

**William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*: Drugs, Satire, and the
Metaphor of Control**

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By Richard Jeremy Parrish

Thesis Director
Dr. Gwen Ashburn

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Lori Horvitz

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"All hope abandon, ye who enter in!" -Dante, *Inferno* III.9

Naked Lunch, the 1959 *magnum opus* that won its writer, William S. Burroughs, international fame as, among other things, an avant-garde satirist and a central figure in the Beat movement, is a work of rare, brutal flagrancy and intensity. A novel in terms only of its packaging, it is a disconnected, amorphous, and jarring text that, as goes the legend, is compiled from the notes of a schizophrenic but savagely satirical talent—a talent that developed its wry, misanthropic voice in the social and technological Petri dish of the post-war global milieu and articulated the dark potentials of humanity in practiced cadences of American gutter-speak. In the book's retrospectively-written introduction (now an appendix), "Deposition: Testimony Concerning A Sickness," Burroughs provides a key to its intended effect on "civilized countries," exhorting, ". . . let them see what they actually eat and drink. Let them see what is on the end of that long newspaper spoon" (205). The effect of discomfit is clearly *Naked Lunch's* fundamental *raison d'etre*, but as viscerally as it continues to be felt by readers, the moral purpose can still be hard to discern. From a historical/biographical approach, *Naked Lunch* can be placed marginally within historical literary modes including the descent into hell, satire, Romantic poetry, pulp fiction, and the picaresque in an alienated, relentlessly scatological fable of utter despair. Concurrently, the contexts of the unique biographical circumstances of the writer shouldn't be ignored in assessing *Naked Lunch's* moralizing, cautionary message.

To this purpose, the book's formal elements and techniques make it a many-sided assault on the expectations of novel-readers. In the book's surrealistic, grotesque carnival landscape of perverse imagination, the conventions of narrative, including plot, focus of narration, and linearity, are shattered and recombined. The reader is continually forced to reevaluate her own

relationship to the narrator(s) and to the book itself. "Junk" is Burroughs' favored slang term for all opium derivatives, including all synthetics (200). Extending junk as a paradigmatic metaphor for all systems of control which negate individual will, Burroughs indicts the consuming nature of power in all levels of society and walks of life. Fragmentary, mystifying techniques result in a fantastic picture of total human depravity that draws its satirical force from Burroughs' own alienated life and rings, psychologically, very true. The metaphor of junk serves the moral purpose of making the reader aware of his own aptness to be conned and her capacity to control and be controlled, to addict and be addicted.

I. The Addict-Author: Burroughs' Biography and the Descent into Hell

First, Burroughs' legendary biography doesn't merely provide context for the world of *Naked Lunch*: it is in fact a necessary key to understanding the narrative structure. Ted Morgan explains that, "although primarily homosexual and professing a caustic misogyny," Burroughs' relationship with his wife, Joan Vollmer Burroughs, "was one between two remarkable intellects," and he "saw Joan as a woman of unusual insight" (123). The accidental, fatal shooting of Joan in Mexico (1951) can be seen as the cataclysmic event that sent Burroughs, up to that point the writer of only one conventional, fictionalized semi-autobiography, *Junky*, spiraling into the long period of heavy addiction and emotional disconnection that gave birth to the novel in Tangier, Morocco.¹ Burroughs himself supports this assertion in the introduction to his next novel *Queer*, written in 1953 (but unpublished until 1985):

¹ With the help of the other members of the central Beat triumvirate, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, who sailed to Tangier in 1957, the chaos of typed and handwritten pages littering Burroughs' cheap hotel room was retyped and compiled into a manuscript. After taking the cure in London, Burroughs wrote additional sections in Copenhagen, Denmark, and at the famous "Beat Hotel" in Paris through 1957-58. The different sections were organized and published in Europe in 1959 as *The Naked Lunch*. With some textual alterations and the two appendices (see nl), the present version of the text was first published in America in 1962 (Miles 237-242).

