

REVIEWS

Monks of the Acid Theleme

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The Pump House Gang, by Tom Wolfe, *New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968. 416 pp. \$5.95.*

The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, by Tom Wolfe, *New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968. 416 pp. \$5.95.*

McLuhan: Pro and Con, Edited and with an Introduction by Raymond Rosenthal, *New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1968. 308 pp. \$5.95*

The College Drug Scene, by James T. Carey, *Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968. 210 pp. \$5.95.*

YOUNG MR. WOLFE continues to do his thing, which is to explore for us the queerer byways of our brave new world and Great Society. He has introduced us to pop art collectors, to underground movie-makers and their coprographic films, to the auto-erotic dancers of the discothèques, to a "topless" cabaret performer with breasts monstrously enlarged by injections of silicone, to the agoraphobic publisher of *Playboy* in his enchanted castle with his courtiers, henchmen, and houris, to surf riders and motorcycle banditti, to debutantes who chatter at dinner parties in the foulest of

four-letter words, to the adolescents who have forsaken comfortable homes, indulgent parents, barbers and bathtubs and the sweet life of suburbia for the verminous pads of Haight-Ashbury and Sunset Strip.

The first of the books listed here is a collection of Mr. Wolfe's magazine entertainments, dealing most knowledgeably though a bit obscenely with some of the subjects mentioned. One piece, however, concerns that "academic sheep in Tom Wolfe's clothing," as Mr. Anthony Quinton puts it, Professor Marshall McLuhan, grand oracle and lawgiver of the post-typographic, audio-tactile age of global tribalism. The rather awe-struck title of Mr. Wolfe's bit on McLuhan is "What If He Is Right?"; to which Mr. Christopher Ricks, another of the critics in Mr. Rosenthal's assemblage, retorts that the professor, having so often contradicted himself, can hardly have avoided being right on some occasion or other. However this may be, the professor, a convert to Catholicism, has now succeeded in converting his co-religionists to the extent at least that a Catholic university is said to be paying him a hundred thousand dollars a year to expound his bewildering gospel of the media, the message, and the massage.

The other book by Mr. Wolfe has to do with the ways, deeds, and adventures of a coterie of young acid-heads who live psychologically at the farthest frontier of the new post-linear, post-logical universe—the frontier at which the audible, the visual, the tactile, the aural, and the olfactory are of imagination all compact, where one is able to “taste color” and to “feel sound.” This frontier is known appropriately to its inhabitants as Edge City because it provides a jumping off place either into madness or into something like that “eighth dimension,” or highest tone of the cosmic octave, that the late Georges Gurdjieff identified with the Absolute. The this-worldly locus of the cult has been wherever its prophet, or chief guru, the novelist Ken Kesey, has happened to be—whether barreling across the continent with his intimate disciples in an antique school bus, welcoming pilgrims and neophytes to his retreat in the California redwoods; hiding out in tropical Mexico to avoid arrest and extradition, presiding over his agapae or chemical love feasts in the hippie haunts of San Francisco and Los Angeles; or retiring to his native Oregon.

Mr. Wolfe and his blurb writer see, or affect to see, in this Kesey a kind of saint and the founder of a new religion. It is, it seems, a religion without a theology or morality, a *now* religion with no concern about past or future and far less about an afterlife, but recognizing and seeking union with an all powerful esoteric force or entity, nameless and ineffable. It is also a mystical religion in the sense that its devotees find themselves lifted far above the brutish, up-tight world of unregenerate squares into a selfless and ecstatic communion with this All-in-all. The instant passport to ecstasy is the drug called LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide). Thus the long and difficult stage of mystical ascent familiar to other mystics and called the “purgation” is neatly bypassed and the mountain scaled at a single leap, at least by the predestined elect. Or as the late Aldous Huxley, a life-long searcher after mystical experience

and an early experimenter with hallucinogenic drugs, explained a decade ago, we can now, thanks to recent additions to the pharmacopeia, achieve without effort and at very slight expense “what in the past could be achieved only with difficulty and by means of self control and spiritual exercises.” And if the pharmacologists cannot yet provide us with a painless access to the Life Everlasting, they have given us the “next best thing: eons of blissful experience miraculously telescoped into a single hour.”¹

