

⁷*Biographia Literaria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 304.

For an exhaustive account of the relationship of Coleridge's habit to his literary output, see Molly Lefebure, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Bondage of Opium* (New York: Stein and Day, 1974).

⁸*Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), pp. 33–34.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁰"The Apocalypse of Hasheesh." *Putnam's Magazine*, December 1856.

¹¹From Richard Neville, *Play Power*. Reprinted in *Rolling Stone*. New York: Music Sales Corporation, 1972, pp. 142–143.

¹²Trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), pp. 236–237.

¹³Though a combination of LSD, china white heroin, and sleeping pills apparently figured in his death. See David Henderson, *'Scuse Me While I Kiss the Sky* (New York: Doubleday, 1978).

¹⁴See Frederic Dannen, *Hit Men* (New York: Times Books, 1990).

¹⁵Ted Friedman, "Milli Vanilli and the Scapegoating of the Inauthentic," *Bad Subjects* 9 (November 1993).

¹⁶"Sleep and Poetry," ll. 155–165.