Subjective Effects
Writing Psychedelia

wow man I said
when you tipped my chin and fed
on headlong spit my tongue’s libation fluid

and wow I said when we hit the mattressrags
and wow was the dawn: we boiled the coffeegrounds
in an unkempt pot

wow man I said the day you put me down
(only the tone was different)
wow man oh wow I took my comb
and my two books and cut and that was that

– Diane di Prima,
‘Short Note on the Sparseness of Language’

One: Set and Setting

Di Prima’s poem captures both the main concerns of this chapter, and a sense of socio-literary context of the major texts discussed. However, the concern with the (in)adequacy of language in relation to certain forms of experience is associated with, but not limited to, subjective narrative within the countercultural moment. Writing in the late 1800s in an article on the ‘Subjective Effect of Nitrous Oxide’, William James expresses similar ideas about the “ineffability of the experience” (Brown, 2002: xi) as well as the disappointment of this when “as sobriety returns, the feeling of insight fades, and one is left staring vacantly at a few disjointed words and phrases” (James, 2012:1). Yet despite such similar points being made across contexts, suggesting that the sense of lost insight into one’s own words might be intrinsic to the experience of particular states, there are certain interventions in (literary) language made by writers grappling with this ‘unspeakability’ which render its presence visible. Often the ineffable experience of hallucinogenic sensory experience is better manifested in form rather than in content. What is experienced is often too strange, and too fast-moving, to describe, but how it is experienced can to some extent be recreated in the formal aspects of writing. There is
also the sense of a community or continuity of this formal-phenomenological creative problem which allows for the building up of a body of representative work which, layered and interpenetrated, does represent this very unrepresentability, at least, remarkably well.

While it differs from the repetitive circling around the ineffable which comes to haunt texts concerned with the inward gaze of writing about opiates, there is also a body of ‘knowledge’ built up through intertext in writing about psychedelics. It is an indirect way of substantiating the insubstantial. Already pronounced in Hunter S. Thompson’s work, it becomes a complex network of presences and meanings in Tom Wolfe’s.

Arguably it begins with some of the earliest texts on the subject. Having read Baudelaire’s Artificial Paradise, Walter Benjamin wrote that “it will be necessary to repeat this attempt independently of this book” (Benjamin in Boon, 2006: 1) and, having tried hashish, that he had a sense of “understanding Poe much better now” (ibid). Baudelaire himself makes use of de Quincey’s work in his own writing, and Andrew Brown, who translated On Wine and Hashish, notes that “there is something mediated and intertextual about all Baudelaire’s writings on intoxicants” (2002: xii). Huxley, in his work on mescalin, draws on others literary sources – the often quoted idea that “if the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite” (Blake, [page number unavailable] ‘A Sudden Fancy’) is in fact Blake’s line from The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, from whence Huxley takes his title.

Charles Baudelaire is best known for his initially scandalous tome of poetry, The Flowers of Evil (1861) which has outlived its notoriety. A lifelong opiate addict, he was a member of the drug-taking Parisian salon, the Club Les Hashishins, and wrote extensively about the use of various substances in relation to modern life and artistic experience. He also produced numerous prose sketches in the flâneur mode, which he cultivated. His writings on drugs are collected as Artificial Paradise, after the title of the first essay, in which he ponders the validity of an illuminating experience which is artificially induced.
Walter Benjamin was a German philosopher who produced most of his work during the interwar period. He was also heavily influenced by the field of literary studies, and worked periodically as a critic. Because his work draws on so many fields, and because he did not live long enough to produce more of it, his philosophy is difficult to classify, but also has the benefit of utilising various interdisciplinary margins. “For Benjamin, hashish, mescal, and opium opened doorways to aesthetic, philosophical, and potentially political experience” (Boon, 2006: 10). His writings on drugs are collected in a volume titled On Hashish.

Aldous Huxley was a writer of fiction who became interested in “the value of mystical experience” ([unknown author], prefatory notes to The Doors of Perception, 1977: i) later in his life. In cooperation with psychologists and others in the 1950s, he undertook and documented a number of experiments with mescal. This area of work was developed on a larger scale by Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert, and subsequently, for political reasons as well as those of academic mismanagement, driven underground and into the Counterculture. Huxley’s work on the subject is enthusiastic but cautious. Most of his ideas are taken from the immediate subjective mescal experience, but his writing develops and mediates his experiences in The Doors of Perception (1954), making his work particularly lucid and accessible.

Hunter S. Thompson’s writing crosses the divide between reportage and fiction; he developed the ‘Gonzo’ style of journalism which places emphasis on the author as participant and the process of ‘getting the story’ as the guiding feature of the ‘story’ itself. Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas “takes the Horatio Alger vision of the American Dream as the mythological basis for a psychedelic rampage through Las Vegas. Thompson’s point was a fundamental one, but had not been made in the context of drugs before. The neon-saturated night of Las Vegas is just as much a hallucination, a myth, a product of the imagination, as any vision triggered by LSD” (Boon, 2002: 266).

Tom Wolfe was one of the pioneering writers of the New Journalism, as well as one of its first theorists. His work is characterised by the extensive use of literary and typographical
devices in order to (re)construct immersive experience. “Although [The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test] was nominally a nonfiction record of the Pranksters [a countercultural subgroup formed around the author Ken Kesey], Wolfe consciously mythologised the tale, partially in the name of the fusion of real and imaginal spaces that Kesey was aiming at with the Pranksters, and partly in the name of the ‘New Journalism’, an inventory of literary effects designed to create the effect of sensory bombardment that characterizes modern life” (Boon, 2002: 265).

It is important to keep in mind the contexts and connotations the various hallucinogenic substances had for users in their time. Historical contexts and particular subcultures vary greatly from drug use in the present. Hashish as Benjamin and Baudelaire knew it was relatively new and exclusive in the West; its history heavily tainted by notions of the ‘exotic’ by virtue of the trade routes by which it arrived in the modern Anglophone countries. LSD, synthesised in 1938 was, in the USA, the subject of much speculation and experimentation, but not made illegal until 1966. The result of that legislative move was similar, in sociohistorical terms, to that of the Prohibition, as Bob Weir of the Grateful Dead notes: “we figured that made us all outlaws” (Weir, 2005: xiv).

There is a certain profundity to the way in which sociological studies like Blum’s Society and Drugs (1969) state that “[LSD] has no history; history requires time for careful documentation and perspective over decades” (1969:129). There is also the sign of a mismatch between field and study; in the context in which LSD was being taken in the 1960s, there was no time for “decades” of “documentation and perspective”, a peculiar circumstance to which writers like Thompson and Wolfe responded. “LSD is often taken lightly now, but in the 1950s and 1960s the drug was an uncharted journey” (Plant, 1999: 121). Rolling Stone journalist Charles Perry notes that, in the mid 1960s, “if you wanted a model for mind drug use, there wasn’t much to find” and that “here was territory that seemed pretty new” (Perry, 2005: 5). This statement applies to both psychedelics and the literary-journalistic “territory” the drugs and their users provided. This is also significant because it carries the possibility, in terms of writing the drug experience, of not falling into intertextual byways of shorthand and ineffability, of coded visions and borrowed
expressions. A drug with no history has no ready-made mythos, no jargon, no description with which to compare or align the experience and its representation.

Hashish goes back quite a way across cultures; it carries with it a symbology and set of expectations. Hallucinogens can of course be traced back to the mythology and liturgy of the First Nations in the Americas, which did contribute to the aura around them in some hippie enclaves, but in terms of the modern Western experience, synthetic hallucinogens don’t go back much further in terms of literary representations than to Huxley. Prior to this, two detailed accounts by the American neurologist Silas Weir Mitchell and British psychologist Havelock Ellis date back to the 1890s (Edwards, 2004: 199). These essays are more concerned with quasi-clinical documentation than literary style, but they place some emphasis on the aesthetic nature of altered sensory experience.

The language around psychedelic substances itself reveals their problematic nature and the difficulty in naming the experience they induce. Philip Robson points out that “one person’s psychomimetic (psychosis mimicker) is another’s psycholytic (literally mind loosener, and by implication, consciousness expander). Hallucinogen is a widely used label derived from the Latin alunicari (‘to wander in the mind’), which somehow fails to do justice to the complexity of the human response to these substances” (1999: 109). Ostensibly to use the term adjectivally, as in to say that psychedelic drugs are hallucinogenic, is not inaccurate. ‘Psychedelic’, the term which seems most useful although it is “etymologically unsatisfactory” (ibid), is a more benign adaptation of ‘psychodelic’ “derived from the Greek words psyche (mind) and delos (visible)”, that is, to see the mind, or to render it visible, coined by Humphrey Osmond in correspondence with Huxley.

In this section I aim to discuss the role of hallucinogenic drugs in psychedelic experience as it is documented and explained in experimental precursory texts by Baudelaire, Benjamin and Huxley, as well represented and reconstructed in two countercultural nonfiction novels by Thompson and Wolfe. Thus my usage of the term encompasses not only the experience of psychedelic drugs, but also of the psychedelic culture. The
relatively popular use of hallucinogenics in particular, and other drugs more generally, played an important role in shaping the Counterculture movement of the 1960s. Beyond immediate experience, the possibilities of the psychedelic in art, literature, and music as well as design and theatre informed a number of innovative developments. Moreover, and pertinently to these texts, psychedelic culture, with its spectacular public presence and insistence of different ways of seeing and interacting with the world became, briefly but significantly, a focal point in the countercultural creative landscape of the West. The connection between the Counterculture and psychedelia is not just sociological, but also includes the ramifications, political and individual, of a shared subjectivity concerned with a different version of perception.

Psychedelic culture had a particular presence on the American West Coast, occupying a geographical and culturally imagined space which both Thompson and Wolfe interrogate politically and integrate idiomatically into their texts. Their work is important because in representing through literary form the psychedelic experiences of the Counterculture, they also help to constitute it as a cultural form. In doing so they transform the inherently temporary and frequently ineffable psychedelic space into a lasting cultural presence, while at the same time questioning the nature of the often romanticised collectivity and intended transcendence of excessive drug use in that context.

Two: Experiments and Protocols

Walter Benjamin’s On Hashish is a series of notes and transcripts taken during ‘experiments’ in taking high doses of hashish (and some mescaline) which he terms ‘protocols’. Howard Eiland, who translated Benjamin’s writings collected as On Hashish, suggests that “the drug experiments were part of his lifelong effort to broaden the concept of experience” (2006: viii). Benjamin approaches the project of documentation (rather than representation) earnestly; the accounts are detailed and frequently repetitive. They reveal certain tendencies, reinforced by repetition and expectation, in what Benjamin and his colleagues looked for and noticed about their experiences, better than they describe them in a consistently “weird but downbeat mood” (Johnson, 2011: 146).
Benjamin’s work, radical in its historical context, opens up more possibilities than it fully explores. The idea of altered states of mind as having philosophical significance is in itself fundamental, in that it challenges the prevalent belief systems of reason and disturbs the validity of observation alone as yielding knowledge. Thus while in his own work Benjamin gestures towards a paradigm shift he does not fully adopt, his observations resonate with further developments introduced by many later writers and theorists. His use of the term ‘protocol’ for experimentation is particularly interesting, in that it invokes the scientific methodology of hypothesis tested through experiment yielding theory but attempts to do precisely the opposite. His writing dwells on work that unsettles the chain of activities meant to result in proven fact through subjectively engaging the unobservable, the volatile. In essence his project is concerned with that which disrupts the understanding that what is observable should be verifiable and explicable. Eiland notes that Benjamin’s “philosophical immersion” in “intoxicants” was in aid of “a transformation of reason” (2006: viii). In conducting these ‘experiments’ and writing about them, and in entertaining the possibility of exploring the idea that there might be something of value to his work in the drug experience, he was concerned with “the transformation of reason. Which is to say: transformation of the traditional logic of noncontradiction and the traditional principle of identity” (ibid: ix).

