

The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test and the Limits of Language

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The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test (1968) by Tom Wolfe is an important account of the Counter-culture, and a seminal work of the New Journalism. Its central concerns are the use of psychedelic drugs within a specific social and sub-cultural setting; and the formal strategies for representing the often ineffable experience of psychedelic drugs in literary non-fiction. In this article I discuss Wolfe's use of a number of techniques and approaches to the breach between experience and representation, as well as his treatment of the limitations of language to encompass the psychedelic.

The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test and the Limits of Language

Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) is a non-fiction novel concerned with an experimental community called the Merry Pranksters which formed around the writer Ken Kesey. More broadly the text is about the Counter-culture and its use of psychedelic drugs. The focus of this discussion is the relationship between the experience of psychedelics in a group setting, and its representation through literary language. While the distance between experience and representation endemic to psychedelics, and the author's attempts at bridging it might be seen as a fault, I argue that the lag between the two is essentially the subject of the text, and as such is accurately represented.

While Wolfe's work is iconic of its context and genre, it is not the first attempt at a detailed description of psychedelic experience, which, perhaps because of its multisensory nature, disruption of time and space perception, hallucinatory and pseudo-hallucinatory aspects, and frequently reported spiritual or at least euphoric dimension, is notoriously difficult to convey eloquently. Significant precursors are Baudelaire's essays *On Wine and Hashish* (1851) and *Artificial Paradise* (1860); parts of William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902); Aldous Huxley's substantial account of mescaline, *The Doors of Perception* (1954), as well as its counterpart, 'Heaven and Hell' (1956); Henri Michaux's text on the same drug, *Miserable Miracle* (1956); and Walter Benjamin's experimental transcripts and essays written between 1927 and 1934, collected as *On Hashish* (2006). In terms of critical works on literary representation of the drug experience, the first such modern study is M.H. Abrams's *The Milk of Paradise* (1934).

More recent work includes *Writing on Drugs* (1999) by Sadie Plant, *The Road of Excess* (2002) by Marcus Boon and David Boothroyd's *Culture on Drugs* (2006). Of particular relevance to this discussion is Marc Weingarten's book on the New Journalism, *Who's Afraid of Tom Wolfe* (2005) as well as Brent Whelan's article on *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, 'Furthur': Reflections on Counter-Culture and the Postmodern' (1989).

In 'Furthur' Whelan suggests a useful way of approaching *Acid Test* by seeing it as a duality of practice and authorship. In this sense, Wolfe's writing about Kesey's agency in the Prankster project constitutes an act of authorship which lends itself to a 'double reading' (Whelan 1989, 78). Such a co-existence of textual realities also accounts for some of the sense of immense fullness or volume in the text.

Wolfe creates a capacious intertextual space in and around the narrative in order to enable a residual interconnectivity alongside his interpretation of events. Because the actions, conversations and ideas described take place in a real space with a high level of literary connections, there is juxtaposition or merging of the real and fictional. People become characters; texts become events. Wolfe creates the impression of the novel being at once a mediated transcript of the real and a fiction of America, of Counter-culture, of power and authority, of psychedelic drugs and psychedelic culture. 'Wolfe sees it and sets it down in various ways. There is the story of Kesey, the stories of other people, the story of their effect on music, society, and the law; the parallel of this group and their structure and philosophy to a religious movement; the whole pattern of American society is related to Kesey and the Merry Pranksters' (Reynolds 2014, 1).

The Pranksters take on fictional names and pretend they are in an endless, improvised film which becomes a metaphor for their collective interaction with the

outside world. Other writers, including Allen Ginsberg ('First Party at Ken Kesey's with Hell's Angels' (1965), Hunter S. Thompson (*Hell's Angels*, 1966), and Robert Stone (*Dog Soldiers*, 1973) wrote about scenes included in *Acid Test*. These accounts correspond, in varying degrees, to the events and attitudes explored in Wolfe's work. None of these texts, including Wolfe's, purport to be a complete or objective account, however, and rather than contesting versions of truth, they work as complementary versions of a fragmented surface reality.

Wolfe, in his capacity as narrator, is a distinct figure in the text at first, but then slides into omniscience. Throughout, his presence and voice recede and return in a telescoping motion. His telling of Kesey's story does not follow it, but moves back and forth in time and location, within a broader circular structure, in that the setting of the conclusion joins up with the beginning, imposing a 'traditional narrative container' on 'the loose materials of Kesey's adventures'. 'Within this framework... Wolfe creates something like a classical tragedy' of a prominent hero's downfall (Whelan 1989, 82). In doing so, Wolfe re-introduces the literary paradigm onto Kesey's lived 'text'.

