

A Trip Not Traveled: The Language of Tom Wolfe's

Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test

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The Merry Pranksters ("Lawrence")

Thomas Kennerly Wolfe, Jr. was the man in white. Born in 1930 in Richmond, Virginia, he had always known he would be a writer (Plimpton, par. 4). As a young boy he was quite small for his age. He said that one of the bigger writing influences on him was reading a biography of Napoleon, a book that was actually ahead of its time in that it was written in the historical present. After finishing the book, Wolfe rewrote the story

as if he had written it (Plimpton, par. 6). Later, Wolfe's experimental style was heavily influenced by Soviet literature, especially the Serapion brothers, a group of writers in the 1920s and 30s who were known as independent and innovative free-thinkers (Plimpton, par. 20). Wolfe's journalistic background contributed to his way of openly taking notes whenever he was present. In conditions he found ill-suited to pen and notepad, he would rush home to "try to write down everything" he could remember "before going to sleep;" his excuse being a fear of "memory decay" (Plimpton, par. 33). In his thirties he found fame as a founding member of "The New Journalism," a literary movement started in 1963 (Brown, par. 12).

"In the early sixties, America was a colorless place. Everything was just so. Straight lines. Straight values. Straight shooters. And there was hardly any fun" (*Tripping*). Wolfe states that the sixties "actually began in 1964 with the Beatles, and ended in 1968 with the publication of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*" (Brown, par. 31). He goes on to say that the "pursuit of religious ecstasy" resulted in "self-absorption and narcissism."

Wolfe, you could say, was a man set fully apart from his peers. Under his distinguishing and quirky white suit, he would usually be wearing an ultramarine silk shirt, along with a silk tie having a properly tied Windsor knot, the entire adornment perfectly tailored ("The Man in the White Suit," par. 3). No, no—no fallalery here! His style was pretentious. And strangely enough, his unique style and take on things fit in well with what was happening at the time, not only in fashion, attitudes, and social norms, but most importantly in literature.

Wolfe's own "New Journalism" actually started with a magazine story about cars which was turned into a book in 1965 (Wolfe, *Kandy*). The story of how it happened, how the story evolved and became famous was, for want of a better word, *electric*. Wolfe had given up on writing his first ever featured magazine piece—a story of his visit to an auto show which was to appear in *Esquire*—complaining of writer's block. The editor had tired of Wolfe's delays and told him to send whatever notes he had so that an in-house editor could quickly write it up. A frustrated and angry Wolfe, typing all night, fired out *Dear* — and 60 tripled-spaced pages of his honest thoughts along with a quickly fleshed-out narrative from his notes on what he had seen at said auto show. The editor, flabbergasted and pleased, took off the salutation and more or less published what Wolfe had written (Shilling, par. 2). Tom Wolfe became an overnight success. It was something straight out of *On the Road* lore. From then on Wolfe tried to write in the same style, but always with the intention of creating writing "that really gives a piece a bite" (Plimpton, par. 31).

"Then came Kesey and LSD. Nobody knew what to make of Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters. But by the end of their trip, America was a very different place" (*Tripping*). "Kesey had real charisma.... He came in and they gathered around at his feet as he talked to them in what were essentially parables, about the games that the cops and other people can play with your mind. It was very well done. You could see how disciples become enchanted. And I think that's what they were — disciples" (Brown, par. 18).

It has been estimated that two million Americans had already taken LSD by 1966, when the drug was made illegal (Brown, par. 26). Wolfe states that he never took LSD. "I probably have given that impression in the past, but I didn't. I felt it was really too far dangerous to take a chance" (Brown, par. 28). LSD experiments were being conducted in the early 1960s as part of MKUltra, a secret CIA 20-year mind control program started in 1953 ("Project" 2-3). Ken Kesey, a university student in creative writing and budding author, was an early participant in the experiments. Soon Kesey would use his experiences to write the 1962 novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. But by 1964, Kesey had tired of the literary scene, eventually becoming the "Salinger of the 1960s" (Mano, par. 7). "Writers," he told a reporter, "are trapped by artificial rules. We are trapped in syntax. We are ruled by an imaginary teacher with a red ball-point pen who will brand us with an A-minus for the slightest infraction of the rules" (Wolfe, *Electric* 153). With that, Kesey and his multifarious group of friends called the Merry Pranksters, "proto-hippies" who focused on getting high, purchased a beat-up 1939 International Harvester school bus, nicknamed it "Further," and painted it with fluorescent colors and hit the road ("Electric;" Wolfe, *Electric* 68). They enlisted Neil Cassady, the model for "Dean Moriarty" in Jack Kerouac's novel, *On the Road* (Cochrane, par. 2). As Wolfe states, "The trip, in fact the whole deal, was a risk-all balls-out plunge into the unknown, and it was assumed merely that more and more of what was already inside a person would come out and expand, gloriously or otherwise" (Wolfe, *Electric* 87).

