

# GATES OF EDEN

Harold Massoon

This extraordinary account of the ecstasies experienced during a psychotic episode suggests that "when these things are better understood and controlled, good may be realized out of what we know as insanity."

FIRST LETTER TO: INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION FOR INTERNAL FREEDOM, CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

Gentlemen: Recently I chanced to read an article dealing with the activity of your group. To myself it was heartening, in a sense, to read that the LSD experiments produce sensory experiences of great beauty. I do not believe that the average layman's concept of mental illness includes any knowledge or recognition of the fact that the "disturbed" individual may enter realms of such exquisite beauty as to upset his normal values and reactions. Since the individual is clearly the victim of delusions any such gratifying experience may be chalked off as an escape mechanism—a psychotic dream. This may be so, yet having myself undergone a psychotic experience, a portion of which involved sensory experience and feelings of breathtaking beauty, it is hard for me to accept the idea that the things which happened to me could be explained away so simply. The unconscious mechanisms of man are doubtless of enormous complexity. Man may well be a far more amazing creature than even his inflated conceptions of his contemporary self would indicate. The hallucinogens may prove a valuable tool for the eventual creation of more enlightened populations—indeed, for a better race of men.

For what it may be worth I would like to touch on certain aspects of my own psychosis which occurred some four years ago. My experience was, at one end, a vista into a state of unparalleled beauty and peace, but at the opposite end there were experiences and thoughts of darkness and terror. My hallucinations, when they finally made their appearance, were terrifying; it was as if, at one stage, I stood at the portals of paradise and, at another, felt and experienced the dark gate of hell.

At the outset, while my experience had religious connotations, it should be men-

tioned that I am neither a church goer nor a bible addict. In fact, I will acknowledge that I am a little afraid of the old book—I had an insane theory as to why this is so—and perhaps in my own instance it is just as well. A sensitive, imaginative, and evidently weak-minded person, I have had no wish to tangle with a book that has produced such a bumper crop of fanatics, zealots, and religious maniacs, recognizing that I was prime material. Nonetheless, I suppose I am, in a sense, a religious individual who sees religion as a matter of values to be lived up to; true religion should be an approach to life and a thing more to be lived, or attempted, than preached. However, I have learned quite a bit about the old book and what it contains, from readings as well as from conversations and from observing life itself. In my psychotic state—and somewhere I have read that this is a familiar pattern—the informations and observations gleaned throughout a lifetime **seemed** to fall neatly into place as if a lifetime had provided me with, so to speak, the keys to the kingdom in which I found myself. In my deluded state I believed that I was supposed to write the book, or formula, which would enable others to enter this realm—a realm of great inner beauty, of sensory awakening, and with utter abandon I dismissed all other considerations to plunge excitedly to the task. In the course of matters I made the dangerous mistake of letting my wild and disordered imagination be my guide, believing that I was being inspired by Divine sources and, oh brother, what a trip to the moon that was—culminating, as you might suspect, in a nuthouse.

No doubt there were several causative factors contributing to my particular psychosis and here again, for brevity's sake, I can only suggest the mechanisms which altered my interior chemistry and triggered my psychotic explosion. Heredity? A strong

likelihood, I suppose. My father before me was in and out of mental institutions a number of times and I had opportunity to observe his strange behavior during his "spells." (What may have happened to the inner man is less of a mystery to me now.) Overwork, perhaps;—unrequited love (I was a 43-year-old bachelor at the time—unable to "break the ice"); and a very powerful and provocative book, Philip Wylie's **Generation of Vipers** which I had read before and was in the process of re-reading and which was an influential if not causative factor in my psychosis. But I have no intention to attempt diagnosis—why the hell, I've but a high school education.

It all began in a subtle way with a feeling of wellbeing and abundant good nature that was not unlike a continuous alcoholic "glow." In my work, I became tireless. Each day, ordinarily dull to a degree, became an adventure—my mind sharpened—my wit keened—a feeling of camaraderie enveloped me. With the passing days the feeling grew and I recognized that something (I supposed, wonderful) had happened to me. I was a man transformed. God, I felt marvelous.

