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Super Syphilitics or Alchemical Acid Heads?

On the Nature of Genius in Thomas M. Disch's *Camp Concentration*

Ian Stuart GARLINGTON

Keywords : Thomas M. Disch, *Camp Concentration*, Alchemy, Genius, LSD

You don't want to hear about it anymore, but people are still visiting the cosmos. We must always remember to thank the CIA and the army for LSD.

-John Lennon (1980)

I. Introduction

In the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, Thomas M. Disch is described as “perhaps the most respected, least trusted, most envied and least read of all modern sf writers of the first rank” (Clute). This assertion is supported by the lack of critical attention his works have received, despite Harold Bloom’s inclusion of *On Wings of a Song* (1973) in his Western Canon (565) and Fredric Jameson’s response to an inquiry from the journal *SF Studies* #61, published November, 1993, where he included Disch on a list of SF authors whose works he hopes will be further researched. Within the SF community as well, Disch is not widely discussed even though authors such as Ursula Le Guin and Samuel R. Delany both praised *Camp Concentration* (1968), with Delany going so far as to use the phrase “the jaw’s jeweled hinged” from one of the poems in the novel for the title of his 1976 collection of essays on SF.

In “Faust and Archimedes,” Delany says that Disch, who eventually moved away from SF to pursue poetry, should be seen as working primarily in the mode of the nineteenth century symbolists. He argues that SF writers in general should be viewed in these terms (178). Delany observes that outside poetry, SF is the only literature,

that is symbolic in its basic conception. Its stated aim is to

represent the world without reproducing it. That is what dealing with worlds of possibilities and probabilities means. It is paradoxical that the symbolists must be so passionately concerned with the real world, both the reality without them and within. But if they are not, their symbols have no referent. (178)

In *Camp Concentration*, however, the problem is that the overwhelming number of references and quotations generates so many potential meanings that readers have great difficulty in arriving at a comforting conclusion as to either where the story originated from or what its symbols signify.

Philip K. Dick's bizarre response to the novel highlights the problems concerning its interpretation. On October 28, 1972, Dick wrote the first in a series of letters to the FBI claiming that several months beforehand he had been contacted by a secret organization, which pressured him to include coded information in his future novels. Three days before composing this initial letter, Dick had read Disch's *Camp Concentration* and felt that the book was sufficient evidence that the same organization, identifying itself only by the name "Solarcon-6," had recruited Disch for their purpose (Usher). Over the next three days, Dick wrote letters to both Disch (Heer) as well as his editor (Noguchi 352) in which he praised *Camp Concentration* as "not only the finest science fiction novel I've ever read but now that I've realized that, I find myself reflecting that it is the finest novel as such." On November 4, 1972, however, Dick sent another letter to an Inspector Shine of the Marin County Sheriff's Office in which he outlined the nature of Solarcon-6's plot—basically getting SF writers to include coded information in their books pertaining to "an alleged new strain of syphilis sweeping across the U.S., kept topsecret [sic] by the U.S. authorities; it can't be cured, destroys the brain, and is swift-acting" (Usher). Despite Dick's fear that Disch was part of a sinister, anti-American plot, he includes a passage in his 1981 novel *VALIS*, where the narrator establishes an immediate sense of trust with another character during a sensitive first conversation by having knowledge of Disch's work (326). It seems that Dick cannot make up his mind over what *Camp*

Concentration is really about even if he marvels at the way Disch has constructed it.

In the above-mentioned letter to his editor Dick speculates on Disch's inspiration for the novel, wondering if the interwoven themes of sickness, genius and mental imbalance could have come from Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. As the number of unidentified literary references throughout the book make it exceedingly difficult to identify a single dominant source of inspiration, those who have ventured to comment on the novel use the dedication to Thomas Mann as their starting point and support this assertion by citing the newspaper clipping in the novel concerning a certain "Adrienne Leverkuhn, [an] East German composer of 'hard' music" (*Camp* 141) as proof of connection with Mann's *Doctor Faustus*. Without denying the insights of Delany, Dick and others who have offered interpretations, I believe that the symbolic codes in *Camp Concentration* can be best read as an allegory for the social significance of LSD and other hallucinogens in the nineteen-sixties, particularly as they relate to state institutions. In Disch's final work, *The Word of God*, published just a few days before his suicide in 2008, the narrator says that *Camp Concentration* was a depiction of his generation's artists' willingness "to fry our brains...if it would make us geniuses, or even if it would make us feel rapturously brainy for a little while" (145). By examining the textual evidence that supports this reading, my main goal is to demonstrate how Disch locates the various issues surrounding psychedelic drugs within the greater historical context of Western culture through his usage of literary and alchemic references. In order to do so, I first examine Disch's probable sources for the novel's major motifs, and then consider how his deviation from these prior forms lends support to my proposed allegorical reading.

