

Tom Wolfe's Changing Vision of the Self

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It may seem strange to bring up Tom Wolfe's vision of the self at all. Wolfe one of the authors who immediately comes to mind when one thinks of works that explore the mysteries of the self. He has never worked in the forms that are explicitly about the development of the self, such as the *bildungsroman*. His work is never taken the path of so much recent fiction, where the author essentially looks at his own experience and writes autobiography with a veneer of fiction. (The Wolfe persona—the white-suited dandy—almost never appears in his books.) Nor does he probe the complexities of this or that wounded psyche from either a clinical or romantic perspective. Rather, his works tend to focus on whole societies. If asked what John Updike's books are about, one's answer might be Rabbit Angstrom, Henry Bech, and several very strange clergymen. If asked what Norman Mailer's books are about, one's first answer might be Marilyn Monroe, Gary Gilmore, and Norman Mailer. But if asked what Wolfe's books are about, the answer would probably be, the drug culture, the astronauts, New York in the 80's, and Atlanta. Wolfe's wider focus, however, does not mean that he does not explore questions of selfhood. Rather, he often asks whether the self in any real sense exists independently of its society, and over the years he has taken several different positions on the questions.

Wolfe received his Ph.D. in American Studies from Yale, and that program's attention to sociology as well as literature has shaped his view of the world—though fortunately not his prose. From the time he left hard news reporting for feature writing, he wrote not the sort of "profile," such as Gay Talese's "Frank Sinatra Has A Cold," that

was becoming one of the standard forms of literary non-fiction. Instead, his work always involved a status system, a cultural context. Sometimes his earlier essays, therefore, focus on nameless figures who exemplify a culture. More often, though, they describe an extraordinary or exemplary figure, but only as a way of describing the cultural context that shaped him, and which he or she may, to some extent, shape in return.

Wolfe classic portrait of stockcar-racer Junior Johnson, for example, is only to a small extent about what makes Johnson different from his peer. While Wolfe does not slight his subject's skill, daring, and bravery, he is more interested in the culture that helps produce those qualities. That culture is that of the "good old boys," a term Wolfe introduced to larger American society. Wolfe's good old boys are Southern working-class whites, who in the 1950's and early 60's are on the verge of leaving the dependant status of share-croppers and tenants and achieving, thanks to the new industrialization of the South, the independent status they have always felt at once entitled to and deprived of. Their values, which include both a sense of honor and a mistrust of government, produce both the moonshiners and stockcar-racers who become folk-heroes. Without a culture that celebrates and nurtures the values he embodies, Johnson would not be the person he is—nor would there be any audience for his prowess on the racetrack.

In the same way, Wolfe explorations of both the Las Vegas of the early 60's and the California car culture of the same period focus on a whole culture, rather than on individual personalities. The designers of the whole streamlined, Day-Glo scene are described as individuals, but also, and more importantly, as produced as a youth-culture that began in Los Angeles while an other generation was off to war can continued with ever-increasing strength an independence from adult culture after that generation returned

home to produce a generation that enjoyed unprecedented numbers, wealth, and self-identity. What is more, Wolfe shows that the daring designers who cater to this new culture are themselves that product of a certain artistic milieu. While they are proudly unlike the products of art and design schools—especially those in the East—they have learned both their skills and values in the technical schools of California. Their “space age” vision is not just individual rebellion. It is the product of a culture.

Wolfe’s great book of the 60’s, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, continues to explore the social construction of the self—though Wolfe, of course, never puts it in such dry and theoretical terms. His subject, Ken Kesey and the birth of the counterculture, might seem to invite a celebration of the free spirit, the unitary self exploring only its own nature and rejecting the trammels of society. But that is not Wolfe’s view of the counter-culture. Rather, he sees the Merry Pranksters and many of the other rebels of the drug culture as being shaped by the same forces that have shaped many religious movements over the centuries. To use the language of Max Weber to describe hippies may have seemed daring or blasphemous to some readers at the time, but Wolfe’s great insight was that the drug culture of the 60’s was a *culture*. It was not just a group of individual quests for self-knowledge, which is how it was often presented. Rather, it was a religious movement in which people were shaped as they have been by other religious movements.