I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would have never become a writer but for Joan's death [. . . .] So the death of Joan brought me into contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and maneuvered me into a lifelong struggle, in which I had no choice except to write my way out. (xxii) The "Ugly Spirit" Burroughs refers to here can be read as the all-consuming, antagonistic force

present throughout *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs' traumatized guilt over his wife's death, and his period of heavy addiction and agonizing withdrawal.

Joan's only appearance in the novel (renamed Jane), though brief, mirrors this period in Burroughs' life and corresponds with the initiation of two important literary themes: the "confession" and the descent into hell. At the end of the third chapter, one of many nefarious, controlling characters is introduced, known only as the "pimp trombone player." Jane is taken in by his personality and his pot. The narrator ditches them to have a beer in a restaurant and wait for the bus to town. An ominous sentence abruptly ends the chapter: "A year later in Tangier I heard she was dead" (18-19). This strangely detached reference to his wife, Mexico, and Tangier associates the narrator with Burroughs, but teasingly departs from literal, truthful autobiography. By skirting culpability, Burroughs obliquely highlights the trauma caused by the event, and offers for those familiar with his infamous deed (unlike at the time of writing, Joan's death is now an inextricable part of Burroughs' legend) a clue to the confessional despair, the "Ugly Spirit," that subtly underscores the book's relentless horror.

In conjunction with guilt over Joan's death, the fictionalized structure of *Naked Lunch* reflects another confessional urge, the need to communicate and expurgate the sickest dregs of the addict-author's imagination. Burroughs acknowledges *Naked Lunch*'s confessional lineage in a 1984 article, in which he also summarizes his period of addiction during the following six years in exile in Tangier. He describes his experience as "a state of which [Thomas] De Quincey

gives a good account in his *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, under the section entitled "The Pains of Opium"—the numb, despairing feeling of being buried alive" (My Purpose, 265). Like De Quincey, Burroughs writes from his real-life perspective of a person mortally struggling with a junk habit. Though his aim is more allegorical than autobiographical in the end, he is conscious of falling within the tradition, largely Romantic in origin (see Coleridge's prefatory note to "Kublah Kahn"), of literature that seeks to describe drug-induced experiences to the "square" or inexperienced reader. "The question," says Frank McConnell, "whether Burroughs' talent has been helped or hurt by his long addiction is meaningless: his talent *is*, irreducibly, his addiction and his cure from it" (94). In other words, the action of the novel, be it satirical, farcical, confessional or even allegorical, is first and foremost to be understood as a reflection of the addict-author's private hell.

The tentative parallelism of the novel's action to Burroughs' life is reinforced by shifts in style and content, depicting a descent and re-emergence which mirrors his cycle of addiction and withdrawal. The novel begins as the junky William Lee, who had functioned as narrator and Burroughs' *nom de plume* in *Junky* (as will be discussed later, the narrator of *Naked Lunch* is not always William Lee), escapes from a narcotics officer in the subway, catching the A train just in time³. "I can feel the heat closing in," he begins, "[. . .] crooning over my spoon and dropper I throw away at Washington Square Station" (3). From the first sentence, *Naked Lunch* adopts the tough language and realism of pulp detective fiction, much like *Junky*. Ron Loewinsohn notes that this is "a literal descent into the underworld" (566). The realism, however, soon fades into hallucination. Lee describes a "blind pigeon" (junkie informant) known as Willy the Disk:

² Lee was Burroughs' mother's maiden name, as well as that of his uncle, Ivy Lee. Ivy Lee was considered the father of public relations, engaging in spin and image-control for such characters as Rockefeller and Hitler (Morgan 20).

"Willy has a round, disk mouth lined with sensitive erectile hairs [. . .] He can only eat the shit now with that mouth, sometimes sways out on a long tube of ectoplasm, feeling for the silent frequency of junk" (7-8). The motifs of blind need and grotesque, physical transfiguration are introduced, giving the impression of a descent into the hallucinatory depths of Burroughs' imagination. These motifs are likewise stained by an impression of the overpowering mental and physical transformation that junk has imposed on the addict-author.