Such projects seem to have certain characteristics in common, both in terms of observations made in them, preoccupations persistent amongst them, and the language used to describe these. Notably, there is a tendency towards word play and double meaning, often having to do with the special significance words or terms take on during the course of the experience and limited to it. This can extend to not just the meanings of words, conventional or idiosyncratic, but also the sounds and occasionally their morphology. Words might be said to take on an absurd second etymology based on their surface forms rather than their real roots.

Another facet of writing produced directly under the influence of marijuana or hashish is the filling of the figurative picture plane – a zooming in on detail or personal relevance
and a shedding of context, followed by an allowance of the micro to dominate the entire passage or page. “In a state of intoxication…there is a diffusion of perspective. Thinking is sensualized. A mimetic power holds sway in the realm of perception, the realm of image space, in all its plasticity” (Eiland, 2006: ix). In other words, language accompanies the drift into unmediated subjectivity. For instance, in *Tarantula* (1966), Bob Dylan notes images or lines which become central to some of his finished work of the time. Although he does not develop them beyond incidentally poetic terms in the text itself, it remains a strange but evocative collection of clearly intoxicated ramblings. To some extent, in being more concerned with experiments in language rather than describing and theorising such experiments, but remaining in the form of collated notes rather than a completed, coherent work of literature, Dylan’s text might serve as a ‘bridge’ between the two types of text discussed here. It is useful because of the examples it provides of creative language slippages a mild hallucinogenic like marijuana enables, without the limitations of a structured ‘experiment’, and without the incorporation of the fragments into a more structured text.

“Sacred Cracked Voice & the Jingle Jangle Morning”, an emulation of Kerouac (“ah haunting & Tokay jittery ye be” (81) evidently provided Dylan with material to use elsewhere. Dylan’s rambling text also contains a number of figurative descriptions, which work because of the transferal of attributes or sensory perceptions in revealing or innovative ways. In ‘Maria on a Floating Barge’ there is the line “in a sunburned land winter sleeps with a snowy head at the west of the bed” (27). The line works primarily because of the sense of breadth loaded into its limited length – it contains more space than that of its words, it is given volume, as in capacity, through the compressed, zooming sense of space/time distortion. The land itself is “sunburned”, making it seem smaller, like the body of a person. Within the heat of this body of land, however, a personified and accommodated season, “winter” sleeps “at the west of the bed”, making the space of a bed seem vast enough to require cardinal points of navigation.

There is also often a surface inaccessibility, in that while these texts tend towards the ebb-and-flow rhythm of stream of consciousness, opening the barriers between mind and
representation, they initially seem closed off to the reader because they are too subjective. They seem excessively self-referential, and the focal points are arbitrary and overwrought. Description becomes detailed and imaginative for its own sake, and there is incidental drift between objects, ideas, and conversations which is difficult to follow without the use of formal structures. Punctuation, paragraphing and line breaks are typically dispensed with in the rush to get thoughts down on paper. The relationship between surface and depth is unsettled, resulting in alternating foregrounding and recession of subject and object on the language plane. Some phrases retain their descriptive relationship to what is seen or heard, while others become concerned with just the words making up the description, becoming writing about writing, rather than writing about perception. Syntax remains regular, but is often used to show the continuities and equalities between things, rather than differences or breaks indicated by paratax, as though everything on a page could be linked by ‘and’ or even ‘&’. “Words flow like mountain streams, creating currents of language and narrative unified into patterns of awesome complexity and extent” (Johnson, 2011: 31), at least to the writer at the time.

This sense of continuity on various levels stems from the seeming extension of time known to accompany marijuana or hashish intoxication, and the perception that the two basic planes of time and space are ‘woven together’ “in a manifold resonant fabric, an interpenetrating and superposed transparency of (historical) moments: what Benjamin, with a touch of the humor that is integral to hashish, terms ‘the colportage phenomenon of space’” (Eiland, 2006: ix). Eiland suggests that this can result in a situation (of the mind) where “far-off times and places interpenetrate the urban landscape and the present moment, creating for [Benjamin] a kind of historical palimpsest” (2006: x).

The metaphor of ‘palimpsest’ is interesting. Benjamin gestures towards this notion as having historical and political bearing, a direction which Eiland follows in his writing on the text. But even without this potential application the idea is sound as describing a multilayered language of experience which neither fully covers, nor is fully eclipsed by, the subjective history of linguaged experience itself. This in turn has continuities in psychoanalytic theory, in that the memory of experience partially clouds and partially
uncovers latent memories. This includes, for instance, the presence of previous work in the current, or prior experience in immediate expression, and even, as Benjamin’s reworking of Baudelaire’s Arcades Project suggests, the historiography of public space.

In On Hashish, Benjamin lacks the poetic valuation of a creative text, making it seem as though his notes want to dwell on themselves, the movement of perception, the novel idiosyncrasies of language, but are not permitted to do so. Benjamin concentrates on the phenomenon of returning to particular descriptive turns of phrase, for instance, instead of allowing them to develop, as though refusing to believe that novelty, play, or even just sonority can hold his interest in something he bemusedly acknowledges to be arbitrary. He attempts to observe and draw conclusions from his experiment simultaneously, which clouds the observations, more so due to the fact that the mind on hashish, as he himself notes, latches onto the (supposed) significance of the incidental. Boon suggests that this limitation is not singular to Benjamin’s work, but that it is common to Bataille, Witkiewicz, and other Modernist philosophers or writers experimenting with these types of drugs. Their dwelling on the ‘excessiveness’ of the experience, he argues, is due largely to their “existential orientation”. “In rejecting a priori the possibility of a spiritual dimension to the psychedelic experience, they imposed a limit on their experiences that turned them into self-reflexive, self-reiterating studies of mental processes” (2002: 242).

Benjamin pursues the notion that the medium of describing (writing) becomes at once the medium of having the experience (thinking in language) and is seemingly altered (on the level of perception) by it. The phenomenon is demonstrated by the nature and interplay of the observations made. For instance, “oven turns into cat. The word ‘ginger’ is uttered and suddenly in place of the desk there is a fruit stand, in which I immediately recognize the desk” (Benjamin, 2006: 21). The connection between ‘cat’ and ‘oven’ is oblique but possible. Perhaps a cat sleeps near the oven, usually or in this particular instance. The play is determinedly on words – the word “oven” becomes the word “cat” – if it were the real things, not the terms transforming, surely he would write ‘the oven’ and ‘a cat’. “Ginger” is both the colour of a cat, and the name of a spice, which is associatively linked to fruit. This connection is made conceptually (what might go together) or by
activating memory (fruit prepared with ginger) rather than contemporaneous perception. He does not see the oven and the cat, the desk and the fruit stand simultaneously, but he perceives the connections between them all at once. Although this happens in one sentence, there is a cognitive lag from real oven to inferred cat to imagined fruit stand, and back to real desk, in which connections are made through memory and cognitive connectivity on the language level. This is different from the contemporaneous perception of full-blown LSD, dream state, or schizophrenic hallucination in which things are dual at the same time, and are seen/heard/felt/experienced to be so with no such lag, and little, if any, such insight.

The phrase “poetic evidence is in the phonetic” (Benjamin, 2006: 20) is a play on the similarity of the sound and shape of the two words in contrast to their different meanings and functions, and suggests that the experience is indirectly described through choices and accidents in word selection. “One is very much struck by how long one’s sentences are” which is “connected with horizontal extension” (of what is unclear) and “(probably) with laughter” (ibid). In other words, the interconnectedness of perception imagined or visualised as on a plane of experience, or a continuum of ideas, lengthens thought, which lengthens speech patterns (‘and’ prevails).

Although the subject can never say what has really moved him during the experiment...according to Benjamin, there is a hashish effect only when one speaks about the hashish…the attention of the subject is deflected from the main object of his experience, which is inexpressible, to some incidental object, which, though truncated, may prove more profound than what he would have liked to say at first. (Eiland, 2006: xi)

This relates to the “constant digressions” Benjamin (2006: 28) mentions elsewhere, and the enjoyment of or significance afforded one’s own articulated thoughts, but not those of others. “No sooner has the person you are talking to opened his mouth than you feel profoundly disillusioned…he painfully disappoints us through his failure to focus on that greatest object of interest: ourselves” (ibid). Thus language becomes not a means of communication, and not fully a means of expression, but the playground of the amusing or significant slippages and connections between interior and exterior words. Even though the experience might be collective it is not shared, for the interior language plays...
of another do not translate, though spoken (or written) language, nor do they relate, to those of the subject.

Baudelaire wrote extensively on the interlinked subjects of alcohol consumption, hashish experimentation, and opium dependence. He attempted to theorise these experiences within creative, social, and perhaps spiritual frameworks. His essays are written primarily in a creative mode; that is, he uses the full range of literary devices, and seems far more willing than Benjamin to trust the essential truth of metaphor than the empirical practice of notation and observation. They are narrativised accounts written after the experiences they recount, and the anecdotes he relates take on a fictionalised, imaginative style. “The story does not exist in nature but must be constituted in its telling” (Eason, 2005: 126). His work is not the raw material of Benjamin’s jottings, but a developed meditation on the taking of mind-altering substances. The experiences are mostly his own, but often not conveyed as singularly subjective, as though the ideas were externalised.

These essays, short creative prose pieces, and a translation of de Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* were published together as *Artificial Paradise* (more recent editions typically contain more material than the original; I use the 1999 edition). They are engaging and readable in their own right, and offer insights into Baudelaire as a writer, drug taker, and conflicted man. They are not faultless, nor complete, nor entirely reliable; their fictional aspect gives them the freedom to deny such qualification. Baudelaire does what the New Journalists were frequently criticized for doing in the interests of coherence and clarity: “to simplify the task and clarify the analysis I will concentrate on assembling a mass of information relative to the character of a single imaginary individual instead of collecting a few scattered anecdotes” (Baudelaire, 1999: 70). The resort to authorial intervention, to fictionality, is immediate and logical to him as the best means of getting the point across.

Baudelaire notes the role of the individual in the drug experience; for him it is not a matter of control, but of inflection. Thus the use of hashish is a matter of self-exploration rather than escapism. “The experimenter took pains to introduce an element of the
supernatural into his life and thought by artificial means; he remains...in spite of the accidental vivacity of his sensations, the same person intensified” (Baudelaire, 1999: 34).

His writing about the hashish experience is a detailed, poetic account which reads like a story, a psychedelic travel narrative rather than an act of documentation, and given in the second person. “I assume you have been careful to choose the right moment for your adventure” (Baudelaire, 1999: 37), he writes, because “perfect enjoyment requires perfect peace of mind” (ibid). He cautions against interference, external interruptions as well as internal anxieties. In stressing the importance of mental calm and readiness, Baudelaire is very aware of the delicate balance required to sustain the experience. In this, he prefigures Leary, who professed approaching hallucinogenics as a spiritual experience and stressed the importance of ‘set and setting’, that is, ensuring that the state of mind and environment were conducive to a positive experience.