II. Faust, Genius and Alchemy

While Dick looked to *The Magic Mountain* for Mann's meditation on disease, genius and institutionalization, Delany instead points to the parallels between *Camp Concentration* and parts I and II of Goethe's *Faust*, Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, and Valéry's *My Faust* (180). Mann's version of the Faust tale is the story of a young German composer,

Adrian Leverkühn, who intentionally seeks a syphilis infection through an encounter with a prostitute in hope that the disease will grant him greater creativity, but which ultimately leads to his insanity and death. The book is composed using what Mann referred to as the “montage technique” where he draws upon “factual, historical, personal and even literary data” (*The Story* 32). He often took entire passages and inserted them into his novel with only minor alterations, thereby creating a kind of game for Mann critics to search out the original sources (Bergsten 10-11). Disch, too, employs a similar technique of unidentified quotation, yet he also includes the names of many poets and artists leaving it up to reader to interpret each case’s significance from knowledge of their biographical details.

As Dick pointed out, the examination of the relationship between illness and heightened mental activity in the setting of a facility in *Camp Concentration* pays homage to *The Magic Mountain*. Despite the suspicions of the reader, in both stories the protagonist remains in a prolonged state of self-denial, refusing to admit that the symptoms he exhibits are caused by the disease being treated at institution he is staying at. And just as the characters Castorp encounters represent different pre-war European worldviews, Sacchetti reproduces in his reports his conversations with the other test subjects and doctors who serve as mouthpieces for the various opinions expressed in the melodramatic existential debates. In regard to *The Magic Mountain*, Weigand points out that the idea of the connection between disease and increased cognitive capacity is part of a distinctly German opinion expressed through prominent literary figures, arguing that, “disease is more than something to be done away with... it is a fascinating phenomenon and, possibly, a vehicle of evolution; and that it may be one of the distinguishing marks of genius” (11). In *Camp Concentration*, the mental abilities of the test subjects reflect this view of illness in that their increase in knowledge is inversely proportional to their decline in health.

The genius attained through illness in both Disch and Mann’s narratives, however, is not compatible with the dominant concept of high intelligence in a rational modern materialist worldview. In the opening pages of *Doctor Faustus* Mann offers the following description of genius,

which will provide a framework for my argument that follows:

Now this word “genius,” although extreme in degree, certainly in kind has a noble, harmonious, and humane ring.... And yet it cannot be denied... that the daemonic and irrational have a disquieting share in this radiant sphere. We shudder as we realize that a connection subsists between it and the nether world, and that the reassuring *epitheta* which I sought to apply: “sane, noble, harmonious, humane,” do not for that reason fit. (4)

The discussions on the nature of genius in *Camp Concentration* reflect and expand on this view. Dr. Busk points out to Sacchetti that high intelligence almost always results in anti-social behavior and so the genius offers little benefit to the larger society, citing the naturally gifted poet narrator as an example of this (24). In a subsequent discussion, while explaining the history behind their neuro-syphilis experiment, Dr. Busk states that:

[T]he act of genius is simply the bringing together of two hitherto distinct spheres of reference, or matrices—a talent for juxtapositions.... It seems clear, now, that it is a sort of breakdown—literally, the mind disintegrates, and the old, distinct categories are for a little while fluid and capable of re-formation. (58)

She says that thought and creativity can be viewed as degenerative diseases of the brain. The brain, in turn, defends itself against these threats through the gradual solidification of “inalterable *systems*, which simply refused to be broken down and re-formed” (59). Finally, she mentions Joyce and “*Finnegan Wakes*” (sic) as an example of the disaster that can occur when the brain fails to properly defend against thought in adulthood (59). *Finnegans Wake* also comes up earlier in the novel as one of the potential intellectual battlegrounds when Mordecai challenges Sacchetti to a mental dual (38). Incidentally, through reading commentary on *Finnegans Wake*, Thomas Mann came to perceive an “unexpected relationship and... even affinity” with his own work, despite the apparent

differences in style (*The Story* 91). Next, I will show how by citing *Finnegans Wake* in the above situations, Disch effectively connects the motif of genius with the most extensively referenced theme in the novel: alchemy.

