

## Book Reviews

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*The Cult of the Seer in the Ancient Middle East: A Contribution to Current Research on Hallucinations, drawn from Coptic and other Texts*, by VIOLET MACDERMOT, London, Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine, 1971, pp. x, 828, £9.00. [Supplementary volume, in Coptic, £3.00.]

This book is obviously, and deservedly, destined to be a work of reference. As such it cannot be faulted. It is clearly the distillate of an immense amount of research. The material offered is fascinating. The main contribution to scholarship is probably the elucidation and description of visionary experiences from Egyptian Coptic sources. Apart from revealing to us what was previously hidden, the author has presented other, more accessible, information in an attractively logical manner. The introduction for example, is an admirable précis of the visionary experience as described by different authors. The quotations from Plato and others are well chosen and admirably arranged in relation to each other.

In these days it is a comfort to find an author genuinely alarmed by the induction of visionary states by drugs. In spite of a variety of specious arguments in its favour, there is no doubt that this widespread practice is basically decadent. There can be no doubt that many contemporary addicts, particularly among young people, are in search of the visionary experience. Some regard the latter as an escape from stresses which they find intolerable. Others are genuinely, if uncritically, preoccupied with religious experience. Whatever their motive in seeking the drug-induced vision, too few realize that they are indulging in something which is for the most part misguided and dangerous. Visionary experiences should always be seen against the background of the individual's general maturity and degree of spiritual development. Drugs facilitate visions without any accompanying inner development. This creates an enormous gulf between the world the individual has seen and that in which he ordinarily lives. Too often the victim attempts to obliterate the gulf by a full saturation with drugs.

It is at this point that one must regretfully part company with the author. She is very rightly condemnatory of the drug-induced vision. She argues that there is little common ground between modern drug-takers and the Middle Eastern ascetics of an earlier vintage. Unfortunately, unless I misread her, she dismisses the possibility that the visionary experience has any contribution to make to the modern predicament. How otherwise can we translate her statement on page 236 that the content of dream and trance revelations is merely an enhancement by the 'imagination' of physiological experiences. This enhancement can have no valid relationship to the 'universe'. The inverted commas are the author's. Such statements reject altogether the evidence of religious experience of every age and every variety of culture. It is indisputable that extra-sensory manifestations, including visionary experiences, are the products of psychic and spiritual maturity. In these days the existence of extra-sensory phenomena can hardly be disputed. Dr. MacDermot seems to convey that the visionary experience is, in our time at any rate, necessarily a regression to archaism and the imitation of primitive societies. Does the author consider St. Paul, as manifested in Corinthians 1, chapter 12, to be the mouthpiece of a primitive society? He speaks of the variety of gifts arising from the Spirit. He mentions healing, the working of miracles, prophecy,

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the discerning of spirits, different kinds of tongues and the interpretation of tongues. Buddhist and Hindhu philosophy testify also that such manifestations are, in every age and culture, the by-products of spiritual maturity. They cannot be curtly diagnosed and dismissed as archaism. If the author is implying that it is undesirable that we should be preoccupied with visionary experience at the expense of our total development, then certainly we must agree with her, but one must refute altogether any idea that the phenomenon itself is basically pathological.

Dr. MacDermot could well have given more space to the contrast between the visionary experience of her Middle Eastern seers and those of our contemporary layabouts, but we should not ask too much of one who has put us so much in her debt by opening a window on aspects of culture previously inaccessible to us. I cannot see any early prospect of her being overtaken in the field she has explored with such diligence and competence.

ARTHUR GUIRDHAM

*Purkyněs Weg. Wissenschaft, Bildung und Nation*, by ERNA LESKY. (Veröffentlichungen der Kommission für Geschichte der Erziehung und des Unterrichts. Heft 12) Vienna, Cologne, Graz, H. Böhlhaus, 1970, pp. 68, illus., OS.76.

One aspect of Jan Evangelista Purkyně [1787–1869], the great physiologist, is shown in this monograph in detail: his political views and their influence on his academic career. A Czech in the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the time of romantic nationalism on the part of the minorities, and repression and reaction on the part of Metternich and his Government, Purkyně was not a *persona grata* at either Prague or any Austrian university. He had to spend the greater part of his life teaching at Breslau University where, paradoxically, he had to use the German language against the use of which he had agitated in Bohemia. While expecting justice for the claims of his Czech co-nationalists, he also believed in the universal brotherhood proclaimed by the Freemasons and was disliked by the Prague and Austrian University authorities for this affiliation. Only at the age of sixty-two, Purkyně was made Professor of Physiology at the Medical Faculty of Prague University, through the intervention of Leo Count Thun-Hohenstein who was, in spite of his name, a Czech nobleman. In an appendix, Professor Lesky is making all the material on this appointment, extracted from the Archives of the Ministry of Education in Vienna, available to the public for the first time. The result of this late appointment was a certain intolerance of competition in his field on the part of the septuagenarian Purkyně, who was overburdened, without allowing J. N. Czermak to become Extraordinary Professor at Prague. Until his death at eight-two Purkyně continued to give physiology lectures, finally most of them in Czech; the fulfilment of his aspirations. In a final chapter, Professor Lesky attributes the sentiments expressed in Purkyně's utopia on tolerance between nations, 'The Policy of Love', to the influence of his early teacher, Bernard Bolzano.

MARIANNE WINDER

*The New Jersey Pharmaceutical Association 1870–1970*, by DAVID L. COWEN, Trenton, N.J., The New Jersey Pharmaceutical Association, 1970, pp. xii, 240, illus., \$7.00.

The New Jersey Pharmaceutical Association, celebrating its centenary in 1970, could have chosen no one more fitted than Professor David L. Cowen to write its