Most importantly, Baudelaire, like the other writers discussed, places great emphasis on the language of the hallucinogenic experience, and he both writes about it and uses it to make the point, demonstrating it, in a synthesis between Benjamin’s project of observation and Wolfe and Thompson’s one which makes the intervention with incomplete analysis. Baudelaire writes of the awareness of form coming first from altered perception of art, design, architectural structures, and then linking with, in the freed-up associativeness of the hashish high, structures of writing – of language, of style, of form. It is a retrospective perceptiveness rather than an immediate perception, which he applies consciously to writing, a keen awareness of and joy at language itself discernable in much of his poetry as well. Baudelaire seems to revisit his experiences through the medium which he perceives as most susceptible to influence of altered states. Language itself manifests its system of analogy; the mechanism of linking experience and concept to word is exposed as being part of the experience of association, transposition, and metaphorical substantiation. Form is at once a code and a joke, a structure and its ornamentation. The disjuncture between thought and word becomes apparent; the ability to match them up becomes a game in which the writer marvels at his proficiency.

The sinuosity of outlines becomes a language of utter clarity in which you interpret the restless aspirations of its letters...There begins to develop a mysterious, temporary state of
mind in which the profundity of life, bristling with its multitude of complications reveals itself to you within the surroundings of the décor in which you find yourself. (Baudelaire, 1999: 73)

Language itself is defamiliarised; its structures are made manifest, and its functions become the object of renewed interest. “Grammar, that most arid of disciplines, becomes an incantation. The words spring to life” (Baudelaire, 1999: 74). He also notes the importance of allegory to the experience, and uses it frequently in his poetry. In addition, he is aware of the seeming significance of time and space; he suggests that space can, or can be used to, ‘symbolise’ “the depths of time” (ibid).

Huxley’s 1954 essay *The Doors of Perception* details his experience of taking a dose of mescal in the company of a guide and observer. It also draws certain ideas from this experience and expands on them after the event. While Huxley is aware of being the willing subject of an experiment, the main point of which is to observe subjective shifts in perception, he is also willing to extract from this certain philosophical concerns which he discusses largely through the terminology and concept of art appreciation. He thus anchors these subjective and at times diffuse sense distortions and heightenings in the language of a particular but shared visual and conceptual exercise.

Huxley writes about the notion of ‘isness’ which he first experienced under mescalin. When asked whether he finds a particular flower arrangement which he has been meditatively gazing upon attractive he answers: “neither agreeable nor disagreeable…It just *is*” (1997: 15). Things perceived just to be, imbued with the viewer’s enabled perception of their ‘isness’ are not subject to conventional aesthetic or functional values. ‘Isness’ is the perceived ‘being’ of things lacking consciousness to perceive themselves. They simply are, “a bunch of flowers shining with their own inner light and all but quivering under the pressure of the significance with which they were charged” (ibid). This significance is that while the flowers are “a bundle of minute, unique particulars” they display also “the divine source of all existence” (ibid: 16). In other words, things are understood to be at once unique and universal, distinguishable yet fractally parts of wholes, incidental yet meaningful.
Johnson writes of the ‘suchness’ of materials in art (2001: 136) when made prevalent as demonstrating this shift in perspective. The surface can take on enough significance to fill the whole in psychedelically influenced thinking. Colour becomes subject. This leads naturally enough to abstraction, a focus on form which writing cannot access. Truly abstracted writing becomes word salad, anti-expression. Words by themselves lack the capacity to contain the psychedelic experience which Boon states “seeks the infinite in the finite… [and] reaches the limits of language only to find itself still within language” (2002: 242). If the psychedelic experience opens up the possibility of shifting the limits of perception, the notion of a ‘beyond’ as a mode of seeing the actual, but language can not match that altered perception, then “the beyond itself can be defined only as ‘the impossible’ (ibid).

There exists a body of work, often dismissed as esoteric, and certainly beyond the scope of this thesis, that argues the opposite; that, in essence, language can be used in and perhaps shape hallucinogenic experience. This line of thought is influenced by shamanic practices of various cultures and their epistemology of altered states, and is contemporarily written about by ethnobotanists and spiritual thinkers such as Terence McKenna. Essentially, the main idea is that language, used in certain ways or contexts, need not be bound to representing experience, but can inform it. In contrast to the conventional idea that “nothing can be perceived or expressed outside of mimetic language and representation…conventional reality, fabricated mimetic language, obscures a dynamic world that is also a product of language in its energetic, magical, or poetic guise” (Boon, 2002: 269).

When writing of perceptions he deems particularly significant, Huxley links them to what was then known about the mescaline experiences of others. He notes that under the influence of the drug cognitive functioning is not impaired, but that “visual impressions are greatly intensified”, in particular that “sensum [is] not immediately and automatically subordinated to the concept” (ibid: 21). In other words, what is perceived is not ‘automatically’ fitted into pre-existing structures of understanding and need not be understood in its relation to prior knowledge. Thus Huxley’s experience of mescaline
contrasts Benjamin’s experience of hashish. In Benjamin’s writing, the primary play of perception is through the linguistic, and through the layering or linking of concepts through words, as in the ginger cat example. In Huxley’s writing, the increased depth of experience is different. There is a heightened visual experience, but the continuity between this and meaning, language, or memory is decreased. As a result the focus is on immediate and there is no time lag between perception, word and thought.

Huxley writes that “the more I think of it, there is something futile, mediocre, even (I am tempted to say) foppish about speech. By contrast, how the gravity of Nature and her silence startle you” (59). Besides the obvious problem of this being expressed in words, Huxley further uses his alacrity with language to embed his opinion in his meaning. “the more I think of it” posits thinking as prior and superior to saying, in that beyond coming first in the sequence, he can outthink his speech but not outtalk his thinking. The parenthesised “I am tempted to say” makes the sentence sound ‘foppish’ precisely by its facetious focus on saying. Following this with a personification of nature and an alliterative emphasis on the subjective effects of silence also suggests a tendency towards employing the figurative. “We can never dispense with language and other symbol systems”, he concedes, “but we must learn how to handle words effectively; [and] at the same time preserve and…intensify our ability to look at the world directly and not through the half-opaque medium of concepts” (60). In other words, rather than attempt to stretch language to fit over every type of experience, and thus perhaps diminish that experience to fit the inadequate medium of expression, we should, according to Huxley, value the capacity to think outside of the prism of language. This suggests a certain relinquishing of control over experience, in that it relies on coming to experience unable to take it back, to express it, describe it, render it, share it.

Huxley also notes that the mescalin taker undergoes a sort of re-prioritisation of interests and motivations, and things that would normally be important to him are unattended to because the experience takes priority; “he has better things to think about” (22).

These better things may be experienced (as I experienced them) ‘out there’ or ‘in here’, or in both worlds, the inner and the outer, simultaneously or successively. That they are better seems to be self-evident” (22)
There is no clear split between interior and exterior ‘worlds’, though there may be drift in the stream of either. The patient way in which Huxley lists all the modes of experiencing suggests that there is no hierarchy, no ‘better’ or ‘worse’ way, that the mind simply wanders. Huxley notes that this is fine for the duration of the experience, but in broader terms would hinder functioning, decision making, and relating to other people. While he finds it illuminating for the purposes of developing ideas from the experiment into this essay, and assumably elsewhere in his work and life, he is quick to point out that “this participation in the manifest glory of things left no room…for the ordinary, the necessary concerns of human existence, above all for concerns involving persons” (29). It is precisely this consideration not taken into account which overshadows the exuberance and optimism of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* and which ultimately brings about the ‘failure’ of the ‘test’ itself.

**Three: New Drugs, New Journalism**

While they are not direct responses to the work of Baudelaire, Benjamin and Huxley’s work, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* share similar concerns. In *Fear and Loathing*, Thompson explores identity, on the level of perception and self-perception, through plays and disjunctures in narrative in ‘drugged’ moments of the text. As part of the satirical project of the text, he also questions personal and political notions of ‘sanity’ and ‘normality’, and sets up a dialogue between inner and outer modes of reality and the cross-perceptions between the two. Plant notes that this, in effect, was the role LSD played in the Counterculture: “LSD challenged all accepted notions of sanity, normality and identity” (1999: 126). Thompson plays the drunken journalist, the politico, the hippie, the sullen writer, the naïve quester, and takes into his account of events the responses he elicits. At the same time, he alters his perception of these same events and publics, and notes his own responses in a variety of states. The novelistic nature of the text makes the framework of such ‘experiments’ dynamic and anti-empirical, but the idea is similar to Benjamin’s, and taken further, while relying on similar techniques of composite figures to Baudelaire’s.
Wolfe’s vantage point in *Acid Test* is located in the insider-outsider space of writing, but on one level it is a study of the group mind on drugs, the social dynamics of experience. It explores the subversion of the same fundamental philosophical principles – reason, logic – and their post-enlightenment relationship to observation and explanation with which Benjamin is concerned, while linking the particular to larger considerations of culture and experience, as Huxley also begins to do. In writing *Acid Test*, Wolfe also engages questions of experience in relation to authorship, authority, agency, and self-production in and beyond the literary text.

Both non-fiction novels try out a version of the paradigm shift Benjamin is thinking about when he takes drugs. They disqualify themselves from scientific method by purposely bungling the line between fact and fiction, but through this they might provide an alternative means to non-hierarchical truth, in the same manner that Baudelaire employs the devices of literary text rather than scientific observation to achieve some level of verity. The idea itself is satirized by Wolfe’s title – these are things beyond a test of reason or chemistry; there is no ‘protocol’. Without the structure of correct methodology aimed at particular outcomes, as Benjamin’s use of the word suggests, Wolfe’s narrative is free to explore experience rather than navigate through it towards a specific goal.

While Thompson’s text is as immersed in drugs as Benjamin’s, Wolfe’s is particularly conscious of being immersed in drug culture; both writers are aware of a particular literary engagement with subjectivity. Similar issues are noted by Henri Michaux in an essay titled ‘Disorientations’. He notes, “in a style which often mimics empiricism” (Boothroyd, 2000: 49) much like Benjamin’s, “the struggle of consciousness to retain control of its thinking” (ibid) in the face of drug-induced experience which constitutes “de-systemizations of systems of organization…the institutions of Reason and ‘good sense’ are approached in their various states of ruination” (ibid), much like these quintessentially Modernist constructs are approached by Thompson, Wolfe, and the Counterculture of which they write.
Wolfe and Thompson’s texts differ from the thorough observations made by Benjamin and Huxley in that they are significantly more concerned with the modes and aesthetics of writing. But part of the innovation is the continued focus on the author as subject, as central to and a participant in what is written. The difference, also, is the inclusion of context – literary and socio-historical – in the fictionalised narratives. They take into account that, as Bromell writes in *Tomorrow Never Knows* “you may never have taken LSD, but America has” (Bromell in Johnson, 2011: 11). Marc Weingarten writes that the group who became known as ‘the New Journalists’ “recognised…one salient fact of life in the sixties: the traditional tools of reporting would be inadequate to chronicle the tremendous cultural and social changes of the era. War, assassination, rock, drugs, hippies, Yippies, Nixon – how could a traditional ‘just the facts’ reporter dare to impose a neat and symmetrical order on such chaos?” (2005: 6). Thompson scholar David Eason writes that

The Civil Rights, Feminist and Anti-War Movements as well as the wide use of psychedelic drugs in the ‘counterculture’ called attention to the numerous realities which constituted society. The New Journalism took its energy from a recognition of the legitimacy of multiple realities but in turn had to confront the implications of this awareness for the construction of reports…In articulating the process of storytelling as the imposition of a narrative line on ambiguous events, New Journalism enacts the awareness of a culture which no longer knew ‘the plot’ but nonetheless was forced to make one. (Eason, 2005: 129)

But within this is a creative intervention reflecting on the cumulative effect of such cultural forces and their fragmentation within conventional structures. “The distinctiveness of New Journalism…rests not merely in the themes of ambiguity, fragmentation and precariousness but it its confrontation of these themes as problems of language in the act of reporting” (Eason, 2005: 127). For instance, Wolfe frequently draws attention to his trying out a series of possible adjectives to fit a situation, before settling on the right one. In doing so, he not only has the cumulative effect of the ‘discarded’ words building up the momentum of the ‘chosen’ one, he also points out his considerations in making that selection. Themes are played out in form as much as content; writing becomes literature, and fictionality becomes a mechanism of meaning as much as accuracy. For instance, Thompson was accused on several occasions of making up quotes to fit his articles; such manufacture of verbatim speech is technically falsification (though the words were never attributed to named people) but it can be more
effective in terms of driving home the essence of the story than splicing together unsatisfactory actual quotes. Karl sums up the techniques of New Journalism as partially described by Wolfe in The New Journalism (1973): “historical sequencing is eschewed in favour of dramatic scenes; quotation is out and dialogue is in, some of it even invented. A context is constructed, so that people in a situation come to us with the thickness of background, status, behaviour patterns. The reporter must describe events as they unfold, and therefore needs a point of view, a voice” (1983: 562). The vast majority of New Journalism is written from the first person perspective, and occasionally the second, creating a narrator in the fictional sense through whom the reader can access events more intimately. He notes that “these open up the full range of fictional techniques”, and thus gain access to “roving back and forth in time; interior monologue, even stream of consciousness (all invented by the writer); composite characterization…simultaneity of events…the invention of supporting cast as filler” (ibid). Many of these techniques are employed by Thompson, who nevertheless maintains a fairly streamlined narrative; most of them are exploited by Wolfe, who reaches for the full range of possible effects in order to convey the many layers of psychedelia inherent to his subject matter.