In her book length study on alchemy in *Finnegans Wake*, DiBernard examines the motifs that Joyce adopted from various alchemical concepts such as death and rebirth, integration of high and low, and number symbolism. She argues that central to Joyce's conception of alchemy was his perceived necessity of combining the "physical and spiritual" and the "literal and symbolic" (26). Although alchemy is commonly understood as the attempt to transmute base metals into gold, those who are familiar with alchemical texts recognize that they contain language which is "highly mystical, and... perfectly unintelligible in a physical sense." It is this ambiguous language that allows for metaphysical interpretations of alchemical processes as well (Redgrove 5-6). Historically, there was a clear distinction between alchemists who sought only material gains through the production of gold, known as "puffers," and alchemists who saw the refinement of metals as analogous to the true meaning of alchemy, which involved the refinement of the human soul to a pure, everlasting form (de Givry 350). Joyce's theory of art includes a parallel to the puffers who are "those who look on the world with no wonder, who see in it no mystery" (DiBernard 18). Disch also depicts this relationship between the two types of alchemist. By basing the genius prisoners' secret code for their "escape" plan in alchemical terms, the materialist researchers and guards are cast into the role of the puffers as they only sought material gains and quickly dismissed the possibility of a metaphysical level that contained the real meaning of the geniuses' hermetic statements.

Alchemy is represented in two forms in *Camp Concentration*. First we can observe many direct references to famous alchemists, alchemical texts, terminology, concepts, and procedures. Mordecai says that he believes in "sylphs, salamanders, undines, gnomes" (37), which correspond to air, fire, water, and earth—the four basic elements critical to the principle concepts of alchemy. Mordecai's use of the word "hermetic" (39) and Sacchetti's use of "magnum opus" (81) also imply both the terms'

present day meanings as well as their alchemical origins. After a meeting with Mordecai in which he admits that he has virtually no knowledge of the subject, Sacchetti reads his first book on alchemy: René Alleau's *Aspects de l'Alchimie traditionnelle* (47). During a subsequent discussion, he discovers other books on alchemy resting on Mordecai's table, such as the *Tabula smargdina* and *The Arabic Works of Jabir ibn Hayyan* (71). Mordecai reminds Sacchetti that, while in the modern era, alchemy is seen as utter nonsense, for centuries it held the attention of many of humanity's greatest minds, citing Sacchetti's beloved Thomas Aquinas and his teacher, Albert Magnus (45). Mordecai's room contains many of the components associated with the preparation of the philosophers' stone, including an anthanor, but when pressed for details on the nature of his procedures he gives only a cryptic reply (73-74). By making use of the tradition of secrecy and ambiguity inherent to alchemy in this way, Mordecai is able to conceal the actual technical process that allows him to transplant his consciousness into to body of Haast. Haast's own vanity and fear of death allow him to suspend disbelief, despite his materialist mindset, and embrace the possibility that Mordecai was capable of preparing an "elixir of long life" (74).

In addition to the above-mentioned references, the second function of alchemy is that it provides a framework for discussions of the reunion of material and immaterial realms. In Haast's dedication speech before Mordecai's alchemical demonstration, he acknowledges a debt to Carl Jung among others including Jesus and Henry Ford (97). Jung wrote extensively on the relationship between alchemical symbolism and the psychology of the unconscious. He saw alchemy as historically fulfilling a compensatory function for the failure of Christianity to provide direct spiritual experience, in the same way that a dream compensates contradictions in the conscious mind (Jung 23). With the manipulation of chemical reactions, Jung identified a "parallel psychic process" whose symbolic imagery evokes "the whole problem of the evolution of personality... the so-called individuation process" (34-35). Although modern scientific processes brought about the end of the physical components of alchemy, Jung saw the emergence of the Faust figure as a new

manifestation of alchemical symbolism (37). Compared to other versions, Disch's Faust story includes the most direct alchemical references as well as following both Jung and Joyce's view of alchemy as a representation of the union of the material world with that which has been expelled by modern science.