That idea may strike many as strange, since the Merry Pranksters are hardly interested in questions of ethics or morality at all, and many middle-class Americans consider religion primarily a means of making people morally better. That is not, however, the only possible purpose for religion, much less the impulse that led to the

creation of the major religions that now do make ethics a large part of their doctrines. What is more, while some great religious leaders are, in part at least, ethical teachers as Jesus and Moses were, many were not. They are, instead, what Max Weber calls “*exemplary* prophets,” who present themselves and their own connection with the divine as examples to their followers. Jesus, of course, also fits into things category, as does Buddha. For the Prankster, Kesey clearly plays the role of someone who has received some sort of illumination, which they want to share.

Religions (and religious revivals) tend to begin, not with calm deliberations about doctrine, but with moments of ecstasy. Buddha receives illumination. St. Paul is struck down on the road to Damascus. Zoroaster meets the Archangel Vohu Mano. And the ecstasies described sound, when described, like what LSD takers report: the separation between the isolated ego, the I, and the vast impersonal world in which it is trapped disappears. The visionary feels part of the “divine All-one,” and in touch with the whole universe. The identification of religious ecstasy and a drug high may seem shocking, but it is not a new phenomenon in the history of religion. What the Zoroastrians called haoma water and the Hindus soma was a drug, and may have been the basis of their visions. Even in early Christianity, wine played such an important role that St. Paul has to warn against excesses. Peyote, a drug Kesey himself used, still plays a role in Native American religion. The Pranksters simply recreate an old pattern using a powerful new substance.

The ecstatic experience also shapes the group as a social unit. Those who have had the new experience and are committed to seeing the world in a new way feel united with each other and separate from the rest of the world, from those who remain

“unaware.” There is a deep separation between the initiate and the outsider—“You’re either on the bus or you’re off the bus,” as Kesey keeps repeating. There is also, however, a desire to spread the experience to the rest of the world. And that is why Kesey and his followers do not simply “do their own thing;” they try to share it with the rest of the world, first by shocking people out of their complacency and then by offering the experience directly at the Acid Tests. In other words, after the ecstasy, they go out to proselytize.

With their drug taking and their group therapy-like “briefings,” the Pranksters’ ecstatic experience may seem very different from most American religious movements. But it in fact has a lot in common had several sorts of revivals that had already taken place in American Christianity. The whole Pentecostal movement, with its speaking in tongues and feelings of having received the Spirit directly, came from just that sort of revival, where with music and clapping and lack of sleep people were brought to emotional levels that allowed them to feel themselves truly in touch with a power outside themselves. The same is true, with the added element of danger, in the American sects known as snake-handlers, who take literally the biblical promise that Christians will be able to take up serpents and dance while holding poisonous snakes. Even in the world of the Acid Tests, drug use was not the only key to ecstasy: the “contact highs” that those who had not taken anything experienced showed that just being with others seeking ecstasy was enough to communicate the experience.

The Pranksters do not feel that they are especially in tune with ultimate reality just when they are experiencing a drug-induced high. Rather, they are constantly feeling that they have grasped the patterns of the universe. Wolfe uses Karl Jung’s term

synchronicity to describe their feeling (140). What may seem to be coincidences are not, to them. Rather they are glimpses of the archetypal patterns that elude the conscious mind. At times the Pranksters seem to feel that they are the darlings of Providence, that the universe is looking out for them. While they eschew any sort of traditional religious language, they clearly feel they are in touch with something greater than themselves—“Cosmo” or “the Management.” They feel the currents of the universe, and so can say, “Go with the Flow.” What makes Wolfe’s analysis of their experiences most interesting is that he sees, beneath the strange outfits and the new drugs, the old pattern of people, even in their ecstasies, being shaped by the culture or subculture in which they find themselves.