Both Fear and Loathing and Acid Test stress the boundaries between reportage and fiction. Eason draws attention to the literariness of the production of New Journalism, and notes that “reporters’ resources for this practice [making sense of events by telling stories about them] are figurative language and a particular narrative tradition” which renders journalism “a literary act” (2005: 125). “One of the consequences of the New Journalism in the 1960s was to call attention to the literary dimensions of reporting”, he notes, and “examined as a ‘theoretical’ statement, New Journalism provides a rather explicit conception of reporting as a linguistic and cultural act” (ibid). In other words, it acknowledges itself to be a process of writing in the creative sense, and within that, to deal in equal measure with language – the choices any writer makes – and culture – what is written about, who it is written for, and where the finished product is situated in the cultural landscape. “The form calls attention to language as a mediation, not merely as a stylistic embellishment which connects writer and reader but in the primordial sense of that which stands between the writer in the event” (ibid). The writer is involved in two
sets of overlapping relationships – between event or experience and language, and between text and audience, a three-part interaction voiced by Thompson’s interweaving triple narration. In making it overt in the writing that he is aware of placing himself within this triangle, the writer becomes an author, and the text literature.

In *Are You Experienced?* (2011) art historian Ken Johnson discusses how, in formal as well as conceptual terms, psychedelic drugs and the culture that developed around them influenced art. He considers psychedelic experience and perception as affecting the formal qualities of fine art in the 1960s and later, and his ideas about the possibilities and potentials of such influences are significant. He writes that “what interested me was not necessarily the influence of drugs on particular individuals but the influence of psychedelic culture in general on artists” and that in this study, “[he] would look not just for stylistic features but for a psychedelic mindset and ethos underlying many different forms of art” (Johnson, 2011: 8). Formal attributes or devices, a “mindset” or outlook, as perception, as well as an aesthetic or praxis ideology, that is, personal and shared ideas about what one’s art, and art in general, should be for and about, as well as how these ideas might be formally expressed, and a world view, are all important considerations, and work in tandem. Thus no one aspect of a work of art or a text can be considered ‘psychedelic’ without the concomittance of other aspects.

Johnson’s ability to tease out the stylistic indicators of psychedelic sensibility are useful, in terms of this discussion, in attempting to do the same with a literary text. One does not have to delve deep into *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* to find drugs, by name and type, by mode of ingestion and expected (and unexpected) outcomes. But how do those substances and the experiences they engender shape the form of the text? What is it concerned with, besides what it is obviously about? It is about being a journalist and taking drugs and road tripping; but it is concerned with writing and the drug experience and what that can open up for a writer, and a text. A comparison Johnson makes is useful in illustrating the point. He writes that

> In painting, the sweeping, wide-brush gesture and the careless, messy drip are signs of alcohol-enabled freedom from superego imperatives...drunk painting is sloppy, devil-may-care painting – though it may be athletically skillful. Painting is the drunk art form par
excellence because it is so fluid, so responsive to impulse, and yet, at the same time, hard to control. (Johnson, 2011: 29)

A number of interesting observations are made here: that the influence of alcohol can be detected – not precisely and scientifically, but intuitively and perceptively – in the form of a painting – in the handling of the paint itself. This suggests a correspondence between the expressive loosening of form and “freedom from superego imperatives”. Johnson also notes that while ‘drunk’ painting may be “sloppy”, giving up precision and formal refinement, it can be “athletically skillful”, suggesting that one set of aesthetic values or concerns is favoured instead of another.

He suggests that this particular medium is especially suited to the formal expression of drunkenness, because of its inherent qualities – “fluid” and “responsive to impulse” yet technically demanding. He uses work by the alcoholic Abstract Expressionist painter Jackson Pollock as an example, notably the ‘drip paintings’ for which he was most famous. Interestingly, Johnson points out that many of them were “made during a rare period of sobriety” (2011: 29). This suggests that the influence of a substance on a work of art need not be immediate; that it is familiarity with a type of experience and its significance to the artist that is expressed, rather than a particular, singular, moment of intoxication. Thus prior changes of perception retain a potential influence when the actual period of intoxication is over; and the sense of a type of altered state can permeate a text in ways that reach out to the reader’s experience through context. Thus a text such as Acid Test intentionally bears all the influences of LSD which resonate with its context regardless of Wolfe’s state of mind when writing it.

Four: Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas

In his recent article on Thompson’s work, ‘The Right Kind of Eyes’, Robert Alexander suggests that the “movement from an alienated to a more integrated sensibility is evident in Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas” (2012: 24) but not singular to it. It is a feature devised out of necessity in the New Journalism more generally, as a reaction to and move away from “the alienating effects of ‘modern journalistic style’” (ibid). Fear and
*Loathing in Las Vegas* is not strictly speaking a novel, due in part to the fact that it was initially published as a series of articles in *Rolling Stone*, and its particular achievement is its merging of the subjective and cultural to create a self-reflexive critique.

The conflicting vagueness and precision of the opening sets out the parameters of the text: “we were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold” (3). Plunging straight into the narrative, Thompson uses several terms suggestive of location and direction, “were”, “somewhere”, “around” “on the edge”. When they are all put together, however, they give very little actual information, and right away “somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert” takes on a liminal, fictional, ‘interzone’-like dimension. From the beginning, the text demarcates a space for the other, off-beat, unfactual, unreal, but ‘true’ narrative thread, a space in between realities, an intrusive parallel – it is in this space that the purported quest of the text, the search for the American Dream (but with a full, bitter and nostalgic knowledge that it would be better not to find the torrid tatters of it), takes place.

Like most writers dealing with the theme, Thompson sets up the ‘Dream’ as a piñata to be beaten in the hope that something good will eventually fall out if. In this case, he contrasts his own nostalgic view of San Francisco Counterculture with a cynical view of middle class American ‘reality’ which has sold out its own ideals. The other narrative thread is a series of adventures in reportage, to cover a series of assignments, and this gives the text much of its structure. The third is also a journey, a substance-induced alternative version of events, which trails the reporter and the dream-hunter both. Neither the author, Thompson, nor his alter ego and pseudonym Raoul Duke fully stick to or cover any of these three streams, but drift between them. Thompson wrote of the Duke figure that he was to be “semi-fictional, but just hazy enough so I can let him say and do things that wouldn’t work in first person” (Thompson in Weingarten, 2005: 223), a mouthpiece for the made-up quotes which are not accurate, but convey an actuality. Thus the creation of this fictional persona has as much to do with the functions and complexities of literary language use as it does with issues of identity in the text.
This tripartite structure is tested and subtly revealed in the opening sequence, where a quick play on voice alerts us to the possibilities around the device in the text. “I remember saying something like ‘I feel a bit lightheaded; maybe you should drive…”” (3). This imprecise recollection of speech trails off into a high-volume hallucination: “There was a terrible roar all around us” (3). When it subsides, we are brought back to the now destabilised real present, and the voice of speaker is reunited with his narrative: “And a voice was screaming: ‘holy Jesus! What are those goddamn animals?’” (3). The splitting and subsequent restoration of voices and perceptions is used to establish the unreliability of the narrator. Their waywardness and lack of simultaneity serve to free the third, unfactual, experienced, and most likely authentic voice.

Seymour Chatman, in his work on narratology, differentiates between the “expression plane”, the level of discourse in a narrative, and the “content plane”, on which events are related, in other words, the story itself (1998: 97). Possibly, in a text such as Fear and Loathing, which makes explicit gestures at separating and then muddling the two, it is possible to differentiate between the voices of narrator and author as belonging to the two different planes of narrative, as a device of self-reflexivity in the interests of satire, as well as finding a stream of authenticity or meaning in an overblown, persona-driven picaresque. Chatman suggests that the difference between “showing” and “telling” in a narrative (1998: 98) and the ‘movement’ of the narrator’s voice and character tend to be subsumed rather than expounded in considerations of “point of view” (ibid), a particularly pertinent caution in relation to a text so concerned with tricks and changes of perception. Although, as Alexander points out, the author of Fear and Loathing is not necessarily its narrator, and Chatman notes that “that it is essential not to confuse author and narrator is now a commonplace of modern criticism” (ibid), this is another one of the facets of writing illuminated and then confused by Thompson. Because it comes from the vantage point of literary journalism it crosses the boundaries between reportage, in which the journalist is the unseen narrator on whose presence the telling of the tale hinges, and literary writing, in which more of the fictionalised self is permitted, indeed required, in the absence of a cast of purely fictional characters. Fear and Loathing and other Gonzo texts have greater scope in this respect, and double the conventions to play with. The
writer is no longer “implied” in the narrator’s presence, as Chatman suggests is often the case with less overtly self-reflexive texts (1998: 99). Instead he is a meta-element, within, above and beyond, an echo and a counter-presence – but as such, is simply another manufactured version, different but no more accurate or personal than the narrator. In allowing himself intrusions into the text, he becomes a character.

Like the intertextuality which is characteristic of postmodern writing, being a meta element in the text is in itself an author’s comment of on the constructedness of the text. “Meta-art”, writes Johnson, is “representation about representation, which is a subcategory of being conscious about consciousness or experiencing experience” (2011: 183). It is creating a continuity or mirroring between the discursive and narrative plane; creating an unrepetitive doubling.

This overlapping of voices and narratives dealing with intermingled versions and diversions of the text is what Weingarten describes as “a major tenet of New Journalism”: “blurring facts and characters together…to arrive at some greater emotional or philosophical truth” (2005: 17). By interchanging subject and object in his writing, Thompson foregrounds the conventionally insignificant – the role of the narrator in reportage. In narrating random events, he likewise draws attention to a typically ‘unseen’ structural element. In this way he accentuates the shift in focus enabled by psychedelic experience through the form of the text.