Wolfe was just along for the ride. He would end up spending a year with the Pranksters, interviewing them and pouring over the countless hours of video footage and audio recordings from 1966 to 1967, to write a magazine story which morphed into a book (Brown, par. 21). *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Trip* was published in 1968 and further cemented Wolfe's legacy as a star of The New Journalism. How did Wolfe write a book about people tripping on acid but never tasting it? Perhaps it was Wolfe's dedication to his craft and, as one of the few who wanted to be present, he did not want to forget—as has often been said that “if you remember the Sixties, you weren't there” (“Grace”). Wolfe was just writing a story with an interesting angle. And Kesey let Wolfe inside because he wanted off pending drug charges (Brown, par. 23). The two together formed a meeting of “star” and “reporter from New York” (Wolfe, *Electric* 6). “New York is about two years behind,” said Kesey to Wolfe's dismay (Wolfe, *Electric* 8). Others describe Kesey and Wolfe as “a dream team” (Cocker, par. 7). Wolfe would detail the adventures of “Further” and the escapades of Kesey and the Merry Pranksters in San Francisco, New York, and Mexico. Along the way, he would describe the “Acid Tests” that the Pranksters would hold to introduce LSD to the masses, to bring everyone in. Wolfe says it succinctly, sort of, in a 17-line sentence about what was happening on the bus, the people listening to “Help, I need somebody” by the Beatles, and the answer to their call for *Help!* was Kesey, the one who could keep it together. “*Help!*” Wolfe writes liberally through the paragraph, describing images from a movie, the bus moving, the actions of the pranksters, states that “they feel it flowing through one brain” and that “it seemed like [they] could draw the whole universe into ... the movie ...” (Wolfe, *Electric*

202-3). The ramblings of *Further*, the “Acid Tests,” all in the name of learning something new and writing about it.

Ken Kesey describes getting “on the bus” as an act of learning. We are not quite sure where we are going to go, but we are going to learn something no matter what. (*Tripping*). In Wolfe’s book about Kesey and the Pranksters, the masterly prose and descriptions of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* mark the end of a short-lived legal drug epidemic. The rich language describing the “Trip” is emblematic of the merging of consciousness between fiction writer and non-fiction writer, and the book is a vehicle that can lead us all toward a greater consciousness.

“We set out to seek the soul of America” said Kesey (*Tripping*). Wolfe set out to write about it. He described the language:

Thing was the major abstract word in Haight-Ashbury. It could mean *anything*, isms, life styles, habits, leanings, causes, sexual organs: *thing* and *freak*; *freak* referred to styles and obsessions, as in ‘Stewart Brand is an Indian freak’ or ‘the zodiac—that’s her freak,’ or just to heads in costume (Wolfe, *Electric* 11).

In an interview with the *Paris Review*, Wolfe states that writing fiction can often be more arduous than any literary genre in that the form is confined by a number of rules. He only learned this later, after having written for several years solely as a non-fiction writer who then takes up fiction writing with the idea that fiction would give him “this tremendous freedom” to be creative (Plimpton, par. 37). Wolfe’s creativity is on display from the get-go of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*:

THAT'S GOOD THINKING THERE, COOL BREEZE. COOL BREEZE is a kid with three or four days beard sitting next to me on the stamped metal bottom of the open back part of a pickup truck. Bouncing along. Dipping and rising and rolling on these rotten springs like a boat. Out the back of the truck the city of San Francisco is bouncing down the hill, all those endless staggers of bay windows, slums with a view, bouncing and streaming down the hill. One after another, electric signs with neon martini glasses lit up on them, the San Francisco symbol of 'bar'— (Wolfe, *Electric* 1)