Wolfe also collapses tense to distort time, and with it syntax, in order to convey a series of images or impressions, rather than a sequence with implications for reason, for instance in constructions such as 'I just hung around and Cassady flipped his sledge hammer, spectral tapes played, babies cried, mihs got flipped out, bus glowed, Flag people walk, freaks loop in outta sunlight on old Harriet Street, and I only left to sleep for a few hours or go to the bathroom' (*Acid Test*, 20). He also experiments with typographical effects, and occasionally slips from prose to poetry, although always with a sense of irony.

Whelan notes that ‘there is... a hesitation between ‘reading’ and ‘saying’’: the whole Kesey experiment was aimed at the immediacy of saying, the present word, the NOW, but the intervention of literature, of reading and writing, was inescapable’ (1989, 64). Wolfe reintegrates the ‘lag’ between language and experience, but only as he points out its persistence. ‘The two constructs, the events in the narrative and the narrative itself, are in a sense inextricable, though the fault lines of this division, too, are perceptible in Wolfe’s text’ (1989, 64). This suggests that *Acid Test* is in large measure the full and lasting representation of Kesey’s non-literary ‘text’, and that it is better able to encompass the co-existent duality and the friction between the two. It is, however, precisely around these ‘faultlines’ that delayed, relayed interaction between the two texts and takes place. The lag, that is, the delay between thought and word, or experience and representation, becomes useful and meaningful through this interaction.

Wolfe relies on the impact and possibilities of the New Journalism, a genre of literary reportage which he, partly through the text in question, was instrumental in developing. He makes use of a number of specific techniques to relay the intertwined complex of events which take place in the text. These tend towards the episodic. ‘The Pranksters didn’t function in real narrative time, not with all those drugs, and the book couldn’t abide by a linear storyline’ (Weingarten 2005, 105). Weingarten further points out Wolfe’s use of ‘elisions, because his subjects talked in elliptical patterns’ (2005, 105) which captures the style and atmosphere of conversation, for instance in his descriptions of Cassady’s rambling or Kesey’s intensity.

Weingarten seems to be correct in stating that ‘by subverting his language, [Wolfe] was in effect dosing his prose’ (2005, 105), in that the psychedelic effect of the

text is engineered through its form. Specifically, he contends that ‘punctuation...allowed [Wolfe] to control the pace and timing of a scene, so he could write the way people on hallucinogens actually think’ (2005, 105). This statement seems to suggest only a slowness of thinking and a disregard for syntax, which does not account for all the subjective, nor all the observable, aspect of psychedelic thought and speech, although it is true that Wolfe makes unusual use of punctuation in this as well as many other works.

One particular element facilitating interplay between Wolfe’s literary text and Kesey’s performative one, already laden with a vast array of interconnected meanings and functions, is the psychedelic bus ‘Furthur’. Many scholars use the misspelt destination inscribed above its windscreen as its name, indicating, perhaps, its status as a creature as well as a vehicle. The bus seems to bridge the many levels of the text, existing strongly and significantly in all of them. In addition to being a mode of transportation, it also serves as a visual representation of the group’s ideas – it is painted all over in psychedelic designs – as well as an auditory one, as it is fitted with an immense amount of audio equipment, which is used to address and listen to the outside world. The bus is a manifestation of their ‘journey’. It is a force of cohesion as well as division, setting the Pranksters apart from society, but also demanding or denying allegiance within the group.

Much like the bus he drives, Neal Cassady, whom Friedrich Karl identifies as a late modern ‘legendary centaur, half man, half car’ (1983, 198) travels between the layers of textuality, and is at once a real, a fictional, and a symbolic figure. He features as a character in other well-known American texts, notably Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) and *Visions of Cody* (1972), as well as short piece by Charles Bukowski included in *Tales of Ordinary Madness* (1967) and thus facilitates a continuity between the Beat

movement and the literary aspects of the Counter-culture. He also carries the exchange between the real and textual worlds, a movement between realities and perceptions which echoes the strange real-world coincidences with the imagined or hallucinated in the LSD experiences of the text. In contrast to Kesey, who in *Acid Test* is a writer encountered through texts such as correspondence and his own literary oeuvre before he is met as a real person, Cassady is introduced as a character – he is seen and observed before his identity is revealed. There is a lag between the description: ‘off to one side is a guy about 40 with a lot of muscles...and he seems to be in a kinetic trance, flipping a small sledge hammer up in the air over and over’ (18) and the naming and revelation of who Cassady is in and beyond the text:

‘Who is that?’