In ‘Psychedelic Trips: Travels and Drugs in Contemporary Literature’ Lindsay Banco points out the confluence of the experiences characteristic of psychedelic drugs and the typical tropes of postmodernism. Drugs like LSD and mescaline “also produce subjective experiences that frequently coincide with many characteristics of postmodernism (disjunctions, surrealism, altered perceptions of space and time), emphasizing their connection to the subjectivities of postmodernity” (Banco, 2008: 23). But while psychedelic drugs and psychedelic cultures might have a significant influence on postmodern cultural production, both Thompson’s and Wolfe’s text are too concerned with meaning to be postmodern. They update Modernist concerns to fit ‘postmodern’
experiences – stream-of-consciousness becomes stream-of-consciousness-on-LSD, but that initial attention to writing subjective experience is still the guiding principle. Johnson notes that the postmodern and the psychedelic do have some formal characteristics in common, as well as sharing the same timeframe for their cultural ‘explosion’. However, “while postmodern implies that we’re talking about something that comes after the scattered remnants of modernism, psychedelic has a beginning, a big bang that has continued to resonate for decades in Western culture” (Johnson, 2011: 11). Crucially, however, ‘psychedelic’ is not bound to ‘postmodern’, nor is it defined by it.

All these elements – a ‘disjunction’ between narrator and voice, a hallucination invading the real in a surreal fashion, a short time lapse, as well as the notion that, improbably, most of the action of the text is going to take place within the ‘space’ of the driven car, manifest within the first chapter of Fear and Loathing.

William McKeen points out a rudimentary sort of time compression in the text in that “though the eventual work focused on two events that seem to come over the course of a long, nightmarish week, there was a month between the Mint 400 and the National District Attorney’s Conference on Drug Abuse” (2012: 12). In an MA dissertation on Thompson, Stotesbury suggests that “digressions create a stream-of-consciousness that the reader perceives as immediate in the Las Vegas story, despite the book having been written months after the recorded events occurred” (2010: 35). Throughout, the text seems to work independently of night or day. This is because a lot of it takes place indoors – in bars, in hotel rooms, but beyond that, in the seemingly frequent long distance drives undertaken, it matters little what time it is. Linear time is both compressed in the structure of the text and disregarded in its mode of factuality.

Shortly after completing what was to comprise Fear and Loathing, Thompson wrote in a letter to Tom Wolfe that “what I was trying to get at in this was [the] mind-warp/photo technique of instant journalism” and that “ideally, I’d like to walk away from a scene and mail my notebook to the editor, who will then carry it, untouched, to the printer” (1971: 375). “Instant journalism” ostensibly means a compression of the entire process – writing
in the first person on the scene, at the time. The Kerouac-esque idea of publishing unedited, unmediated work immediately after writing it extends this idea, and shows a great measure of faith in both the quality of his notes and the confidence of the editor in them. In the letter he outlines an additionally shortened version of the process to make a point – Thompson did most of his actual writing on a typewriter, suggesting that he himself did not see his notes as the finished product.

Concerning Kerouac’s influence on his work, Thompson stated that “Kerouac taught me that you could get away with writing about drugs and get published” (Thompson in Weingarten, 2005: 234). This is an interesting statement, because Kerouac never wrote particularly explicitly about drugs – there are mentions and references in many of his texts, but they do not form a major part of the content. They do, however, have a significant bearing on Kerouac’s technique, form and style, which Izant explores in detail in ‘Altered States of Style’ (2008). The implication is that Thompson was so familiar with Kerouac’s work, and receptive to the reading the drug influence in the form rather than the content, much like Baudelaire felt an insightful, intimate understanding of Poe and de Quincey, and Benjamin felt he understood Poe “much better now” (Benjamin in Boon, 2006: 1). This also suggests that Thompson was fully aware as a writer of the possibility of drugs shaping the form or subtext of a novel, of being extensively present beyond the content plane.

In the same letter to Wolfe Thompson mentions that “Jann [Wenner, Rolling Stone editor] said he gave you an earlier, now obsolete version” (1971: 375), suggesting that there was more than one version of the “Raoul Duke in Las Vegas thing” (ibid) and that they differed quite substantially. “Although”, he adds, “in some ways I like the earlier shot better, because it moves faster” (ibid).

A narrative that moves any faster than the final version of Fear and Loathing is difficult to imagine. This statement is indicative of one of Thompson’s major concerns with regard to the piece: to write it as fast as it moves, and faster, through compression, omission, and a prolonged sense of twenty-four hour a day manic “mind-warp” (1977:
“Stimulants introduce the problem of speed to...discussion of drugs and writing” (2002: 171) notes Boon, but “the speed of literature itself...is hard to quantify” (ibid).

“I’ve found that it’s almost impossible to sustain that kind of speedy madness for 10,000 words” (1977: 375), Thompson concedes, but it remains significant that he felt it was important to try. Here Thompson conflates, as he does in his writing, the notion of “speedy” madness as being both the exhilaration of writing really well really fast, and the “madness” of working on speed. Boon notes that “the speed of the text itself” has seldom been considered, yet here Thompson seems to think of “speed” in both meanings and “text” as so closely linked as to be fairly covered in the same statement on writing.

The text frames its lapses and aberrations; but it also leaves what is known to be hallucination in the space of the real, and provokes the boundaries and distinctions it encounters. The imagined is given as experienced, and, in terms of the ‘novelistic sensibility’ it must be ‘true’. Yet the entire structure relies on both reader and author knowing that hallucination is not real, but that the point where is begins, where it intersects with the real, can be interesting. This is demonstrated in the sequence in which the LSD he has taken begins to work as the narrator stands at a hotel reception. “The woman’s face was changing: swelling, pulsing...horrible” (23). It creates points of emphasis, it makes elliptic gaps. The drug shapes change, it drifts between words. The woman seems to take on the appearance of a moray eel; a sentence later, she has become “the Moray woman” (24). It is so; the text identifies her as such. The hallucinated form takes over her identity, even though it is all of the narrator’s perception.

In Sixties Rock (1999), Michael Hicks identifies the influence of psychedelics and psychedelic culture on music. Hicks takes into account that “some scholars question...whether one can connect with any specificity the drug’s effects and the music’s methods” (1999: 58), but suggests that it is an idea worth pursuing. “To consider what makes music stylistically ‘psychedelic’, one should consider three fundamental effects of LSD: dechronicization, depersonalization, and dynamization” (1999: 63). “Dechronicization permits the drug user to move outside of conventional perceptions of time” (ibid) – for instance, Thompson’s drive to ‘speed up’ the pace of the text as
discussed in his letter to Wolfe, and the loss of conventional time frames throughout the text. Hicks notes that typically in rock music, this feature appears as a slowing down and lengthening of songs, and the inclusion of additional riffs and solos; in texts like *Fear and Loathing*, there is the inclusion of subjective, perhaps off-topic material. The difference, which in both art forms can partially be attributed to a rejection of conventions, is the alteration of norms through shortening and fortifying, rather than expansion. Thompson writes of liking the version of his text that “moves faster” (Thompson, 1971: 375); Jerry Slick, in a series of recollections called *Don’t You Want Somebody to Love* discusses ways to make “our sound” “a lot bigger” (Slick in Hicks, 1999: 63). The issue seems to be volume, not in terms of loudness but in terms of capacity or density. Thompson’s work is not as economical as that of Hemingway or Fitzgerald, both whom he admired, but it does seem to hold a lot of reach, movement, and energy per paragraph. It is ‘bigger’ than can easily be accounted for.

“*Depersonalization* allows the user to lose the self” (Hicks, 1999: 63), which seems to be what happens with the tri-partite voice and perception in the text, the various plays on self-awareness, and the ambiguity around the author/narrator identity. Hicks suggests that in the typical LSD experience, this ‘loss of self’ allows the subject to “gain an ‘awareness of undifferentiated unity’” (ibid). This is not really true of *Fear and Loathing*’s often-stated sense of alienation and distancing. Possibly this has to do with the influence of other drugs on the text, notably the edgier psychedelic mescaline and the constant references to speed being the unfashionable drug of choice; certainly there is a trace of it in the pace and the paranoia of the text.

“*Dynamization*”, according to Hicks, is the formal mimicking of the fluid visuality of psychedelic hallucination or pseudo-hallucination: the pulsing, glimmering or trace-leaving of objects, the vividness of colour, and the visibility of repeated patterns across fields. Hicks dwells on it in his discussion of music, and Johnson in his writing about psychedelic art, and it is perhaps better expressed through these forms than through writing. Thompson describes the onset of several hallucinatory episodes, for instance the transformation of the ‘Moray woman’, and the text is in places quite vivid, but it lacks a
complete immersion in sensory sensuality and detailed expressive descriptiveness, in part due to its near-constant cynicism and detachment, even from the experiencing self. Tom Wolfe in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* does use a number of word, phrase or image ‘motifs’ transposed from one context to another in the interests of allegory, satire, or surrealism, which is perhaps an adaptation of this idea to the written form.

Hicks writes about this idea of dynamization being detectable in music in less overt ways – on the level of structure, rather than detail. He notes that some bands in the 1960s began to move away from standard ‘framing’ in their songs, and started combining parts that were structurally different – “differ[ing] completely in instrumentation, tempo, and texture” – or ‘juxtaposing’ “discrete sections” (Hicks, 1999: 66) in single tracks, first live and then recorded as well. Such juxtaposition is readily used in writing, and is another postmodern device with a particular use in representation of the psychedelic. In *Fear and Loathing*, it manifests in various ways: in the meeting of short episodes with novel form, perhaps comparable to “segue[ing] individual songs in such a way as to make a whole album side become a single track” (ibid) and in the combination of a variety of generic and specific types or aims. These might be a quest, a satire, an American road trip, a personal account of the incidental, all together suggesting that the focus and form of the journey shifts as it develops, as it does on LSD. The various intertextual references and allusions in the text function much like the collage-effect practice of “insert[ing] foreign passages into otherwise consistent songs” (ibid) which developed into more complex ‘sampling’ and merging and re-merging of tracks and sounds in psychedelic dance music.

Sensory changes brought about by various types of drugs are indulged in macabre detail in a competitive discussion of bizarre substances ingested by the narrator and his attourney. The one-upmanship of the discussion is a device of humour, sustaining the hyperbolic improbabilities described; but what it releases in terms of the idea of what drugs can do is interesting. It begins with their (presumably fictional) experimental ingestion of adrenochrome, procured by the attourney as payment for his services from a devious client. “There’s only one source for this stuff”, notes Duke quasi-ceremoniously, “the adrenaline glands from a *living* human body” (131-132). Huxley notes in *The Doors*
of Perception that “adrenochrome, which is a product of the decomposition of adrenalin, can produce many of the symptoms observed in mescaline intoxication” (1977: 10).

Besides the implicit violence there is a thematic match – what but decomposing adrenaline could be taken when all the botanical and chemical drugs have been exhausted in something called Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas? The result: “barely able to talk now…my body felt like I’d just been wired into a 220 volt socket” (132). Speech goes, but not words, and body and self are one in “my body felt like I’d”, not “it’d”. The conversation moves to the possibility of eating “a big handful” of “extract of pineal” (132). The suggestion is vehemently opposed by the attorney; his reasons are his imaginative expectations of what the result might be:

One whiff of that shit would turn you into something out of a goddamn medical encyclopedia! Your head would swell up like a watermelon, you’d probably gain about a hundred pounds in two hours…claws, bleeding warts, then you’d notice about six huge hairy tits swelling up on your back… (132)

No such being could emerge from a “medical encyclopedia” of any kind, but it could emerge out of the human psyche, and does so with the force and conviction of a fullblown hallucinatory, if not psychotic, visualisation at the bare mention of the substance, without any having been taken. The disproportionately large head is a basic symbol of altered psyche, some distension of the mind (the cover image of the text in the Vintage edition uses precisely this symbolic effect). The rapid enlargement of body is a mismatching of self-perception and the world, in part borrowed from the image of a chemically oversized Alice on her arrival in Wonderland. The rest is the grotesque imagery magnified and embellished upon. Clearly it is the idea of a macabre bodily transformation rather than the specific details of it which fuels this rant – the weight gain is “about a hundred pounds” and “then you’d notice about six hairy tits”. The actual manifestations are arbitrary or approximate, hence the repeated “about” – but the idea informing them is consistent.