Wolfe’s next major book, *The Right Stuff*, is also about the social construction of the self—or of the certain sort of self. Wolfe’s book about the Mercury astronauts being two decades and a continent away for the seven chosen heroes, because who he finds interesting is the culture that created them, the ethos that led them to lie calmly atop many stories of high explosive. Wolfe devotes his early chapters to Chuck Yeager and the early test pilots because they were the creators, in part, of the culture that formed the astronauts. And it is the social milieu of military officers and more specifically test pilots, rather than that of hippies, that Wolfe explores here. The culture is the key to the whole phenomenon, because the astronauts, who think themselves at least as independent as the outlaws do, are also the products of a specific culture. Wolfe made it clear they thought that the central theme of the book. To understand how the astronauts were able so coolly to risk their lives, Wolfe argued, you had to understand the culture they lived in, for, as he says, “physical bravery only happens in a social context. There has to be a

sphere of people, a fraternity which sets standards and whose approval is all-important to you—and there has to be no honorable alternative to bravery [...]. Otherwise you're just not going to have brave people" (Blue 104).

When Wolfe turned to writing fiction, the social construction of the self remained one of his major themes, though between his two novels he seems to have changed his view of the subject utterly. In *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Sherman McCoy becomes a different person when he loses the culture that has sustained him. Wolfe describes him as being a different person after he loses his wealth, his positions, and most of his friends. And McCoy has the same feeling himself: he is not the same person after going to jail that he was before. Wolfe explains the phenomenon by a reference to anthropology and José M.R. Delgado, the Spanish brain physiologist.

For nearly three millennia, Western philosophers have viewed the self as something unique, something encased inside each person's skull, so to speak. This inner self had to deal with and learn from the outside world, or course, and it might prove incompetent in doing so. Nevertheless, at the core of one's self there was presumed to be something irreducible and inviolate. Not so, said Delgado. 'Each person is a transitory composite of materials borrowed from the environment.' The important word was *transitory*, and he was talking not about years but about hours. (491)

Without his position, wealth and friends, McCoy ceases to be the man he was. In other words, in the *Bonfire of the Vanities*, the self is not just a social construction; it is *only* a social construction.

Wolfe's most recent novel shows him moving beyond the idea of the self as just a social construction. He instead seems to have returned to the idea of a unitary self that remains despite as changes in society. *A Man in Full* reveals a significant departure from Wolfe's earlier analysis of human motivation, or at least a development of it. In many of his earlier works, particularly *The Right Stuff*, Wolfe celebrates a culture of competition.

It is that culture, not the inherent qualities of the individual, which produce achievement. Charlie Croker has lived in the same world, as a football player, as a soldier, and as a real estate developer. But when he is no longer “climbing the ziggurat,” like the astronauts and test pilots, but instead tumbling down it at a great rate, he has to find another source of value, one that is based entirely on his own internal qualities and choices, not on his socially-validated successes. In *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Wolfe suggests that the self is socially constructed: Sherman McCoy is a different person when he loses his place in society. Charlie Croker is afraid of suffering a similar fate. He will not be “Cap’n Charlie” without his wealth and plantation. The message that Conrad, the young man who has become a devotee of Stoicism in the course of his unmerited sufferings, brings to him is that he has a self—a character—independent of his society, and that message allows Charlie to make the choice to do what he thinks is honorable even though it means losing his position in society and the wealth that makes it possible. Conrad has made the same choice himself: before he confronted a gang leader in jail, he realized that he had cut “his last tie to the earthy beings from whom men are used to deriving their courage and support” (455). He has, from that point on, only his “spark of the Divine” to rely on.

The central issue in *A Man in Full*, finally, is whether it is possible to have a value system that is not socially validated. Conrad, building on the Stoics, finds that it is. A man—and all our Stoics seem to be men—can protect his character, his spark of the divine, and he does that by making sure that the few choices he can make are honorable ones. He must be uninfluenced in any moral choice by the actions of others—even when the results of the action will be pain, or shame, or bankruptcy. A man can, in other words, keep his integrity, which means completeness. The title of the novel comes to

refer to the man of integrity, who is complete in himself and independent of the society to which he might once have looked to for validation, in other world, a Man in Full is a man who is not solely a construction of his society.

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