The narrator's street-savvy stability in the opening chapter gives way quickly to an increasingly horrific displacement. By the seventh chapter, titled "Hospital," the narrator is in a "critical point of withdrawal," and explains: "At this point the longing for junk concentrates in a last, all-out yen, and seems to gain a dream power" (49). A horrific surgical procedure is performed with a toilet suction cup by a recurring character, the sinister Dr. Benway (51). A romping, televised rendition of "The Star Spangled Banner" is performed by a "Lesbian, concealed in a papier-mache Arc de Triomphe," who rends the Arc and destroys the T.V. control room with her supersonic voice (53-4). The narrative descent is now definitely associated with a junky's delirium, conveyed by the abrupt juxtaposition of increasingly surreal, disconnected episodes. Ostensibly set in a withdrawal clinic (at least in this chapter), the erratic narrative interchanges this concrete setting with the realm of imagination and hallucination without transition or explanation. This is not a traditional narrative as much as a schizophrenic broadcast. Burroughs explains in the introductory "Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness":⁴ "Most survivors do not remember the delirium [of junk dependence] in detail. I have no precise memory of writing the notes which have now been published under the title *of Naked Lunch*" (199). The authority by which the reader is meant to accept the illogical progression of this structure is, at least on one level, the fact that Burroughs wrote it in a fluctuating state of

Hereafter referred to as the "Deposition."

junk use and withdrawal, and is laying bare his (or, perhaps more accurately, his highly autobiographical avatar William Lee's) raw, psychic experiences.

The climax, or rather, the trough, of the book's descent into the hell of withdrawal occurs in the seedy, science-fiction-style underworld of Interzone, which further parallels this dark period of Burroughs' life. As McConnell observes, "'Interzone' is precisely that—the world between human will and its negation: the point at which, in the absence of the drug, speech at all becomes possible, but correlatively, the point at which the drive toward resumed addiction is at its strongest" (99). Interzone represents the deranged frontier of control, the desperate, intermediate no-man's-land between dependence and freedom experienced by the withdrawing addict. Literally, the inspiration for this imaginary place was the international zone, Tangier itself. Ted Morgan describes the city's appeal for Burroughs in 1954. Legally an international zone, it was "straddling two worlds," a "capital [sic] of permissiveness," and in it, Morgan notes, "boys were so plentiful you had to fight them off." The drug trade openly flourished without interference from police. Tangier had been marked as a special zone by an agreement between the Spanish and the French in 1912. It overlooked both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean and "was governed by the consuls of eight European nations," and had "three official languages—French, Spanish, and Arabic—and two official currencies, the franc and the peseta." Tangier was also a "hub of unregulated free enterprise. Anyone with a valid passport could become a citizen of the city" (236-237). Tangier provided a hiding-place for Burroughs, a place where one could literally sell oneself to a marketplace of addictions. It also provided the inspiration for the imaginative, literary locus of Interzone, a place where the sick fantasies of *Naked Lunch* run amok and find their culmination in total degradation and depersonalization.

The world of Interzone is a commercial and cultural free-for-all, a fantastic version of Tangier taken imaginatively to the nth degree. It is largely the reason why Mary McCarthy calls *Naked Lunch* "the first space novel, the first serious piece of science fiction." She observes that, "from [the book's] planetary perspective, there are only geography and customs. Seen in terms of space, history shrivels into a mere wrinkling or furrowing of the surface" (35). Though he does not extensively use space as a literal setting in *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs certainly describes the horrible geography, people, creatures, and customs of Interzone without emotional qualification. His removal is complete as that of an alien's anthropological analysis from orbit. Interzone is the "Composite City where all human potentials are spread out in a vast silent market" and "A place where the unknown past and the emergent future meet in a vibrating soundless hum . . . Larval entities waiting for a Live One" (89, 91⁵). The Interzone sections, in dark science fiction mode, can be interpreted as a representation of the hellish, hallucinatory perception of the world through the eyes of a "kicking" junky. The addict-author, who during addiction feels only the domination of need for the drug, is describing a world of use and abuse, invading parasites, and "all human potentials," a world that is analogous to Tangier, the place of writing. The narrative descent into hell has traced a course parallel to the cycle of the writer's addiction, making possible a level of interpretation that amounts to a sort of hallucinatory cautionary tale about the disconnecting, possessive domination of junk.