The ideas of experimenting with pineal gland excretions discounted, the two men approach ethnobotany, in a play on both the strange fads (banana peels, morning glory seeds, nutmeg) that swayed the drug users of the Counterculture and the possibility of a rampantly toxic ‘down home’ neighbourly Christian American source of highness: “last
Christmas somebody gave me a whole Jimson weed” (132). And, perhaps tying the two strands – the countercultural and the Las Vegas drive to excess – together “enough for a year – but I ate the whole goddamn thing in about twenty minutes!” (132). “I went blind for three days. Christ I couldn’t even walk! My whole body turned to wax. I was such a mess that they had to haul me back to the ranch house in a wheelbarrow…they said I was trying to talk, but I sounded like a raccoon” (133).

There is an initial blindedness which, given the import the attorney gives the story, should give way to transformation and insight. Transformation there is, perhaps, in that he ends up comparable on some grounds to a “raccoon”, but the insight remains latent. It is a tale of excess for its own sake. The proximity of the expletive “Christ” to the three days of blindness suggests the unused potential of a spiritual experience. But this, like other metanarratives and legends in the text, is thwarted – he turns, if anything, into an animal, and cannot tell his own story – “they said I was trying to talk”. The revelation is lost if it cannot be articulated.

Thompson states that even more than alcohol, “ether is the perfect drug for Las Vegas” (46). It is the experience best suited to being used as a metaphor for another version of it: the writer trying to come to terms with (literally, find the right words and bring them to) the fake, stale and bizarrely powerful version of the Dream inhabiting Las Vegas.

This is the main advantage of ether: it makes you behave like the village drunkard in some early Irish novel…total loss of all basic motor skills: blurred vision, no balance, numb tongue – severance of all connection between the body and the brain. Which is interesting, because the brain continues to function more or less normally…you can actually watch yourself behaving in this terrible way, but you can’t control it. (45)

Ether produces a schism between mind and body, which symbolizes or signifies the schism between America and its dream, and between the journalistic view of Thompson trying to find the words for this and the body of Raoul Duke entering yet another gaudy casino. Boon notes that “the anesthetics, with their ability to shut down the body and mind in a swift movement when administered at the appropriate doses, resonate in a special way with the notion of transcendence” (2002: 89) in that they entertain the notion of “doubles, doppelgängers” (ibid). The sense of alienation Thompson experiences as a writer on this assignment, or what Weingarten terms Thompson’s “cultural displacement
in Vegas” (2005: 235) is “accentuated” in the moment by the “use of the second person singular to describe his own actions” (Alexander, 2012: 23). The curious effect is that everything he sees himself doing is seemingly happening to “you”; but because it actually is not, it happens, seemingly, to no one. It is detached from the “I” of the text, which is so strong a presence elsewhere in it, and not reclaimed.

Despite the fact that he keeps taking them, the narrator notes early on that “[Las Vegas] is not a good town for psychedelic drugs” because there “reality itself is too twisted” (47). Wolfe, too, notes the town’s ostentatious re-manufacturing of a collectively imagined version of reality; he calls it the “super-hyper-version” of “a whole new life style in America” and “the Versailles of America” (1965: xvi). What brings Thompson to this conclusion is the rather hyper-real “possibility of any freak with $1.98” making use of the Circus-Circus’s (a casino with an aptly duplicict, play-play name) ‘attraction’: “stand in front of this fantastic machine… and your likeness will appear, two hundred feet tall, on a screen above downtown Las Vegas… say anything you want” (47). Thompson envisages this as a potential invasion of his own space, both literal (the screen is visible from his hotel room window) and self-projective (Thompson is projecting a larger-than-life version of himself and saying ‘anything he wants’ through the text). The twisted reality, too, seems to be a found object additionally tweaked in the interests of art – Thompson imagines such a “freak” choosing to say “Woodstock Über Alles” (47) in his moment on screen. The humour lies in the pairing of Nazi rhetoric with the ‘philosophy’ of an event like Woodstock, but Thompson pretends not to see it, intimating that he is singularly aware of the unlikelihood of such a juxtaposition.

The text is structured around two major assignments. “But what was the story? Nobody had bothered to say. So we would have to drum it up on our own. Free Enterprise. The American Dream. Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs in Las Vegas. Do it now: pure Gonzo journalism” (12). The notion of “pure” journalism here is intriguing, suggesting both a clarity of vision and lack of compromise in terms of the writing, as well as the connotation of unadulterated, industrial strength substance.
There is no clear assignment, in the industry-specific sense of “story” but also there is no plot or narrative, nothing to tell, no myth, legend or fable to use with regard to the current events. There is, however, space for writerly intervention in “we would have to drum it up on our own”. The “we” is either editorial (replacing the person who should have “bothered to say” what the story is but didn’t) or refers to the three strands of speaker, narrator and writer in the text – the attorney sidekick has little to do with the actual writing. To “drum it up” suggests something like ‘provide our own fanfare’ for the text, but the image of typing so precise, so emphatic, so rhythmic and loud as to be like drumming carries over the meanings in the phrase well. Although establishing that writerly freedom is crucial to the development of this particular narrative, it is not peculiar to this text, but has, perhaps, to do with the moment in journalistic and literary culture inhabited by New Journalism. Joan Didion, a contemporary of Thompson’s, writes in *The White Album* about her experience of writing literary reportage at the time: “I was supposed to have script, but I had mislaid it. I was supposed to hear cues, and no longer did. I was meant to know the plot, but all I knew was what I saw” (1979: 12).

This sentiment pre-empts the ‘wave speech’ which deals with the climax and crash of the countercultural version of the American Dream.

And that, I think, was the handle – that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn’t need that. Our energy would simply prevail. There was no point in fighting – on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest if a high and beautiful wave… So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look west, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark – that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back. (68)

This is perhaps the only section of the text devoid of cynicism. According to Alexander, who calls it “a lucid flashback” (2012: 20), it is not otherwise apart from the prevalent mode of the text. This resonance is accentuated by the emphasis on the text’s historicity and the narrator’s own place in it. “So now” in relation to the memory of San Francisco serves to accentuate the difference between ‘then’ and ‘now’; “less than five years later” is clear enough without the prefiguring historicisation. “So now” also sounds like a possible ending, a reappraisal and summary. Alexander notes that in this passage Thompson compresses “five or six years of history into a single image that fuses
Thompson’s personal experiences with those of a generation” (2012: 29), in contrast to his solitary vantage point throughout the rest of the text. Yet in the rest of the text, the compression of personal time (that of the narrative) is at odds with the incongruity of Nixon’s reign just years after the ‘moment’ of acid-culture San Francisco, while a far longer trajectory of American literary culture is invoked. The question, then, is whether they all co-exist, in a memory, in a perception, in a text, in reality.

Instead of ending the text, this passage joins the two ‘trips’ of the narrative together, and marks the beginning of a frenzied journey to back to California which is heralded by the miasmic phrase “the decision to flee came suddenly. Or maybe not” (69). But it is cut short by a recall to the final ‘assignment’ of the text, the National Conference of District Attorneys on “narcotics and dangerous drugs” (77). Clearly, that moment in time and place cannot be returned to, and the establishment’s version of the Counterculture is becoming dominant, which sets it up for the scathing parody that is the ‘coverage’ of the DA convention, but also prevents Thompson from pursuing the writing project latent in the wave passage, and the aborted journey back to it.

Alexander writes that “Gonzo is the discursive counterpart of acid and its revolutionary culture” (2012: 29). The creative intervention of the text, the break away from journalism into literature, and from the merely postmodern to the formally psychedelic, is a move towards creating the point of meaning in the text. It comes midway through the text and seems, as Alexander suggests, to happen in the course of the writing process itself. The text stops being documentation and becomes expressive creation “somewhere along the way” as Thompson “seems to have recognized the limitations of” “recording the whole thing as it happens” (2012: 26) as succumbing to the old limitations of “dominant journalistic practice” (ibid). Alexander terms Gonzo journalism “more subjective and radically participatory” (ibid: 27. But throughout the text Thompson continues to be a stand-alone figure. Still, “Thompson makes explicit, albeit in an exaggerated fashion, the subjective inflection of phenomenal experience which necessarily occurs, it would seem, in all but the most mechanical acts of representation” (Alexander, 2012: 27). In other words, he includes into his work the often concealed fact that events are observed and
subsequently written about by someone within the invisible frame of the image being presented. The intervention is concerned with awareness, agency, authorship, the creative rather than “mechanical” ‘act’ “of representation”. ‘To act’ is to take action, to write oneself into the text, but it is also to pretend, to play, to represent; to put on an act of authorship. This ‘act’ in both senses is consistently solitary except for the nostalgic passage about the San Francisco LSD culture. In “fus[ing] [his] personal experiences with those of a generation” in that section, Thompson “represents an aesthetic consolidation consistent with spirit [he] attributes to San Francisco in the mid-1960s” (Alexander, 2012: 29). Through the fixing of disparate elements, personal and cultural, present and past, to an image both literal and imaginary, in a sort of symbolism, Thompson writes the unseen. He remembers instead of describing, makes meaning instead of finding it.

Significantly, the ‘wave speech’ is one of only a few still moments in an otherwise frantic text. There is something poignantly ironic in looking West from Las Vegas towards the ocean that bears this metaphorical wave of the crashed and receding Counterculture, which conveys the narrator’s marooned sense of self and nostalgic longing. Hence, perhaps, the focus on three versions of the self. Baudelaire subtiles his On Wine and Hashish as being “compared as a means of multiplying individuality” – it is this idea, rather than the outcome of the comparison, which dominates the thoughts behind the reflections on both drugs, and as such carries a certain resonance with Thompson’s work.

At times exuberant, and fiercely cynical throughout, the text ends on a sombre, reflective note. There is no one event, it is the tone that expresses it, as well as a few revealing passages. One of these is an incisive appraisal of the social landscape of America. Through the use of inverted commas around any sense of commonality, Thompson indicates his alienation from it; his political anger is clear. Although he is writing in 1971, he feels far longer removed from the ‘moment’ on the late 1960s.

But what is sane? Especially here in ‘our own country’ – in this doomstruck era of Nixon…No more of the speed that fueled the Sixties. Uppers are going out of style. This was the fatal flaw of Tim Leary’s trip. He crashed around America selling ‘consciousness expansion’ without ever giving a thought to the grim meat-hook realities that were lying in wait for all the people who took him too seriously. (178)
Sanity in the conventional sense is obsolete; it does not matter because the reality is, in a public sense ‘insane’. Leary’s ideas are picked out as an example of ‘what went wrong’, but it is the same failure that brings on the disappointment, the defeat of the narrator’s tone. He too went “crashing around America” in the interests of “consciousness expansion”. Expanded consciousness is rendered futile, if not dangerous, because the psyche, and the person, exist in society, culture, and their realities. Robert Forte quotes Leary as saying that the insights enabled through the experiences he advocated are “intimate and precious…they should be kept out of politics” (Leary in Forte, 1999: 14). But the politics of all experience are inescapable and irreconcilable – showing this up, seeing this, is difficult, troubling. incredibly, given the socio-political context that arose in America around LSD use in the 1960s, the very “grim meat-hook reality” Thompson notes as incompatible with the psychedelic project, Leary felt that Albert Hoffman “was unjustified in reproaching [him] for the seduction of immature persons to drug consumption, because teenagers in the United States, with regard to information and life experience, were comparable to adult Europeans” (Hoffman, 1999: 39).