III. Pallidine and LSD

The reintegration of the spiritual and material as it pertains to alchemy is described in *Camp Concentration* as the combination of Inner and Outer Space:

[T]he materialist scientist lacks this fundamental insight, and so his whole attention is directed to Outer Space, whereas an alchemist is always aware of the importance of *teamwork* between Body and Soul, and so he's naturally more interested in Inner Space. (90)

This same view is expressed toward the end of *The Magic Mountain* in a discussion of the "occult" as it relates to reunion of the conscious and subconscious, where Mann compares the materialist, who sees the mind as "a phosphorescent product of matter," with the idealist, who "proceeds from the principle of creative hysteria," so the two "will tend to answer ... the question of primacy in exactly opposite terms" (645). What must be noted, however, is that the term Disch used to signify the immaterial world of the subconscious, "Inner Space," expresses a special meaning, both for him as a New Wave SF writer, as well as within the nineteen-sixties discourse concerning consciousness expansion through the use of hallucinogenic substances like LSD, psilocybin and mescaline.

J.G. Ballard, the most widely known British New Wave SF author, wrote in what served as a manifesto for the New Wave that "it is *inner* space, not outer, that needs to be explored" (qtd. in Greenland 51). Although many assume that Ballard coined the term in 1962, Greenland cites a travelogue appearing in 1961 in the *Scientific Book Club* titled *Exploring Inner Space: Personal Experiences Under LSD-25* (51). In a collection of essays published in 1998, Disch reminds us that

the exploration of Inner Space was shorthand for psychoactive drugs (*The Dreams* 108) and that this became “the distinctive transgressive feature of the future foreseen by New Wave SF” (111). The terms “inner space” and “other world” occurred frequently in the discourse relating to hallucinogenic drugs and the counterculture. One UCLA director running an LSD experiment announced to the participants, “You are the astronauts of inner space. You are going deeper into the mind than anyone has gone so far, and you will come back and tell us what you found” (Stevens 172). This alchemical goal of the union of inner and outer, body and soul, was also shared by English author Aldous Huxley, who viewed mescaline and LSD as tools for reuniting the two realms (Huxley 2-3). His two essays, “The Doors of Perception” (1952) and “Heaven and Hell” (1954), as well as his psychedelic utopian novel, *Island* (1962), played a major role in the popularization of hallucinogens in American culture in the sixties. Disch says that he was so impressed by Huxley’s description of the effects of mescaline in “The Doors of Perception,” that he decided to try LSD in 1966, one year before *Camp Concentration* was serialized in *New Worlds Magazine*—NWSF’s flagship publication (*The Dreams* 112).

There are a number of points in *Camp Concentration* that make it possible to identify a symbolic relationship between genius as a result of neuro-syphilis and LSD. The most easily identifiable of these are the two direct references to LSD toward the beginning of the novel. In the first case LSD is mentioned in a discussion of recently developed consciousness-expansion drugs where it is described as a drug, “which can produce a specious sense of omniscience” (26). Dr. Busk then implies that the narrator is already well acquainted with the effects of LSD. Sacchetti confirms this by responding, “Is that down on my profile, I must say you’ve been thorough” (26). In the second instance, Mordecai compares the effects of LSD to those of Pallidine: “I’ll say this for the stuff they gave us—it beats acid. With acid you think you know everything. With this, you goddamn well do” (34). In this second case, the symbolic relationship between the drug and the disease is one of inversion—a pattern that can be seen throughout the novel, including its title.

Within Dr. Busk’s description of the development of Pallidine from

the standard spirochete bacterium *Triponema pallidum*, she says that, “unlike most pharmaceuticals” it is “living, self-reproducing. In short, a bug” (55). Unlike standard forms of venereal disease, however, subjects in the lab are infected through intravenous injection instead of sexual intercourse, thereby giving it closer associations with drugs than with disease. Both Mordecai and Sacchetti are aware that the effects of Pallidine result from bacterial infection, yet they still refer to it repeatedly using the term “drug” (49, 50, 128). In one example of this, in response to Haast’s unusually persistent series of questions, Sacchetti says, “If I didn’t know better, I might suspect that *he’s been taking* Pallidine” (129; emphasis added). Here Sacchetti uses the present perfect continuous form, “has been taking” instead of the present perfect form “has taken,” yet if Pallidine were an infectious disease, infection would only have to occur once, rather than the habitual exposure that “been taking” implies. This form instead suggests effects closer to those of a drug, which in most cases only last for a number of hours.