Near the end of the narrative, with the chapter titled "Hauser and O'Brien," the surreal, gradually intensifying nightmare that characterizes the meat of the book abruptly shifts once again into the mode of crime/detective fiction, symbolizing, at least in a biographical analysis of the narrative cycle, the end of Burroughs' withdrawal and return to the living. William Lee, reintroduced, is caught tying up for a shot in a hotel room by Narcotics detectives Hauser and

In quotations from *Naked Lunch*, all ellipses except those in brackets are Burroughs'.

O'Brien (also narcotics detectives in *Junky*), who are under orders to seize his manuscripts. Lee kills the detectives and makes plans to skip town. When he calls the Police Squad headquarters from a payphone, asking to speak with Hauser or O'Brien, the operator tells him there is no one in the department by those names. Says Lee:

In the cab I realized what had happened . . . I had been occluded from space-time [. . .] The Heat was off me from here on out. . . relegated with Hauser and O'Brien to a landlocked junk past [. . .] Far side of the world's mirror, moving in to the past with Hauser and O'Brien . . . clawing at a not-yet of Telepathic Bureaucracies, Time Monopolies, Control Drugs, Heavy Fluid Addicts. (175-181) Lee and Burroughs experience a kind of breakthrough and clarity of vision in a stable realm, free

from the persecution of the "heat," or police, who were ardently pursuing him in the novel's opening lines. The language parallels Burroughs' testimony to the apomorphine cure found in the "Deposition," where he insists, "The vaccine that can regulate the junk virus to a landlocked past is in existence" (202). This breakthrough coincides with the physical end of Burroughs' stint as a self-destructive junk fiend, as well as the completion, or rather, expurgation of the confessional text.

Hauser and O'Brien, products of the writer's mind and representative of the urge to write and to kick the habit, are revealed as illusions. The writer and the reader are dumped back into reality, but with a lost innocence, an acquaintance with the evil specter of an all-consuming vision of control. The episode has self-reflexive significance to *Naked Lunch* as a unified project—Lee's manuscripts have taken the place of his spoon and dropper as the incriminating object. "*Naked Lunch*" writes Ron Loewinsohn, "tells (or represents or dramatizes) the story of a cure. . . . This is the story of Agent Lee's descent into the underworld of drugs and his successful reemergence in the upper world as an artist who can get across to his audience some painful but liberating news" (567). Burroughs has lived through the shooting of his wife, the

numb self-destruction of heavy addiction, and the nightmare of withdrawal, all of which are the basis for his authority on junk and the nature of blind need, the negation of personal will. In confessionally "writing his way out" of the struggle with the Ugly Spirit of guilt and addiction, he has, in an extension of his autobiographical tendencies already established in *Junky* and *Queer*, provided the reader with a psychological map of the process of breaking free from these possessive forces.

II. Beyond Junk: The Addiction Metaphor

Indeed, awareness of Burroughs' experiences from 1951-1959, the background for the writing of *Naked Lunch*, as well as the basis for its ultra-modern style but *Inferno-like* structure, is a necessary stepping stone to understanding the true nature of the novel's theme of control. "I am a recording instrument," writes Burroughs in the concluding "Atrophied Preface." He continues, "[. . .] I do not presume to impose 'story' 'plot' 'continuity' . . . Insofar as I succeed in *Direct* recording of certain areas of psychic process I may have a limited function . . . I am not an entertainer" (184). Burroughs claims, as a clue to the purpose of *Naked Lunch*, that the book has a very literal significance; the representation of his own drug-addled experience. In the (originally) introductory "Deposition," Burroughs explains, "Junk is the mold of monopoly and possession [. . .] No sales talk necessary [. . .] The junk merchant does not sell his product to the consumer, he sells the consumer to his product" (200-201). Elsewhere, he is even more explicit: "The theory of addiction came into my head when the junk went into my arm. It was a metaphor for society [. . .] Addiction means somethin' that you've gotta have or you're sick. Power and junk are symmetrical and quantitative: How much?" (qtd. in Morgan 351). Finally, in *Interzone* (actually an early version of *Naked Lunch* written in the same period but published in

1989), Burroughs universalizes his theory: "Drug addiction is perhaps a basic formula for pleasure and for life itself (110). Over the course of Burroughs' early career (about 15 years), the author's heavy addiction to junk coincides with the development of the idea of junk as a paradigm for human behavior and a basic metaphor of control in his work.