In a world that grew more beautiful day by day I recognized one significant fact: no one—but no one, could feel as wonderful as I and wish to do anything but **live!** Here, within myself I had discerned—or been shown—the brotherhood of man, the pure true beauty of existence. A growing conviction took hold of me—this must be put into words. Thinking back I can see the egotism of it—just the shade of an idea that I, yes **I**, would be exalted, glorified, famous.

Well, suffice it to say I blew my job, leaving behind a few good-natured but pointed allusions to the company's greedy ways, withdrew my thousand odd from the credit union and set out to write "The Book of Life." Somebody had to write this, deriving it from the "Tree of Life" in the Garden of Eden, which I came to regard as a symbolism, a simple tale but fraught with hidden meaning. Legendary "Eden" never existed, but the story was written with a clever reversal and put at the front of the book instead of the back where it rightfully belonged, by a force representative of the dark half of man's

heritage and symbolized in the figure of a man with some of the appurtenances of an animal. For if the old black book were purportedly a manual for man's guidance someone surely erred in disregarding the opposites in man's nature, not realizing that the devil himself might have had an equal hand in the assembly of the book. This must, of course, be regarded as an insane theory but some of these heresies bear mention. It may not be too far-fetched to suggest that the old book may have done a lot of harm as well as good, if hypocrisy, fanaticism, etc., are taken into consideration.

So I plunged into writing and the imagination soared and the words flowed freely. Each day was a continual joy and my ecstasy was unlimited. Nights I would sometimes leave the apartment and drive through the velvet dark, and the city was an enchanting place. Sometimes I drank—not that I desired liquor—only to be around people and where there was music. Liquor seemed to have a special effect on me—I was continuously "high." I began to experience feelings of rapture in my lower belly, exquisitely sweet feelings of pleasure, some so piercing and keen as to make me want to cry out, others soft and gentle like little fingers, constantly changing, never alike and this, during the height of my ecstatic feeling, was almost continuous.

Once on retiring I had an erection and began to experience climax after climax, some lasting for minutes and this continued for two or three hours, with no manipulation on my part. I could visualize an act of love of pure beauty and feeling, bodies joined in quiet dignity, no animal movements required. A breath-taking experience, even alone, and with a woman similarly attuned—oh God what it would be! I recall feeling a vast relief—so this was how it was and sex was not eliminated but here was an act of love a thousand times more beautiful. Small wonder that man's animal sex act has "dirty" connotations—I might note here that I have found pleasure in **that** as well, I image as much as anyone—but what I experienced was unbelievable.

I continued with my writing believing that when my work was done I would ultimately

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be led to "Eve" for what I was experiencing was meant to be shared and the prospects were exciting—well, that is a mild word for it.

I had been in this state of "Eden" for perhaps a couple of weeks or thereabouts when I had my first hallucination. Following a session of writing I went into the bedroom to lie down and rest a bit. Suddenly there before my eyes there was the blackest of blacks and I saw my mother's face, crying out, imploring—as she was sucked into a black vortex. I was terrified—I almost went to the phone to place a long distance call home. What did this mean? Had my mother died? There was a feeling of malevolence accompanying the hallucination that was terrifying. Then I calmed. I'd met the Great Deceiver—it was all a clever trick to try and drive me out of my mind. And it came to me that no man "attains" Eden without doing battle with this jealous force. If one lost this psychic battle, the devil would have his kind and he'd end up in an asylum—a hopeless gibbering idiot. Terrifying prospect. Somehow I recalled what I knew of the Lord's Prayer—"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil" and I was vastly relieved. Let the clever sonofabitch bring on his bag of tricks—I wasn't going to be afraid.

My writing concluded, I drove my car out of the city late one night. I would just start out driving through the enchanted night and somewhere we would meet and I would know. Paradise. I stopped at a market to get some cigarettes, and noticing some large delicious apples there, I bought one. Amusedly I thought about it—a wedding present, the symbolic apple—well, by God, I'd give it back to the faithless bitch and she would understand and we'd both laugh uproariously. For we would be free and wild and uninhibited and Eve a lovable shameless bitch.