The mood of disillusionment which descends on the text towards its conclusion suggests that it was intended to be something beyond a satire, that it has inadvertently revealed too much. McKeen, in tracing the facts behind the fictionalised events, suggests that many of the accounts in the text are “a heightened version of reality” (2012: 10). On the one hand this works as a parody, the real stretched to extremes to render it absurd, sinister, or laughable. But on the other hand, there is a sense that writing from and about “a heightened version of reality” shows that version to be untrue, useless – a good device, a clever technique, but nothing more than a ‘hyper’ version of the same loathable post-sixties comedown. “I haven’t found a drug yet that can get you anywhere near as high as sitting at a desk writing” (Thompson in McKeen, 2012: 12), he said in an interview much later. Perhaps the seeping melancholy then was a disjunction between two passions, and the related upstaging of a carefully written and personally significant persona, as though the predictable inability to find the American Dream and its documentation also revealed the unpredicted aimlessness, as the story nears its end, of being the persona of Hunter S. Thompson. Gilmore suggests that ‘Thompson’s fear and loathing was about disillusion –
the feelings that gnawed at you after a dream that proved only an hallucination. It was about the terror of losing that illusion, and having no refuge” (2010: 45). Thompson himself described *Fear and Loathing* as “a failure so complex that I feel I can take the risk of defending it as a first, gimped effort in a direction that what Tom Wolfe calls ‘The New Journalism’ has been flirting with for almost a decade” (Thompson in Alexander, 2012: 30). Thompson does not give particular reasons for seeing the text as a failure; ostensibly he wanted more from it.

“Gonzo is, in some respects, an atavistic embodiment of the spirit that drove the acid culture” states Alexander (2012: 29), which seems a qualified version of his initial claim that “Gonzo is the discursive counterpart of acid” (ibid). In its invitation of drug perception into the text, in allowing the distortions, loops, and fragmentations of the acid experience into the writing, it is. But it is far too cynical to be only and completely of the Counterculture it briefly mourns, and so “it is a mutation too, the edge in Thompson’s style deriving from his inability to accept the naïve ‘mystic’ fallacies of the Acid Culture and a resolve never to lose sight of the ‘grim meat-hook realities’ of temporal political life” (ibid). Possibly that it is a “mutation”, a variation on a theme, makes it all the more ‘acid-like’, but what inspires Thompson’s cynicism is also what keeps him going after the wave has crashed – a faithless observership, a vantage point which struggles for the total immersion he requires for the ends of Gonzo writing. In this sense the aim of Gonzo as well as the New Journalism more broadly is to write of a moment in social culture in such a way that the manifestation permeates the text and allows it to become an intervention in literary culture.

*Five: The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*

*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* employs various devices to create a sense of compression of time, space, context and content encapsulated in a conventional structure. Within this structure, the territory it covers is vast and complex. As in *Fear and Loathing*, there is a certain quality of ‘volume’. That is, it creates in itself, through the use of structure, pace, narrative voice, repetition and subtle change, and a layering of phrase and
motif, a space which contains multiple aspects of experience. This includes the experience of the author writing, of the author doing participatory research, solitary and collective immersion in psychedelic drugs and culture, countercultural community and antagonism towards the mainstream, and the engagement of this particular text with literary culture. The other meaning of ‘volume’ is also appropriate to *Acid Test*, in that Wolfe frequently comments on the loudness of the music played continuously by the Pranksters in a bid to accentuate the extent of their sensory perception. This also resonates with the described ‘loudness’ of their extravagant presence. Brent Whelan suggests a useful way of approaching the text by seeing it as a duality of practice and authorship – Wolfe writing about Kesey’s agency in the Prankster project as an act of authorship, which lends itself to a “double reading” (1989: 78). This might also account for some of the sense of ‘loadedness’ in the text, in that it operates on at least these two levels, and explores a vast terrain of people, characters, incidents, imaginings, insinuations and ideas, texts and other cultural productions, literary and other language use, on both real, literary and psychedelically enhanced levels. The text can perhaps be described, and in turn navigated, as a shifting collection of overlayed maps, a multiplication of Whelan’s idea of a duality, from the layer closest to the reader, that is, Wolfe’s final published text, through an a-chronological succession of intertextual and other interconnections via the cultural landscape of late 1960s America. This metaphorical topography also covers long-term group psychology interactions, the field notes or ethnographies of Kesey’s actual written work and his leadership of the a-literary production of the Prankster project, and the lightshow projection onto all of these of the effects of near-constant use of large quantities of LSD. All of this seems to be accompanied by a high volume rambling Acid Rock soundtrack, perhaps looped, which acts to blast the force of Wolfe’s prose at the reader. Wolfe himself comes to the fore and recedes in his own work and words, and finally holds onto the words and thus makes sense of the whole. Figuratively the narrative goes to many more places than the bus stops at, but it comes back, whereas the bus is sort of abandoned at an undefined point.

One of the ‘spaces’ explored in the text is that of the intersubjectivity peculiar to group use of LSD. Another is the capacious space of intertextuality Wolfe creates in order to
enable a residual interconnectivity alongside his interpretation of narrative events. Because the events described take place in a real space with a high level of literary connections, there is a juxtaposition or merging of the real and fictional as well; people become characters; texts become events. Wolfe creates the impression of the novel writing itself, being at once a mediated transcript of the real and a fiction of America, of Counterculture, of power and authority, of psychedelics and psychedelic culture.

The Pranksters themselves take on fictional names and pretend they are ‘in a movie’ of sorts, which becomes a metaphor for their group interaction with the outside world. Other writers, including Allen Ginsberg, Hunter S. Thompson, and Robert Stone wrote about events, people, or scenes included in *Acid Test* with varying degrees of fictionality. Wolfe, in his capacity as narrator is a distinct figure in the text at first, but then slides into omniscience. 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” (Whelan, 1989: 82). “Within this framework…Wolfe creates something like a classical tragedy” of a prominent hero’s downfall (ibid). In doing so, Wolfe re-introduces the literary paradigm onto Kesey’s non literary work.

Wolfe handles what at times seems an inevitable jostling for authorship, agency and power between himself and Kesey. But while he has access to Kesey’s followers, and conducted many interviews and conversations with them, their allegiance, and thus the openness of the accounts they give, lies with Kesey for the most part. Wolfe writes about Kesey, not for him – he observes and quotes, but seldom discusses the prevalent ideas circling within the group with Kesey himself. He also stays clear of certain parts of Kesey’s personal life, notably his wife Faye and their children, who remain a peripheral presence. He does not keep the same distance from Kesey’s mistress, Mountain Girl, however, which, although it might stem out of courtesy for Kesey or Faye, has the effect of presenting Mountain Girl as a far more central and vocal presence.
Wolfe does not contradict Kesey’s vision of the Prankster project, but he does rather somberly note the casualties deposited at the police stations and mental institutions on the Pranksters’ trans-American journey. He does not dwell on them, but the irony of literally driving the more vulnerable members of the group into the establishments of institutional control is clear. It is accentuated stylistically as well. Wolfe contrasts these disembarkments with the lively, loud, chaotic noise and clutter of his writing about the Pranksters on the bus, which is characterised by long, looping sentences and flowing descriptions merging interior and exterior fragments. Instead, these moments are presented as stark, quieted descriptions, suggesting abrupt stops, radical discontinuities. “And there, amid the peaceful Houston elms on Quenby Road, it dawned on them all that this woman – which one of us even knows her? – had completed her trip. She had gone with the flow. She had gone stark raving mad” (81).

Much of this is played out through the use and non-use of dialogue and direct speech, quoted or undifferentiated. 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 points out and that reintegrates the ‘lag’ between language and experience. “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” (ibid). 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 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, and thus the ‘lag’ becomes useful.

Kesey’s first appearance in the text takes place when Wolfe visits him in prison, but the man described in this sequence is somehow different to the one reunited with the Pranksters a while later. This second re-entry scene provides him with more of an ‘entrance’ as a character. The prison interview is, oddly, the only time Wolfe and Kesey speak directly about Kesey’s ideas around LSD and writing, but it has a strong tone of
surreal detachment, as Wolfe describes along with the conversation the experience of speaking to Kesey through a telephone while facing him across a thick wall of glass. Thus this initial meeting is imbued more explicitly with the senses of lag, detachment, and duality which become implicit aspects of the text later.

The Pranksters, under Kesey’s guidance, developed a particular brand of communal LSD experience, with particular emphasis, expectations, and themes. They shaped and understood their drug use in particular ways. “That substance [LSD] and that experience are treated by Kesey and his friends as no more than a medium, a specialized lens, through which consciousness itself will be perceived in a new way” (Whelan, 1989: 69). Indeed, some of the group activities undertaken on LSD are focused on re-orienting and perhaps re-understanding perception, and as such are interesting explorations of consciousness. For the most part, or for most of the group, they do not go beyond that, or are not fully used in any way beyond the immediate experience.

The other chief occupation of the group is a performatively disruptive or provocative presence aimed at baiting the straight world they have removed themselves from. This antagonism has as much to do with perception as action, intention as response. Wolfe describes it in a curious way, using reversals in structure to illustrate reversals in perception. For instance: “also a blazing silver disk in the middle of her forehead alternately exploding with light when the sun hits it or sending off rainbows from the defraction lines in it. And, oh yeah, there’s a long-barreled Colt .45 revolver in her hand, only nobody on the street can tell it’s a cap pistol as she pegs away…at the erupting marshmallow faces” (8). This description is effective in getting the sense of the situation across because it is almost reversed. Wolfe mentions that the weapon is a cap pistol after he has described it as a revolver, because that is how it appears. Despite the fact that it is a toy, the girl’s ‘pegging away’ at pedestrians who cannot see the difference is in earnest.

Kesey is doubted and misunderstood by most of his audience when he begins speaking about going ‘beyond acid’. Although it is never explicitly clear what the Acid Test events
are intended to do or be, there is a strong sense at the conclusion that they fail in some way. Whelan distills the rhetoric around the group LSD experience into a working idea:

The ambitious program of acid aesthetic innovation, and finally the acid tests themselves, is to bring an ever-expanding group of people past these lags and divisions [of perception, primarily] into a complete awareness of their own identity, individual and collective, a state of achieved self-presence. The final goal is to transcend representation altogether, to reduce the difference (the re-) to a simultaneity. (Whelan, 1989: 69)

This reveals another ‘faultline’, since Wolfe then re-introduces the ‘difference’ by re-presenting Kesey’s project, through writing it. Kesey himself never articulates this “program” as clearly as Whelan does, however, and if it is indeed the idea, it is lost on many of the participants, at least in Wolfe’s representation. It also calls into question the validity of the two modes of meaning-through-art-making, and highlights their dependence on one other for representation and articulation through their contrasts.

Whelan states, reasonably, that “how seriously” and “how literally this project is to be understood is questionable” (1989: 69), a question not directly posed by Wolfe, although it hangs over the text. Whelan also recognises the duality of the project – the spectacle of the experience – and suggests that “the shock” of it at least is “undeniable” (ibid).