Take note of Wolfe's use of uppercase letters. He uses them throughout the book. The book ends, actually, with every other line of text in uppercase letters (Wolfe, *Electric* 411). The language in the second, third, and fourth sentences is rhythmic, and bumpy, obviously indicative of the scene we are in but alluding to a religious chant, incantations that introduce the reader to the magical world of Tom Wolfe. We also get the shifting point of view of a passenger in the truck and of someone living there in one of the slums "with a view." As anyone who has lived in San Francisco knows, you can often peer into the fourth and even fifth storey windows of buildings because of the high grade of the sloping hills. Wolfe also gives us a historical tidbit of information of the bar sign, something I never knew originated in San Francisco. Wolfe is the ever-observant journalist and insightful, steadily aware of whatever place he has brought us, but also letting us in on a little secret—stranger things are sure to come.

acid test: A decisive trial to determine worth or quality, as in *Exposure to brilliant sunlight is the acid test for showing this fabric won't fade*. Alluding to a

19th-century chemical test for distinguishing gold from other metals, this term was used figuratively by the early 1900s. ("Acid")

When asked after being released from jail, "Do you have a right to do what you want, whatever you want, and still live in this world?" Kesey answers: "I feel a man has a right to be as big as he feels it's in him to be" (*Tripping*). Throughout Tom Wolfe's book we follow Kesey, a man of confidence, of strength, a hero to many. Wolfe takes note of all the bad trips throughout his one year *sabbatical*, all the terrible things that happen to people when they take LSD. "Kesey would say, 'Look, we're pioneers and these things happen to pioneers,' ... [but] Kesey himself was a very strong individual, physically, mentally and in terms of daring" (Brown par. 28). Others could not *trip* as easily and as often as Kesey and survive. Without Kesey, the deep and reflective thinker, omnipresent in nearly every scene, the scene would unravel. Wolfe knows this, and as the book progresses Wolfe *as reporter* mostly disappears. This leaves the reader to often wonder at times who, in fact, is actually speaking. Is it Wolfe? Or Kesey? The two personalities combine and mirror each other. It has been implied that many have thought it was Kesey who wrote the book (Mano, par. 5). We are reminded of this in Wolfe's own language about the entire scene in general, how it helps us to see that he is surrounded by people experiencing many strange psychotic moments. "Countless things that seemed separate started to merge," Wolfe states. Ego and non-ego, sound became a color, walls breathed, colors became smells (140). And what was more descriptive writing at first, becomes more narrative as the journey progresses.

Wolfe's methods are not without fault. For all the great things that are said about his experimental and colorful writing, his "hyperventilating prose as vivid and colourful as the subjects themselves" (Brown par. 15), Wolfe seems to be stuck in outmoded ideas regarding blacks and women (Cocker, par. 17; LaPointe, par. 3, 7).

Spades

"*Ssl. offens.* a black person" ("Spade," 2.2).

Wolfe uses the racial epithet throughout much of the first half of the book, writing "*Spades*, the very soul figures of Hip, of jazz, of the hip vocabulary itself," were no longer part of the scene (Wolfe, *Electric* 10). Wolfe does not dig deeper into people and cannot see that this is wrong. However, as the reporter disappears as the book rambles forward, so does the offensive terminology disappear, as Wolfe becomes part of the scene, the whole.

Regarding the whole "Boy's Club" feature of the psychedelic scene that Mountain Girl expounds on in later interviews (*New Maps*), where women were often openly abused, Wolfe is not progressive at all in that he provides the reader a clever pretext for everything shocking that happens. *Well, these people are all high, right?* we might imagine Wolfe wondering. The one scene in particular, the one with the Hell's Angels' gang banging the willing wife or ex-wife of Neil Cassady, where the bikers pull in a drugged up Cassady to finish off the fun (Wolfe, *Electric* 176-181), Wolfe simply reports things "as they happened" but concealed the identities of those involved even though they all signed off. The women are mostly invisible except as objects and Wolfe's amusing prose does nothing to convey the horror. Wolfe was criticized years later after

Kesey read the book, Kesey saying that the book was mostly true but Wolfe kept it too “nice.” Well, “you really just have to tell the truth” Wolfe concedes later (Brown, par. 37). The reporter from New York has learned from the disillusioned writer how to stick to the truth. The fact that Wolfe later becomes a fiction writer, and very much a failed and disillusioned one at that, shows that the two, Wolfe and Kesey, have sort of switched places. Kesey retired from the scene and spectacle after the publication of Wolfe’s book, going back home to Oregon. The *two-years-behind-the-times* reporter Wolfe—brought into the spectacle then spit out it, an electric and glowing man.