Well, gentlemen, I'm running up the pages here and there are many things recalled but not gone into. Suffice it to say, I followed my deluded imagination to a motel alongside the highway and my imagination told me "he" had her there in one of the units and I went in and there he was, the fiend incarnate,—bald head, hooked nose,

swarthy complexion and glittering brown eyes—a vicious looking specimen with what appeared to be two fangs for lowers. I am a slightly built fellow but I damned near tore that motel unit apart with my bare hands and it took about five state police to subdue me. Later, in the back of a police car, steel cuffs biting into my wrists, my jaw fractured—a figure walked by and it was the bald headed one only this time he was wearing a felt hat. He looked at me in the back of the police car and his face lit up with a saccharine grin of such sweetness that I had to smile back. How neatly he'd done me in—the bastard. He disappeared down the path to the cabins and shortly thereafter I smelled the unmistakable odor of sulphur in the police car—strong, penetrating—an olfactory hallucination, I suppose. There were some terrifying moments in the asylum but even so my cheerful glow continued for some time, gradually diminishing, the rapture fading. Released in about three months. There isn't a helluva lot that I can say about a state institution that is very commendable however and if LSD can help some of those poor devils—well, that's a great deal. And it may even be found some day that there are hidden resources in man's psyche which is not an economic push-button gadget but full of a vivid and beautiful life that has nothing to do with worldly goods.

Back in society and with a different company, two years ago I awoke one morning with a great feeling of indescribable joy. I tiptoed to the window to see that about ten inches of new snow had fallen during the night and somehow the whiteness, the purity, and the beauty of feeling seemed to go hand in hand. I went through another experience involving moments of great beauty and sensory delights as well as some pretty dark times. This time I subdued, with quite an effort, my inclinations to abandon my job, and somehow I made it through about four months of insanity, though I was very nearly deceived into answering auditory hallucinations during one hectic week. But I am a reticent person—thank God for that—and I pretty much kept my wild thoughts to myself, a not inconsiderable feat. Possibly the knowledge that all this had its beginning and end in the self was a help. Again I had a compulsion to write—I wanted to bring this

beauty of feeling to others—and this time I guess I did some 200 odd pen-written pages. I've never been inclined to re-read them—I suppose they are a curious mixture of truths, delusions, and fantastic heresy. During this "illness," I did manage one constructive thing that it may be significant to mention. Always a heavy and compulsive cigarette smoker and never quite able to quit, I abandoned the weed with an ease that was really astonishing. Gave nearly a carton away after they lay around a couple of weeks untouched. After about three months abstinence, my psychosis faded, and like an ass I bought a pack and it seems I haven't been able to quit since. So it may just be that when these things are better understood and controlled that good may be realized out of what we know as insanity.

Since my last episode I've gotten along quite well. I have no special desire to flirt with another session in the booby hatch and I try and keep both feet on the ground and I don't, at my intelligence level, propose to know all the answers as to what happened to me. It may be that there is enough integrity within me, and that my personal values—not always coincident with those of society—are true enough that I am very close to something. There is no doubt that there is inner conflict and dis-integrity within my psyche and I suppose that is my "devil." But oh, God, if a man could capture and control the other feeling—I would want it always. And if numbers of men could find the route, I could foresee the beginnings of man's dream of peace.

Philip Wylie indicted society and science, and his writing bears scrutiny. The greater efforts of science, he declares, "have gone to implement man—not to enlighten him. Egotistical man assumes that he knows all there is to know of himself whereas he and his truth seekers actually know relatively little of inner of spiritual man because so little effort has been devoted to that end." What occurred to me subjectively seemed much too profound to be designated an escape mechanism, but even if it was—take a hard look at your society and your people who flock by the millions to the bar rooms each night for a little "escape" and perhaps, in instances, a little human warmth, and I'll

tell you there's just a great deal to want to "escape" from.

I have no special feelings of shame for my psychotic escapade and episode in the nut factory—as I've told friends, jokingly, well, it's not everyone gets the first hand experience. But I've made little effort to tell, as I have attempted here, of the exquisite beauty I experienced—after all I was "sick," "I didn't know what I was doing," etc. If my acts were incomprehensible, I recall pretty well what I did and the motivations at the time, and I readily acknowledge and recognize that my mental apparatus played tricks on me.

I suppose I have written because someone it seemed should hear my tale and perhaps your experiments have provided the only people with sufficient insights as to possibly appreciate it.

#### SECOND LETTER

Dear Doctor: In reply to your letter of April 30 may I say that I have no objection if you see fit to make use of my account of a psychotic adventure in your periodical.