The names of earlier mystics who lacked these conveniences—Gautama Buddha, Zoroaster, Mani (or Manes) Plotinus, Eckhart—are scattered by Mr. Wolfe analogically throughout his book, along with some from the comic book pantheon—Superman, Mandrake, Flash Gordon, and so on. These latter apparently symbolize the impersonalized feeling of power that sometimes and somehow accompanies the escape from personal identity into the communal ecstasy; for in a mysterious way this loss of self is combined with an extreme of personal freedom. Each initiate who succeeds in “getting out in front of it” becomes intent upon “doing his own thing” (*Fais ce que vouldras!*) and though the thing itself may seem to the unenlightened eye absurd, infantile, idiotic, and even contemptible, it is for the doer synthesized into the communal pattern and invested with cosmic significance.

A period of withdrawal, isolation, and passivity has characterized the lives of most mystics. This seems to be true even of some psychedelic mystics like Dr. Leary and his disciples, who in their continuing quest of “inner revelation” retire from time to time to the solitudes of their monastic estate at Millbrook, New York. But the holy hippies of the Keseyite cult neither forgot the world nor wished to be by the world forgot, for they were possessed of a messianic zeal to turn the whole world on, and to a frightening extent, one gathers, they have succeeded. They might despise the materialistic values of the up-tight world, as

they despised its haircuts, neckties, brief cases and well-shined shoes, but they embraced its gadgets, especially movie cameras, tape recorders, and amplifiers, of which they made great use in their missionary endeavors. The miles and miles of tapes and films recording their exploits seem to have served them as a kind of scriptures. Into this record went, among other things, every incident of the school bus odyssey, including the pitiful freakout of a young girl disciple whose "thing" was to do without her clothing and who was led away to a psychiatric hospital, when during a stop over at Houston, Texas, she appeared stark naked on one of the streets. As far as can be determined from Mr. Wolfe's narrative, few tears were shed for her. As the Prophet Kesey was fond of putting it, one "is either on the bus or off the bus," that is to say either working with the acid and getting out in front of oneself or clinging to the shreds of one's ego, thus having a "bad trip" and freaking off into nightmare and delirium.

For most mystics silence, exterior and interior, has been necessary to spiritual exaltation. The unheard melodies are sweeter than the heard. But the psycho-sensual adventures of the acid mystics seem to have been to an incessant accompaniment of rock and folk-rock music. Another contrast to the older mysticism is in the matter of vocabulary. Where the others have spoken of "aloneness with the Alone," or "the Cloud of Unknowing," or "the Dark Night of the Soul," or have had recourse to the idioms of love poetry, the acid mystics speak rather tritely of being "plugged in" or "turned on" and similar images borrowed from the household commonplaces of the up-tight world. For the rest, theirs is an idiom compounded of obscenities, or what were once considered such, psycho-analytical jargon, and the hep cat lingo. Perhaps the explanation is that the great mystics achieved a real transcendence of sensible experience where the acid heads have achieved so far only a magnification or distortion of it. At any rate Kesey him-

self, after his return from Mexico, began to speak of realms of being unattainable by acid or any other drugs, something of which his attorneys made much at his trial. But then Kesey's pronouncements were always enigmatic. His teachings, Mr. Wolfe tells us,

were all cryptic, metaphorical; parables, aphorisms: "You're either on the bus or off the bus." "Feed the hungry bee." "Nothing lasts." "Put your good where it will do the most." "What did the mirror say? It's done with people." To that extent it was like Zen Buddhism with the inscrutable koans. . . .