Kesey could not keep tripping. He stopped his spiritual search for meaning by way of drugs, stating,

You find what you came to find when you’re on acid and we’ve got to start doing it without acid; there’s no use opening the door and going through it and then always going back out again. (Wolfe, *Electric* 363)

How dare Kesey start a movement and then leave. Of course it would crumble. Here is where Wolfe came in. He documented the mess and in doing so unexpectedly created a sort of Bible for the hippie generation.

It really is one hell of a special book, you know -- a lifechanger, a rabble-rouser, a mindblower, a gathering of the tribes, a call to arms, a manifesto for a new society, a car repair manual, a fly on the paisley-patterned wall account of a cultural revolution -- a masterpiece! (Cocker, par. 4)

Wolfe has simply taken the keys from Kesey and driven the metaphysical bus further, if you will. It was Kesey, originally, who sees the journey as continuing part of an

American tradition, of going west, and when physically halted, to keep exploring in whatever way imaginable (*Tripping*). Wolfe was definitely high on Kesey's and the Merry Prankster's mission. The journey was also spiritual.

Kesey states that "It's a door to heaven" (*Tripping*). And, "Every person is a microcosm of the whole pattern of the universe" (Wolfe, *Electric* 140). They were seeking *satori* (Wolfe, *Electric* 4).

The drug opens the 'doors of perception ... for an instant' and we can see "the entire being ... for the first time [and] that there is a whole' (Wolfe, *Electric* 141). Wolfe writes of Jung's theory of synchronicity: "the unconscious perceives certain archetypal [sic] patterns that elude the conscious mind" (Wolfe, *Electric* 140). Is Wolfe playing with language when he says that "there is whole"? Hole or whole? Perhaps he uses a homonym to make us wonder. I think he is making fun of "the scene." He does this throughout the book, writing about the people in search of spirituality, that they are doing "the Tibetan thing" and that he thinks "it's funny" (Wolfe, *Electric* 154). Wolfe would morph later.

Wolfe writes about another reporter, Clair, who unwittingly took acid after being invited to do a story on the scene in Watts. He reprints her entire experience over several pages. What is interesting is that she eventually could "see" the point to this, could "feel" it:

A great flash of insight came to me. I've forgotten it now, but there was one instant when everything fell into place and made sense, and I said aloud, 'Oh, of course!' . . . why didn't I see all this before, why couldn't I have realized all these

things and not resisted them so much. That didn't last and hasn't recurred.

(Wolfe, *Electric* 277)

This was her "Acid Test" and she passed. She found ... something by chance. She could not recreate it.

Wolfe did not partake in the "Acid Tests," but he loses himself all the same. The language of *Electric* becomes a glob, a "Cloud" (there is an entire chapter called this), where "synchronicity" and "happenings" occur on every page. There are many long passages of stream of consciousness and we are baffled as to whose consciousness we are made part of, Kesey's or Wolfe's or someone else's (Wolfe, *Electric*, 297-299). In many places Wolfe's sentences are half finished. He never reaches a conclusion. We are left wondering, again, is this Kesey or Wolfe? But does it matter? We know what they know, that everyone, Wolfe, Kesey, the Pranksters, are all trying to move to the next step. Merging (Wolfe, *Electric* 376-378). Wolfe writes about the blackout of 1965 and an 11-year-old boy who thought he caused it by whacking a telephone pole the exact moment a huge power surge happens (Brown, par. 20). Wolfe states that the Pranksters thought it was true, that "synchronicity" or "cosmo" caused it and "once you find out about Cosmo, you know *he's* running the show" (Wolfe, *Electric*, 215). But who is "*he*"? Wolfe or Kesey or the boy? A surge in synchronicity, connectedness.