It is very seldom that I have gone so far as to write as I did; though on occasion I have felt like writing a "letter to the editor" as regarding one thing or another. I customarily stifle the urge, recognizing that after all there was probably nothing especially profound or startling about my own particular digressions and the letters were as well left unwritten. Having undergone an interval of psychosis it was gratifying and even exciting to discern from what reading I have done relative to the effects of hallucinogens, that there was apparently a striking resemblance between the perceptions realized under the drug and insanity—or, at least my own particular encounters with it. Appreciate the dilemma of an individual such as myself who has undergone a profound experience—an experience which, while it held intervals of terror, was of indescribable beauty, followed by the painful return to "normalcy." The recognition that one has been deluded, made an ass of himself, and that this was insanity is inescapable—what is there to say that

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might find understanding in his fellows? Unfortunately the experience is very much a subjective one and recognizing the futility of words one may as well be reticent. The point I am trying to make is that the terms "mental illness," "nervous breakdown," "delusionary," "lunacy," while doubtless carrying in their essence elements of truth seem so damnably inadequate and to me it seems that there was more to it than this—that in the heightened senses, the quickened mind, the keened emotions there was something dynamic and an illumination of a kind. It would be sheer conjecture to suppose that some chemical change or whatever takes place in that ultracomplex psychic organ, the brain, perhaps prior to its time in evolutionary development and, since the subject has not grown up to the utilization of this new set of feelings and this quickened mental faculty, he becomes insane, abandoning his normal values and disregarding the common sense dictates of his environment. He would be limited to his own particular grasps of current knowledges and plagued with his own peculiar set of delusions, beliefs, superstitions and fantasies even though his psychic organ transcended the normal state. *Life Magazine* recently carried some material relative to LSD. I can appreciate the account of a normally level-headed business man who saw himself as God and I can likewise appreciate the feeling of the young man who walked in front of a speeding automobile convinced of his own invulnerability. There is such a positiveness—such a feeling of absoluteness. Normally I am not an individual of strong convictions nor am I particularly inclined to be a staunch "believer" but in psychosis I not merely "believed"—I **knew**. Somehow it seemed that more than just a sickness of the kind might be involved if one could employ discrimination and that a "fool" might just possibly, though it were beyond his ability to comprehend it, discern the glimmering of a higher state. This much I **do** suggest—if mankind is to survive through the ages without annihilating his species and reconcile his planetary differences into some manner of peaceable co-existence, somewhere in the millenia ahead one might hopefully anticipate psychic evolution for the better.

At any rate it was gratifying to learn that folk of more education and doubtless greater stability than I can claim, had undergone, though provoked by chemical means, similar adventures. Truly would I like to possess the quick mind, the compassion, the capacity for loving, the zest, the tirelessness, the human warmth, the humour—the things I **felt** while in a psychotic state, for to do so would be to **live**—and how very wonderful it seemed that life could be. But there is that word of course—"seemed."

I might mention that coincident with my writing of my experience to you people, possibly as the result of aroused feelings and the recalling of past adventure, I lapsed forthwith into another enraptured interval of psychosis. I did, in fact, awaken the morning after I had written the account, and the euphoria lasted many weeks though it was interposed with occasional terrifying thoughts. How very very sure was I **this** time that I had somehow discovered the essence of vivid life and, of course, how very very deluded I turned out to be. I abandoned a good job, went through a modest savings and was obliged to sell my (all paid for) late model automobile. It was a matter of some six months before I was re-employed—sadder, older and, it is to be hoped, possibly a trifle wiser. No nuthouse this time—I was smart enough to manage appearances, curb the tendency to loquaciousness, keep bills paid and exercise some restraint and actually I had quite an exhilarating experience, if an expensive one. Since I am a bachelor no one was particularly harmed and I have apparently emerged from the experience satisfactorily. Still and all I hope I am done with it for although it is a terrific adventure it is not a happy thing for an individual with some intelligence and a sensitive nature to be obliged to emerge from. At least I think I have shed some of my delusions in the process and perhaps the outlook is not unfavorable. My personal orientation has ever been inclined toward life and living as above personal gain and advancement so I can be philosophical about the matter—at least I have savored the heights and the depths of feeling and encountered a very crafty personal devil.