‘That’s Cassady.’

This strikes me as a marvelous fact. I remember Cassady. Cassady, Neal Cassady, was the hero, ‘Dean Moriarty’ of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, the Denver Kid, a kid who was always racing back and forth across the U.S. by car, chasing, or outrunning, ‘life’, and here is the same guy, now 40, in the garage, flipping a sledge hammer, rocketing about...and – talking. Cassady never stops talking. But that is a bad way to put it. Cassady is a monologist, only he doesn’t seem to care whether anyone is listening or not...He will answer all questions, although not exactly in that order, because we can’t stop here, next rest area 40 miles, you understand, spinning off memories, metaphors, literary, Oriental, hip allusions, all punctuated by the unlikely expression, ‘you understand –’ (*Acid Test*, 19)

The ‘marvelous fact’ of Cassady is so pleasing to Wolfe that he relates to it directly, inserting his personal response to it. What is so ‘marvelous’, besides Cassady’s curious presence itself, is his coming to life from another work of literature, as well as the possibility Wolfe sees of playing the intertextual game by including the same person in his own text.

There is a further contrast in Cassady, known for driving cross-country in a bid to ‘chase’ or ‘outrun’ life, now being energetically static, ‘in the garage’. Thus stationary, he constantly moves and speaks, in a directionless, streaming sort of way, and explaining this trips Wolfe up. Judging his initial statement, ‘never stops talking’, he notes that ‘that is a bad way to put it’, yet leaves the hesitation over the right phrasing in the published work. He also includes knowledge obviously gleaned later – at this point he has not spoken to Cassady, and knows little of his habits – about what he says, and how. Wolfe recreates Cassady’s speech at the end of the passage, though it is the representation of an impression rather than a quotation. In this impressionistic, improvised fragment, which is joined seamlessly to Wolfe’s voice, the first thing he says is ‘we can’t stop here’, which echoes the same line in Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1972). This possibly suggests a resonance between the two journeys, either intended as part of the intertextual work of *Acid Test*, or a circumstantial reference, or another of the psychedelically uncanny connections which permeate the text.

The LSD experience is a near-constant, largely ineffable presence throughout the narrative. Its ill-definition is functional, in that it creates an incomplete sense of something more that is never fully articulated. Wolfe wrote about *Acid Test* that ‘the first part, setting the stage, was OK...the second and third were pretty thin stuff. Certainly

they failed to capture the weird...fourth dimension I kept sensing in the Prankster adventure' (Wolfe in Weingarten 2005, 100).

These sections do convey Wolfe's sense of a 'fourth dimension' which is difficult to write and would cause him to lose the insider/outsider vantage point, however.

Weingarten comments that 'Wolfe explains, but he doesn't reveal' (2005, 101) this aspect of the experience. But that is the interest of the text, and its credibility. 'What Wolfe struggled with were the metaphysical aspects of the story: it was impossible to do justice to the Pranksters without really describing the effects of hallucinogens on the mindset of the group' (2005, 101). But nobody has yet written a complete, articulate, literary account of the 'effects of hallucinogens' on their own mind, let alone that of a group, and Wolfe's task, ultimately, is to produce a readable text. To this end, some sort of ineffability, mystery or incompleteness is far more successful than a plunge into the esoteric depths.

Weingarten suggests another duality, in keeping with the use of the bus as vehicle and metaphor for an epic inward and outward journey. While the geographical travels on the bus 'provide the bulk of the narrative', 'the acid trips...provide the metanarrative, or rather the metaphysical narrative, folded into the story' (2005, 101). Wolfe is keenly aware of this, but 'How to tell it!' (*Acid Test*, 114) The exclamation mark transforms this problem into an utterance of frustration rather than a question. Wolfe notes ideas about 'what it is not': 'I never heard any of the Pranksters use the word *religious* to describe the mental atmosphere they shared after the bus trip' (114) and the avoidance of the linguistic in explaining the 'mental atmosphere' altogether: 'in fact, they avoided putting it into words' (114). The closest he comes to naming it is through drawing attention to the unnamability, by ending the paragraph with: 'and yet – ' (114). He elaborates on this,

drawing further attention to the Pranksters' – and his own – wordlessness around 'The Unspoken Thing'. 'All the Pranksters were conscious of it, but none of them put it into words, as I say. They made a point of not putting it into words. That in itself was one of the unspoken rules. *If you label it this, then it can't be that*' (115).