But Wolfe keeps his head. He tells us what he really thinks in passages like this:

The hip world, the vast majority of the acid heads, were still playing the eternal charade of the middle-class intellectuals—Behold my wings! Freedom!

Flight!—but you don't actually expect me to jump off that cliff, do you? (Wolfe, *Electric*, 365)

He knows that this is a thing “of the moment,” it is cool and all that people are getting their “groove,” but it won't last. Everything decays. So, does Wolfe pass the “Acid Test”?

“The Acid Tests were one of those outrages, one of those *scandals*, that create a new style or a new world view,” Wolfe explains (Wolfe, *Electric*, 250). To many of those who joined in, Kesey would say, “They know *where* it is, but they don't know *what* it is” (Wolfe, *Electric*, 251). *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* is one of the many books that mark a generation. Wolfe's open interpretation of the book, strangely, has even led to improvements in surgical techniques (Herati, Atalla, and Kavoussi 887). The book has given the hippie world much of its vocabulary and philosophy (“Electric”).

Wolfe gets many things wrong. When he writes about the black person—using the derogatory term again—who stands up on stage when Kesey asks, “Anybody who knows he is God go up on stage” and “Gaylord God” goes on stage but no one else (Wolfe, *Electric*, 262), we know that Wolfe remembered it differently when he said 12 people came up in a later interview (Brown, par. 20). But how he said it in the book, with Kesey on stage, the “ripples of the crowd,” speak.

He is blind that Mountain girl “bore [Kesey's] child” (Mano, par. 3), as Wolfe describes the woman having a child and marrying another man with no mention that the babe could be Kesey's (Wolfe, *Electric*, 317). How could he miss this?

But he gets many things right. He writes of how the Pranksters were treated at Millbrook, the ground zero for the LSD storm. The Pranksters say that their treatment

there was “one big piece of constipation,” the League of Spiritual Discovery that started it all. Everything was a sham, Wolfe got that right, but especially that the awareness of it, that everything was a *big piece of*— was something spiritual and *beyond* acid and toward a greater consciousness or understanding.

Where Wolfe passes the “Acid Test” is with his capturing of scene and pouring his language into it. We know he is accurate in that as he has spent days with individuals describing their experience:

I’m convinced the way I narrated it was accurate. It’s a controversial technique, but I think if you really feel you’ve gotten close to a person and they’ve transmitted the emotion of the moment, it’s an important thing to do. (Brown par. 23)

Electric is *The Great Gatsby* of the Sixties’ “Silent Generation” (“Silent,” par. 6).

The book is seen to have contributed to the drug outbreak and is given an entry alongside other momentous events in a list of dates of importance in the history of drug use and the war on drugs in America (Baldwin and Luzer, par. 10).

It's easy to feel nostalgic for the simpler world of the counter-culture 1960s. And in the midst of a new "new age"—think Burning Man, post-work sound baths, and weekend ayahuasca retreats—our perception of its cultural precedents is often scrubbed clean, romanticized, and repackaged. But diving back into Wolfe's intricately constructed account is a reminder that it was all a lot more complicated than that—his stark documentation putting you right there, in the place and time.

And that shit was messy.... Complicated, messy moments such as these—wives and kids on the sidelines, bad trips. (“Thanks,” par. 6,7)

The first acid test had a painted sign on cardboard at the local bookstore. “Can you pass the acid test?” (234-235). The final “Acid Test Graduation” was quite a scene. Kesey telling everyone, “Everybody who’s with us, everybody who’s with us in this thing, move in close. If you’re not part of this thing, if you’re not with us, then it’s time to leave” (400). And a baby, one of Kesey’s legitimate kids, starts screaming during the “meditation” and a woman screams to stop the child from screaming. The Pranksters are trying to channel the energy and these two forces of energy trying to disrupt them, both need each other, one caused by the other. “Archetypal! Mind power! ... They’re almost ... Almost have it! ... Feel it!” (401). It’s over.

Two writers merge. A whole new world has started. Onto more spiritual things.

“WE BLEW IT!”

“...perfect!...”

“WE BLEW IT!” (411).

No you didn’t.

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