In addition to these inconsistencies in terminology, the descriptions of the physiological effects of Pallidine are also similar to those associated with the LSD experience. According to his journal Sacchetti was injected with “what seemed like several thousand cc’s of bilgy ook” (5) on May 16, and in his entry approximately two weeks later, he reports difficulty concentrating on his reading, stating that “giddiness infects my whole body: There is a hollowness in my chest, a dryness in my throat, an altogether inappropriate inclination to laughter” (16). Descriptions found in a mid-nineteen-forties report of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the CIA’s predecessor, regarding initial tests of a “Truth Drug” being developed for interrogation purposes, mention how “the sense of humor is accentuated to the point where any statement or situation can become extremely funny to the subject” (Lee and Shlain 4). In this particular instance the drug was a powerful marijuana extract, however, a strong sense of hilarity is reported as a common effect of LSD as well. LSD’s inventor, Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann, described the following symptoms in his first self-experiment with the drug on April 19, 1943: “Beginning dizziness, feeling of anxiety, visual distortions, symptoms of

paralysis, *desire to laugh*" (Hofmann 48; emphasis added). At other times Sacchetti reports major distortions in his perception of time: "I feel as though a week has gone by since I sat down yesterday afternoon to start work at it" (51). This, too, is a commonly reported effect of LSD. Participants in one of the largest and longest running LSD experiments described the experience with statements such as, "Time seemed to have come to a complete standstill. Every minute seemed hours and time was dragging" (de Rios and Jangier 36-37).

There are important points on both sides of the discourse surrounding LSD in the late-sixties that allow a connection to be made with neuro-syphilis and genius as it appears in Disch's story. In 1966, opponents of LSD were making claims that "LSD probably caused long-term brain damage" (Stevens 285). There was also a study published in *Science* reporting that LSD caused breakages when introduced to a test tube of chromosomes (343). Although these claims were later disproven (358), the descriptions of the breaking of chromosomes or brain damage appear quite similar to the decay of the brain as a result of Pallidine. Even before these reports concerning the potentially harmful effects of LSD were published, however, there was a firm belief among many psychiatrists and psychologists who used LSD as a tool in psychotherapy, that LSD had the ability to remove mental imprints or "circuits" that dictate our cognitive processes and would essentially allow a psychologist to help someone reprogram their own brain. Building on Bergson by way of Huxley, Leary gave the following description of how hallucinogens have the potential to remove fixed categories of the mind:

Cultural learning has imposed a few, pitifully small programs on the cortex. These programs may activate perhaps one-tenth or one-hundredth of the potential neural connections. All the learned games of life can be seen as programs which select, censor, alert and thus drastically limit the available cortical response.... The consciousness-expanding drugs unplug these narrow programs. They unplug the ego, the game machinery, and the mind (that cluster the game concepts). And with the ego and mind unplugged, what is left?...

What is left is something that Western culture knows little about. The open brain. The uncensored cortex, alert and open to a broad sweep. (“How to”)

Disch's description of genius shown in the previous section of how the decay of the brain from neuro-syphilis allows for the reformation of new associations, is analogous to Leary's explanation of how “consciousness-expanding drugs unplug... narrow programs.” In *Camp Concentration*, it is Pallidine's ability—albeit through a process decay—to eliminate solidified cognitive structures that leads to the unlocking of the human brain. The only difference is that Leary had hoped that this would lead to an evolution, first in culture, and then ultimately in the species, while the researchers in Disch's novel, much like the U.S. military, saw it as nothing more than an opportunity to develop new tools for war (25).