Junk addiction provides the metaphorical vehicle in *Naked Lunch* for a panoramic, cynical survey of post-war, post-Bomb society from the perspective of the consummate outsider: the addict, criminal, artist, homosexual expatriate. Says Burroughs in the "Deposition," "Junk yields a basic formula of 'evil' virus: *The Algebra of Need*. The face of 'evil' is always the face of total need [. . .] Assuming a self-righteous position is nothing to the purpose unless your purpose be to keep the junk virus in operation" (201). The need for junk is purely quantitative, scientifically precise in its predictability, and Burroughs extends this paradigm to all levels of society. In doing so, he adopts existing satirical literary modes, indicts the folly and abuse of authority, and blurs the line between reality and representation throughout *Naked Lunch*.

Though it may, indeed *should*, be read in part as a psychological autobiography, *Naked Lunch* extends, through its routines and vitriolic humor, to encompass the whole of human experience. Beyond the descent into hell, science fiction and the drug confessional, it takes its place in the traditions of picaresque and satire. Dismissing critics' condemnations of his work on the grounds of its "Nihilism, unrelieved despair and negation, misanthropy, [and] pessimism," Burroughs cites similar reactions to Louis-Ferdinand Celine's *Journey to the End of the Night*. "I have always," he says, "seen my own work in the light of the picaresque—a series of adventures and misadventures, horrific and comic, encountered by an antihero. Much of my work is intended to *be funny*" (My Purpose, 266). In *Naked Lunch*, the humor is always present and always pitch-black.

The "antihero" Burroughs refers to is the narrator, an enigmatic amalgamation of figures that is sometimes William Lee, or often an unidentified observer. Burroughs' own unmistakably wry, satirical voice pervades the text like an aloof puppet master switching voices in an abrupt and schizophrenic manner. The "series of adventures" are the routines presented to the reader in a string of dark situational comedies. The suggestion of TV sitcoms is intentional. In a 1964 article, Marshall McLuhan identifies Burroughs' technique as "corporate form" and explains: "an evening watching television programs is an experience in a corporate form—an endless succession of impressions and snatches of narrative." He compares *Naked Lunch* with Joyce's *Finnegan 's Wake* as one of the few modern literary works that successfully emulates electronic media (517). *Naked Lunch's* episodic structure makes it a sort of picaresque for the post-war

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20 century, adopting in ridiculously hyperbolic, satirical form the techniques of fragmentation and the distortion of word and image found in the media. The narrator embarks on a journey through a sick consciousness, a journey full of negation, relentless obscenity, exaggerated misanthropy and indictment of the world.

In an episode called "The Prophet's Hour," for example, Christ, Buddha, Mohammed, Confucius and Lao-Tze are exposed as cons in a private performance by a "vicious, fruity old Saint applying pancake from an alabaster bowl":

"*Mohammed?* Are you kidding? He was dreamed up by the Mecca Chamber of Commerce. An Egyptian ad man on the skids from the sauce write the continuity.

"Til have one more, Gus. Then, by Allah, I will go home and receive a Sura . . . Wait'11 the morning edition hits the *souks*. I am blasting Amalgamated Images wide open.' [. . .]

"Well, Gus, I got like two types of publicity, favorable and otherwise. You want some otherwise already? I am subject to receive a Sura concerning

bartenders who extendeth not credit to those in a needy way.' (verbatim from text, 96) The Saint, speaking in dialogue within a monologue, is but one of a legion of minor characters that show up in the book, wildly funny and profane to the highest degree. His monologue serves an iconoclastic purpose, bringing all the major religious figures down onto the level of *Naked Lunch's* world of carnies, cheating ad men and hucksters. The dogmas of religion, from this perspective, are merely stratagems of shameless con-men seeking to control others through the control of word and image.

