

White Hand Society: The Psychedelic Partnership of Timothy Leary & Allen Ginsberg
By Peter Conners
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Reviewed by Marc Olmsted

The title of Peter Conners' study, *The White Hand Society*, is a bit cheeky. The phrase was Timothy Leary's name for a made-up Harvard drinking brotherhood that involved one other member, Charles Slack (whose book, *Timothy Leary, the Madness of the Sixties and Me*, was probably the first exposé of Leary as somewhat less-than-enlightened). The play of the title reflects Conners' command of the many disparate strands of Leary's and Allen Ginsberg's shared history, and while most of Connors' source texts (such as *High Priest* and *Yage Letters*) will be familiar to specialists, his study is a useful, if somewhat problematic synthesis of the history of Ginsberg's and Leary's involvement with LSD.

Conners rightly starts his history with Ginsberg's well-reported William Blake vision(s) of 1948. His account is an admirably clear and accurate presentation, except for the implication that it all happened in one day instead reoccurring over a period of days (Ginsberg, 2008, 35-44). These Blake visions, as well-versed Ginsberg readers know, were crucial for Ginsberg. For Conners, the Blake visions start Ginsberg down the road of psychedelic experimentation. However, the Blake visions also reflect Ginsberg's concern with mystical vision. Even so, this shifts over the years, as Ginsberg later doesn't externalize his seeming visitation, when he

...suddenly had a kind of auditory hallucination, hearing Blake—what I thought was his voice, a very deep, earthen tone, not very far from my own mature tone of voice, so perhaps a projection of my own latent physiology— (Ginsberg 1994, 15)

Had Conners considered Ginsberg's relationship with Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa, whom Conner barely mentions, his account of Ginsberg's involvement with psychedelics would be better grounded and nuanced.

Ginsberg's explorations of alternate modes of consciousness were only partially "about" LSD, but the book's commitment to Leary as the self-styled high priest of LSD weights the book toward psychedelics and minimizes Ginsberg's shifting relationship to acid, even though those changes are relatively easy to trace. After his 1968 car accident, Ginsberg gave an *East Village Other* interview where he asked rhetorically what happens if "you get carcrashes instead of cocksucks?" (Ginsberg 1972, 120) Ginsberg saw that the pursuit of bliss was not a solution to suffering, a conclusion that Shakyamuni Buddha himself arrived at with his First Noble Truth.

For Ginsberg, Leary's doctrine of "Stay high and love God," (a slogan he borrowed from the acid dealing ring of the Brotherhood of Eternal Love (Platt 2008, redpepper.org) was problematic. It amounted to the "spiritual materialism" (as Trungpa termed it) of the ego trying to stay high. Beginning in 1970, Ginsberg was drawn to Tibetan lama Chogyam Trungpa for just this reason – Trungpa was brutal on the subject. In *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, Trungpa talks about the creation and development of ego using a

Buddhist metaphor of a restless captive monkey locked in a house with five sense-windows. When asked what happens when the monkey takes a little LSD or peyote, Trungpa replied, “He has already taken it.” (Trungpa 2008, 137), which suggests that, from Trungpa’s perspective, acid provides no release from *samsara* (ignorance).

Ginsberg’s 1966 comments about his pot-insights about Cezanne’s paintings suggest and foreshadow how he eventually came to see LSD (Ginsberg 2008, 28). The drug heightens the senses and one can perceive details not previously noticed, and these details, upon examination, remain after coming down. In this same way, acid and other psychedelics served as a mega-version of this kind of experience. The five senses, arguably, could also be heightened to an even-psychic degree, such as shamans are often said to demonstrate: divinations, locating missing objects for the tribe, or the telepathy that interested Burroughs (Burroughs, Ginsberg 2006, xxvi). Even the Dalai Lama’s question to Ginsberg in India 1962, “If you take LSD, can you see inside that briefcase?” (140) is not the Zen koan Conners supposes it to be. Such heightening is still a heightening of the world of sense; the monkey is still locked within the house.

Ginsberg summarized Trungpa’s “position on “psychedelics in a 1976 interview. He notes that, for Trungpa, LSD and other drugs,

are too trippy, whereas people need to be grounded; everything is uncertain enough as it is. The world, societies, mind are uncertain. What’s needed is some non-apocalyptic, non-ambitious, non-spiritually materialistic, grounded sanity, for which he proposes *shamatha* meditation and discourages grass and acid, which is logically sensible. I think he may have some more ample ideas about that for specific situations. (Ginsberg 2001, 384)

Conners does mention Ginsberg talking to the Dalai Lama in India in 1962: “As with most of the holy men they encountered, the Dalai Lama replied that, if anything, drugs were a distraction from true enlightenment.” (140) But Conners omits the pithiest instructions Ginsberg felt he received:

I went on to Kalimpong to visit Dudjom Rincpoche, the head of the [Tibetan Buddhist] Nyingma school, and I brought him my problems with LSD...He did give me a very good pith instruction, which I never forgot. ...“If you see something horrible, don’t cling to it, and if you see something beautiful, don’t cling to it.” (Ginsberg 1994, 15)

Similarly, Conners omits Jack Kerouac’s wackily astute comment to Leary about psychedelics: “Walking on water wasn’t built in a day” (Greenfield 2007, 135). Conners’ quotation from Steve Silberman’s 1987 interview with Ginsberg does, though, sum up Ginsberg’s later view on acid to some degree: “...probably a good idea for an intelligent kid – they should also be prepared with some techniques for meditation, so they can switch their attention from bum trips back to their breath, and to the current space around them” (259-260).

Conners also gives an account of Burroughs staying in Leary’s attic and Burroughs abruptly leaving when he decided that Leary was not scientific enough (127). Unfortunately, he neglects Burroughs’ account of acid (quoted from his “Minutes to Go”) in Leary’s *High Priest*, warning,

their immortality cosmic consciousness and love is second-run grade B shit. Their drugs are poison designed to beam in orgasm death and Nova ovens. Stay out of the garden of delights. It is a man-eating trap that ends in green goo. Throw back their ersatz immortality. It will fall apart before you can get out of the big store. (Leary 1995, 213)

While Conners mentions that Leary and Burroughs later reconciled and became close (126), he does not suggest what brought the two men back together, though their shared zeal for space migration may well have been a factor.

Conners' treatment of Ginsberg and the Beats is not as nuanced and comprehensive as one might like. Still, he captures Leary's continuing appeal—the possibility that one might "get religion" without dogma. Drop a pill: the results are empirical. LSD discoverer Albert Hoffman's remarks, quoted early in *White Hand Society*, express this clearly. Hoffman encouraged young people who wanted to try LSD to go into nature and "experience the beauty and deep meaning which is at the core of our relation to nature." (32) But the way Conners tosses around such Sixties catch phrases as "ego death" and "satori" with seemingly no more philosophical rigor than that era's stereotypical acid head typifies the way his study is less a critical or scholarly interrogation of its subject than a deft account for a more general audience turned on by Leary's aura, an aura which seems, like a comet, to orbit back across the empty sky promising illumination.

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