For the first two decades after its discovery, LSD existed primarily in a setting of government laboratories, private research institutes, and psychiatric clinics. Initially it was believed that LSD had the ability to induce schizophrenic-like symptoms and so psychologists believed it could be used to develop better disease models (Hofmann 76-77). Closer to the setting of *Camp Concentration*, however, was the U.S. government's drug research during the cold war era. In *Acid Dreams* (1985), Lee and Shlain summarize their findings from their review of more than twenty thousand pages of CIA reports on project MK-ULTRA and other government mind control projects that were declassified under a Freedom of Information request by John Marks (xxiii). They observed that LSD received more attention than any other compound during the twenty-five years of experimentation and in the reports they found evidence of hundreds of different LSD experiments in the fifties and sixties on mental patients, prison inmates, army personnel, and even civilians (24-32). This information was still classified at the time that Disch wrote *Camp Concentration*, but given the many parallels between the goals of the researchers mentioned in his novel and the actual experiments later confirmed by these reports, rumors of various kinds of testing were most likely widespread.

IV. Conclusion

The biggest difference between *Camp Concentration* and the earlier Faust stories is that in their quest for material gains, the researchers are the ones who strike the metaphorical deal with the devil, while the test subjects are the ones who are destined to pay the price. Unlike the variety of different Fausts who knowingly trade salvation for an inhuman capacity of knowledge or material wealth, Disch's test subjects, with the exception of Stilliman, did not willingly agree to their fate. We must ask then, should this story even be considered as a Faust tale at all? At the end of the novel Stilliman tries to convince Haast to shoot Sacchetti by saying, "You've created this Frankenstein monster, and you must destroy it" (180). Indeed, Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* seems a more fitting predecessor for this creature who never asked to be created, but once self aware, does not want to be destroyed. And just as the monster gets loose in the world, Sacchetti's newspaper clipping exhibit suggests that Pallidine has spread across the nation: "[w]ithin two more months 20 to 35 percent of the adult population will be on their way to soaring genius" (166).

In agreement with the conclusions of Lee and Shlain's analysis, Allen Ginsberg and many other prominent figures of the counterculture long held the belief that the CIA was ultimately responsible for the widespread use of LSD in the United States (Lee and Shlain xix). Although in mainstream culture LSD is nowadays mainly associated with the sixties counterculture, looking at the results of a recent national survey on drug use and health conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, one observes that the number of first-time LSD users reached an all-time high at 958,000 persons in the year 2000 alone ("Results"). In *High Priest*, Timothy Leary optimistically predicted that "the critical figure for blowing the mind of the American society would be four million LSD users" (132). Based on the government survey data, even an extremely conservative estimate would suggest that since 1967, more than fifteen-million people have experimented with the drug. Taking population growth into consideration, this figure is still more than twice Leary's estimate. Perhaps Philip K. Dick was on to something after all. There

really was a hidden code in Disch's work, shrouded in literary allusion and alchemical imagery, referring to an epidemic that was sweeping the nation—one which had, in fact, already infected Dick himself. His only mistake, then, was to fail to see that the genius-inducing Pallidine in *Camp Concentration* was actually a secret code for psychedelics rather than a new strain of antibiotic-resistant VD.

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SUMMARY

Super Syphilitics or Alchemical Acid Heads?

On the Nature of Genius in Thomas M. Disch's *Camp Concentration*

Ian Stuart GARLINGTON

American New Wave SF author Thomas M. Disch's *Camp Concentration* (1968) is set in the near future in a secret underground research center, which is conducting experiments whereby genius is induced in human subjects through injecting them with a specially engineered strain of syphilis. The narrator is a poet who has been brought there specifically to interpret the statements of the genius subjects into terminology which the scientists there can understand. Within the book's 184 pages there are hundreds references to several of the big names of Western literature as well as to various alchemical texts and procedures.

In his exploration of the nature of genius, Disch follows Thomas Mann's suggestion that genius is demonic and not dictated by logic or reason. Thus when the experiment's subjects attain brilliance, they take interest in alchemy and traditional literary works, which offer access to other worlds not subject to the limitations of the modern scientific worldview. There are strong parallels between the setting of Disch's story and the actual LSD experiments carried out in the fifties and sixties by the CIA under Project MKULTRA. I argue that through reproducing the longstanding arguments on the nature of the relationship between the material and spiritual aspects of reality within a framework of disease, genius, and alchemy, Disch symbolically connects various elements of the sixties drug culture with a longstanding tradition in Western society.