To another extent the teachings found expression in Dionysiac revels and extravagant practical jokes. The Keseyites called themselves the Merry Pranksters; their pranks, as the admiring Mr. Wolfe describes them, seem rather childish, though to the participants they had a serious, even solemn significance. Perhaps their greatest prank of all, and certainly the one most helpful to the authorities—though that was hardly the intention—was when, having covered themselves with luminescent paint, they rode their bus to a massive Vietnick rally on the Berkeley campus where Kesey had been invited to speak. Instead, when his turn came, he pulled out his harmonica and played *Home on the Range* while his followers banged away on their electric guitars and blew their horns in a wild cacophony. Having gained control of one of the loudspeakers they began screaming "F--k it! F--k it!" over the heads of the crowd until the rally was disrupted and the projected march on an Army terminal at Oakland broke up in confusion. But what they regarded as their master exploit was the mass conversion to acid of the hippies and others who until then had been making do with marijuana and amphetamines. The conversions occurred at big parties where LSD concealed within some familiar and innocuous potation was made available to all comers. This was the acid test that separates the hep from the hopeless, the beautiful from the

damned. It is from one such bacchanal in the Watts district of Los Angeles that Mr. Wolfe has taken his title.

Prophet Kesey's scorn for the revolutionaries of the New Left, as great or greater than his contempt for the society they wish to destroy, is shared, or so Mr. Wolfe suggests, by the acid users generally. This is in part confirmed by the testimony of Mr. James T. Carey, a criminologist from Berkeley who has been conducting an investigation through the Haight-Ashbury Clinic. The acid heads know intuitively that the revolutionary leaders are, underneath, just as hostile to the hippie manner of life as the square citizens and the legitimate authorities and would suppress it if they ever gained the power. If some of the hippies still offer themselves for protest demonstrations and campus riots, it is more with the notion of making themselves obnoxious to the squares and the police than from any belief or interest in the causes at issue. Their only suggestion for the reform of society is for everyone to love everyone else, as indeed in their own perverse way, they seem to love one another. One, however, recalls here Tertullian's boast to the pagans; words that, as Sir Denis Brogan has observed, has been more often quoted in irony than in affirmation.

As for acid religion, it is easy enough to find analogies in other times of moral and civil dissolution, such as the mystery cults of the Roman decadence which the Senate at length found it necessary to suppress. Our own authorities, Mr. Carey concludes, have the power to suppress the acid movement, or at least to drive it underground, but lack the will to do so. The reason lies in the realization that its votaries are either "their own children or the friends of their children," and there is perhaps also an uneasy inkling that the movement reflects merely the extreme of a dissatisfaction that pervades the whole of the well-fed contemporary world. The acid-heads and other hippies are the one certain harvest of our age of unexampled affluence. They represent the pampered gen-

eration of a prosperous, hedonistic middle class which from infancy has been given or been promised everything, except a sorely needed sense of place and function and a sense of meaning in their lives. It is not surprising then that after a childhood of surfeit their response to the McLuhanite messages and the cybernetic utopia should be a simple "F--k it!" Historically speaking, though, it is not exactly a new story, and the rest of us are left to meditate upon the lament of the Roman poet:

Aetas parentum pejor avis tulit
Nos nequiores, mox daturos
Progeniem vitiosiore.²

¹Address to N.Y. Academy of Sciences, 1957. Cited by Donald Louria in *Nightmare Drugs*, New York, 1966.

²Horace, *Odes* III, vi 46, "The age of our fathers was worse than that of our grandsires. We their sons are more worthless than they, and we shall give to the world a progeny even more corrupt."

The Other McCarthy

McCarthy, by Roy Cohn, *New York: The New American Library, 1968. 279 pp. \$5.95.*

IN THE TITLE the author should have indicated that the subject of this memoir is not the poetic pacifist from Minnesota, but the man from Wisconsin who became the center of one of the stormiest controversies in American political history. From 1950 until his death in 1957, virtually the whole nation was divided into McCarthyites and anti-McCarthyites—there were scarcely any neutrals. To his enemies, and these included most of the liberal politicians and journalists, Joseph McCarthy was a sinister demagogue who made a career of destroying the reputations of innocent persons; to