Wolfe writes in ever-widening circles around the issue in this fragment, noting the layers of unspokenness as a practice rather than a lack. 'One of the unspoken rules' is not naming the experience, strongly countered by the awareness of his own mediation in 'as I say'. The rationale for this is a freedom of experience, a rejection of the limitations wrought by naming; but it also leaves very little to grasp past the immediate moment. The LSD experience is introduced as a problem of language from the start. What can't be articulated, according to Wolfe, is not hallucination itself, which is 'just the décor' but 'this certain indescribable feeling' which is 'indescribable because words can only jog the memory, and if there is no memory of...the experience (115)' then there is no language for it. What there 'is no language for' in this regard is not just the multisensory hallucinations produced by LSD but also the often reported sense of dream logic, observing or participating in uncanny coincidences, a feeling of community or interconnectedness with others, intimations of telepathic communication or telekinesis.

Wolfe writes about this problem in *The New Journalism* (1973), observing that 'print...is an indirect medium that does not so much "create" images or emotions' (73) as draw on the reader's own memories through words. 'For example, writers describing drunk scenes seldom try to describe the state of drunkenness itself. They count on the reader having been drunk at some time in his life'. But with less common experiences 'such as LSD or methedrine, the writer can make no such assumption – and this has

stymied many writers' (63). He notes that this issue is not unique to representing altered states – in any description which is to draw on universals yet retain a sense of specificity, there needs to be a balance between detail and whole, something which direct notations of high experiences frequently miss. 'For that matter', Wolfe writes, 'writers have a hard time even creating a picture of a human face. Detailed descriptions tend to defeat their own purpose, because they break up the face rather than create an image' (63). Too much focus on the surface layer, the 'plasticity' of form, leads to abstraction.

Wolfe likens aspects of the psychedelic experience to other things, and makes much use of ellipsis and sudden breaks and rejoinings in writing around it, but he is careful to always intimate that there is more which does not meet words. Because there is no prior point of reference, and words refer to ideas and memories of the familiar, the experience eludes words, and the only system to code it is some layer of description, with frequent use of metaphor and analogy, as well as to highlight the fact that such descriptions are incomplete. On the subject of Benjamin's drug writings, Kenda Willey suggests that the lag between psychedelic experience and language, or 'the unwinnable struggle to hook common language up with uncommon experience' is 'the difficulty of explaining drug experience' because it is occurs when 'materialistic language meets up with intangibles' (1993, 121).

In the interplay between Pranksters this produces language games which bring out the discontinuity between language structures and multisensory experience. Wolfe writes of 'rap – a form of free association conversation, like a jazz conversation, or even a monologue, with everyone, or whoever, catching hold of words, symbols, ideas, sounds, and winging them back and forth and beyond...the walls of conventional logic' (*Acid*

Test, 58). But simultaneously, acknowledgement of this slippage creates the opportunity for its observation, exploitation, or remedy. These improvised language games are intended to manipulate words afresh to get at some aspect of the experience. They are a way of dismantling the elements to reconfigure the whole. Wolfe does not engage in this; like Cassidy's monologue, it is more usefully described rather than repeated.

Although this practice is included in the text, it also eludes it. It is too immediate and too discordant with conventional, social language use beyond its immediate context, where it is immediately synchronic and momentarily significant, to be written usefully. Ultimately, it serves to break apart the sense of language, rather than enrich it. It shows up the impossibility, encounters it fully, but does not breach it. It is creative, perhaps transcendent, in the moment, but finds no way to last beyond it.

Marcus Boon explains in *The Road of Excess* the challenge of psychedelic writing in terms of 'limit states' as linking to the 'limits' of representation, the idea that 'language can offer only an approximation of the limit states produced by psychedelics, and these limit states are themselves only an approximation of something more fundamental' (2002, 267). In other words, the limits of language perfectly illustrate the limits of the experience; they show the immensity and difference of the experience by stopping at the boundary, and thus delineating it. 'Literature explores terrain similar to that in which the drug user finds himself or herself' (2002, 267), and the representation of that terrain shows the unknowability of it, as though writing was a reverse process of mapping that figurative landscape. The map is imperfect; it is drawn up in language. Thought employs language, the same medium as that of the representation. The psychedelic terrain glimpsed through drug use can not be fully conceptualised because

the tools are insufficient. Language is always transposed onto experience as the only means of addressing it. The more the map is split into types or values of representation, the more it draws attention to the incompleteness of each version, and the more interesting the spaces of difference and repetition across such layers become. They accrue depth and detail to the point of becoming tangential aspects of the fractal whole; but they each and all together fail to capture the full extent of the thing they seek to show.

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