One particular element facilitating interplay between Wolfe’s text and Kesey’s non-text, 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. Amongst its other functions, the bus seems to bridge the many levels of the text, existing strongly and significantly in all of them. ‘Furthur’ is an old adapted school bus which the Pranksters use to live in on long journeys. They also use it as a visual representation of their ideas – it is painted all over in psychedelic day-glo designs – as well as an auditory one, as it is fitted with an immense amount of audio equipment, which they use to address and listen to the outside world they aim to unsettle, as well as the inner one of their communal tripping, and to document the entire enterprise. 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. Whelan characterises the bus as “stage, as artwork” as well as “a vehicle of intrusion” (1989: 71).
He notes also that, as its signage suggests, the bus as a sign or symbol “was necessarily divided” (ibid: 63). Its front end bore the destination ‘Furthur’, “towards new paths not only in experience but in the written sign (as well as a falling-off from literacy)” (ibid), which Kesey allowed to remain perhaps as a means signaling to the straight literary world his radical change in direction. The back end of the bus reads “Caution: Weird Load” (63). The signage is fitting with the sometimes bizarrely epigrammatic sloganing of the 1960s, much of which demonstrates the lack of conceptual connectivity left over in phrases rendered meaningful by the marijuana experience, like some of Benjamin’s notations. Whelan understands the ‘caution’ sign as “the recoiling of the Prankster gesture around the very eccentricity of the group” (Whelan, 1989: 63).

Much like the bus he drives, Neal Cassady travels between the overlapping ‘maps’ of text, and is replete with meaning in all of them, at once a real, a fictional, and a symbolic figure. He carries much of the intertextuality of the text, because he figures as a fictionalised character in other well-known American texts, notably Kerouac’s *On The Road* and *Visions of Cody*, and thus creates a continuity between the Beat movement and the literary aspects of the Counterculture. He also carries the exchange between the real and the 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. For instance, it is either a remarkable coincidence, or none at all, but either way an intertextual conflagration that Cassady is written into the role of driver in texts (*Acid Test* and *On the Road*) fundamentally concerned with ineffable experience.

In contrast to Kesey, who is a writer encountered through texts 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 monologuist, 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 – ‘ (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 the novel from which he is a familiar figure, as well as the possibility Wolfe sees of playing the intertextual game by including Cassady in his own text. He responds immediately to the textual aspect of the man. “I remember Cassady”, he writes, although he has never met him before – he remembers reading about Dean Moriarty. In one sentence, all Cassady’s meanings except his role of driver, which comes later, are brought to bear – he is “Neal Cassady”, “hero”, the fictional “Dean Moriarty” and the type, the figure, the “Denver Kid”. None of these are strictly speaking memories, but associations Wolfe recollects upon hearing the name.

There is an interesting 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. He then 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 direct quote. 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 *Fear and Loathing*, possibly suggesting a resonance between the two journeys, intentional or psychedelically uncanny.
The unlikeliness of “you understand” is doubled. Firstly, it is an unlikely mode of punctuation – Wolfe calls it thus in that he imagines what Cassady’s monologue might look like as text – continuous and unbroken, as the unfinished ending of the passage (and the chapter) indicates, with the repeated phrase thrown in where fullstops would be. This sort of visualisation suggests the lag between event and text is not as prolonged for Wolfe as Kesey seems to think it is for himself. Wolfe finds it interesting, at least as a good means of describing Cassady’s speech, to think in type, to describe a speech pattern in terms of what it might look like on the page. It also suggests that Wolfe is aware of the process of mediation between text and event – that is, language – and sees it as useful, a tool rather than a hindrance. Wolfe’s description of Cassady’s speech is perhaps more interesting to the reader than the content, which comes across as random and disjointed. The “expression” is also “unlikely” for this second reason – the likelihood of Cassady or his current context being understood is minimal.

Perhaps the most elusive aspect of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* is the LSD experience itself, the near-constant, largely ineffable presence it constitutes. Its shadowiness is functional, in that it creates an incomplete sense of something more that is never really 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 Whelan, 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 complains that “Wolfe explains, but he doesn’t reveal (2005: 101) 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” (ibid). But nobody has yet written an account of the “effects of hallucinogens” on their own mind, let alone that of a group, that could be called passable literature, and Wolfe’s task, ultimately, is to produce a 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!” (114) Due to the exclamation mark this problem becomes 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 is in some part documenting, not manufacturing the experience, and his style in general is reliant on localisms and particulars of language. He writes in ever-wider 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. Such not-naming solves the problem of “the personal I, Me, trapped, mortal and helpless, in a vast impersonal It, the world around me” (117). Acceptance of the perception induced by LSD, a confluence of the two, I and not-I allows a “flowing together, I into It, and It into Me, and in that flow I perceive a power…that the whole world is blind to” (117). In a different setting, this could be understood as a regression to the plentitude of infanthood, or the loss of boundaries of psychosis. It can also be a positive experience, as it is presented in the text, but that sense of power resides in the experience and the alteration of perception it allows, be it the added layer of hallucination or the removed veil of revelation. It does not operate in the
everyday non-psychedelic world, and that distinction seems to be the undoing of some of the people in the text, as well as the strength of Wolfe’s narrative. It encompasses, but does not succumb to, the possibility; indulges it in the moment, but does not attempt to carry it beyond. It is a lacuna in the text on all levels, a space which has no markings on any of layers of metaphorical map, no mode of representation. It is ultimately an empty centre, appearing as an illusion of both surface and depth.

The LSD experience is introduced as a problem of language from the start. Wolfe paraphrases some of Huxley’s ideas, as well as some of Kesey’s about his early experiences of taking LSD amongst other hallucinogenic drugs, as volunteer subject in experiments undertaken while he was a graduate student at Stanford. “But these are words, man!” (45) and words such as “hallucination” and “dissociative phenomena” are the language of the “White Smocks” (45) the clinicians who gave Kesey the drug but had themselves not experienced its effects. This perhaps drew Kesey, a writer wanting to go beyond words, away from the literary project later on, because “you couldn’t put it into words” (45). What can’t be articulated, according to Wolfe, is not hallucination itself, which is “just the décor” (45) but “this certain indescribable feeling” which is “indescribable because words can only jog the memory, and if there is no memory of…the experience” (45); 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.

Writers like Heinrich Klüver, who did much research on the forms and patterns of chemically induced hallucinations, maintained that these ineffable emotional or ‘supernatural’ aspects of the experience were simply a result of particular interpretations of and responses to multisensory and synaesthetic perceptions and hallucinations. McKenna and others, however, maintain that there is an important emotional and spiritual aspect to psychedelic experience which manifests in these perceptions, and which can be individually developed.
Wolfe writes about this problem in *The New Journalism*, observing that “print...is an indirect medium that does not so much ‘create’ images or emotions” (1973: 63) 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” (ibid). 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” (ibid). Too much focus on the surface layer, the ‘plasticity’ of form, leads to abstraction, a step too far for literature. Wolfe likens aspects of it to other things, and makes much use of ellipsis and sudden breaks and rejoins in writing around it, but he is careful to always intimate that there is more which does not meet words. Because there is no point of reference, no prior experience, 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. None of the metaphorical map layers, however detailed, can give a complete sense of actually being in a place.

In the interplay between Pranksters, which is a part of Kesey’s layer of the text, this produces language games which both bring out the discontinuity between language structures and multisensory experience, and try to use the disjunct phraseology to restructure language. 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 in the text; like Cassady’s monologue, it is more useful described rather than repeated. “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” (58). Attempts at including language in the experience, not as representation but as an element of the present sense of interaction on LSD, perhaps, or the over-inclusive word jumbles and echolalias of schizophrenia, only on a group rather than individual scale, and not involuntary.

Although this practice is included in the text, it also eludes it – it is not part of the writing. It is too immediate and too discordant with conventional, social language use beyond its immediate context, where it is immediately synchronic and 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. Nobody has meaningfully looked at or listened to the kilometres of tape capturing such ‘rap’ which the Pranksters faithfully made. It means nothing beyond the acknowledgement of the vacancy of language in certain situations.

**Six: Limits and Continuities**

Eason posits that the meaning-making work of writing chaotic experience is “perhaps best exemplified through the trope of metaphor, a comparison based on the principle of similarity…metaphor makes that which is unknown identifiable by locating it within cultural categories” (2005: 126). Thus Baudelaire structures his meditation on substance use as a comparison between the effects of wine and hashish, the former more familiar to most readers than the latter, although he readily deviates from this basic structure. Thompson uses implicit comparisons to other types of narrative – quest, feature article, road trip, memoir– to better indicate the difference between his text and all of those “familiar cultural categories”, the difference being what drives the text. The work of metaphor, according to Eason, is that “the attribute of something known [is] transferred to something unknown, thus making that part identifiable as a cultural object” (2005: 126). By employing a literary device of meaning-making, Wolfe transposes Kesey’s production of a non-literary ‘text’, making a transient, performative lifestyle out of LSD into the “identifiable…culture object” of literature. He also makes sense of the
experience he witnesses, not through actual naming or description, but through metaphor, through transposing something of it over the gap between experience and language in a way that eludes the ‘rapping’ Pranksters he describes.

Baudelaire’s observations echo those made by Benjamin and manifested by others: “your brain teems with incongruous resemblances and unexpected parallels” (Baudelaire, 1999: 39). This seems to be especially prevalent in work on the subject, and is perhaps one of the more significant points in relation to creativity and writing – under the influence of hashish, as Benjamin’s notes show, it is noticeable, dwelt on, but of little textual use. However, if that way of thinking which leads to fresh associations und unwarranted connections can be retained, or remembered, or practiced, it might be useful. Izant notes that “the quality (and even existence) of the unconscious mind – knowledge of which might be posited as one of the goals of the transcendental drug experience – may be by its quiescent nature impossible to recreate in words” (2008: 22).

In these texts, it is not so much rediscovery of the unconscious that is seen as a goal, but accessing its mechanisms in terms of perception and representation. These include unlikely but metaphorically astute connections, continuities which cut through the logical, the potential of greater yet more detailed perception of the ordinary, and ways to write this. Leary suggests that “expanded awareness, by definition, extends beyond the limits of the verbal and conceptual” (1999: 12) because the conceptual resides in the linguistic (not necessarily verbal) or at least cannot be expressed in another way.

But Boon explains 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” (Boon, 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” (ibid), 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. We think in language, the same medium as
that of the representation. We cannot fully think of the psychedelic terrain we glimpse
through the drug because our tools are insufficient, because we transpose the map, the
tool of sense-making, the language, onto the experience as our 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.

At what point do the representations, the maps, stop being judged by the accuracy of their
representation, which in some measure is the problem of Benjamin and Huxley’s projects,
and start being judged by their own aesthetic or structural value, as is the case to a large
extent with Thompson and Baudelaire’s work? Or for their freshness of perspective, a
different sort of sensibility both aesthetically and functionally? A map that takes on so
much of its territory that it becomes a psychedelic swirl is of little use, ultimately. But is
a map that shows only the futility of cartography, no matter how well, any better? A map
that shows uncharted territory is a paradox; but in the doubly shifting terrains of
psychedelic drugs and writing, most paths cannot be replicated. Thus the text which
draws as close as possible to the edges of the experience but falls short, reaching the
point of wordlessness, is the most correct or authentic representation because it goes so
far as to include its lack of tools into the representation process.

To exhaust structure to the point where its failure to grasp what it represents is the most
accurate way of conveying the experience of the psychedelic. Words for and descriptions
of euphoria or anxiety, hallucination, motion, allegory and connectivity can only describe
so much of it, but finally it must be acknowledged that there is something more that is
beyond words. It is a full silence, not an absence, an elusion rather than elision of
language. “Both language and certain drug-inspired states (typically the psychedelics)
can be understood as signifiers of an elusive but ‘essential’ reality” (Izant, 2008: 22). The
centre cannot hold, in Yeats’s famous observation, if language is taken to be the centre of literature, not because it is the crumbling, derelict centre of Modernism, but because, being infused with the illusionary energy of psychedelic culture, it cannot hold *so much.*