The narrator, or rather, polyglot series of narrators united by the montage of routines, functions as, intermittently, either a critic or embodied criticism of some aspect of society. As Anthony Channell Hilfer points out, the narrator of *Naked Lunch* is "satirist and participant conjointly, like Encolpius in Petronius' *Satyricon* who mocks the ostentation of Trimalchio's dinner but is careful not to miss a course" (255). Everything is fair game in the indictment of control addicts, even the narrator himself. The chorus of voices in *Naked Lunch*, some needy and others parasitically fulfilling that need, can be understood as broadcasting from the brain of *thepicaro*, the addict figure satirizing society from the perspective of the antihero.

Concurrently, the social institution targeted by the most vociferous satire in *Naked Lunch* is government, and a primary mode of attack is the language of science. Dr. Benway, the resident expert in degradation, is described as "a manipulator and coordinator of symbol systems, an expert on all phases of interrogation, brainwashing and control (19)." As a freelance control technician, Benway expounds the basic principle of his trade: "The naked need of the control addicts must be decently covered by an arbitrary and intricate bureaucracy so that the subject cannot contact his enemy direct" (19). Later, he says, "Democracy is cancerous, and bureaus are its cancer [. . .] Bureaus cannot live without a host, being true parasitic organisms" (112).

Bureaus (the prime example being the Narcotics Bureau) are represented as latent, deceptive viruses, inventing needs to fulfill and, in the process, compounding and perpetuating any problem they were founded to reverse.

Ihab Hassan points out that, in Benway's discursive diatribes about the "pure" science of control, and in the chapter "Islam Incorporated and the Parties of Interzone," "the satiric content emerges from the vocabulary of pseudoscience" (59). As in the theme of bureaucracy as a virus, the parasitic control-need inherent in politics and government is embodied in the twisted "scientific" theories of Dr. Benway, who is hired by the governments of Annexia and the ironically christened Freeland Republic to work his expertise on their citizens. "A *functioning* police state," Benway maintains, "needs no police" (31). His methods are subtle. In general, he avoids the use of torture, which "locates the opponent and mobilizes resistance" (21). Instead, he experiments with drugs and sex, as exemplified by his idea of "sexual humiliation." He describes this method: "Nakedness, stimulation with aphrodisiacs, constant supervision to embarrass subject and prevent relief of masturbation (erections during sleep automatically turn on an enormous vibrating electric buzzer that throws the subject out of bed into cold water [. . .] After that the Interrogator can gain complete hypnotic control" (24). The antics of Dr. Benway concentrate the theme of governmental control into one character, the hired middle-man who, much like a junk pusher, is in the business of making citizens powerless and malleable using methods that are a grotesque parody of scientific progress and efficiency.

The end result of what Benway calls "pure science" is the mechanization and total demoralization ("T.D.", p. 19) of society. William Lee, hired by Islam Incorporated to engage Benway's services, describes a city in the Freeland Republic: "Documents issued in vanishing ink faded into old pawn tickets. New documents were constantly required. The citizens rushed

from one bureau to another in a frenzied attempt to meet impossible deadlines" (20). It is obvious from the citizens' frantic obedience to an absurdly complicated bureaucracy that they are far advanced in the Total Demoralization process. Benway fondly reminisces about the fruits of his labor in his old gig, Annexia: "[. . .] a panorama of naked idiots stretches to the horizon. Complete silence—their speech centers are destroyed—except for the crackle of sparks and the popping of singed flesh as they apply electrodes up and down the spine" (22-23). Bureaucracy and mind control, specifically control of the sexual impulse and the rape of the subconscious using both psychoanalytic and technological means, constitute the basic methods for maintaining the power of the state.

In his book *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs*, Timothy S. Murphy notes that Dr. Benway's work "is constantly focused on the technology, the means, of control without apparent regard for the ends his work serves." He further points out:

Medical doctors are important [. . .] in *Naked Lunch*, as they were in *Junky*, because they are in a paradoxical position: like the police, they are trained to treat the "Human Virus" of control, to eradicate its symptoms, but they also earn their living off it and thus have an interest in preserving the virus. (81) The parasitic nature of governmental and even medical authority is implicated in the character of

Benway and his dystopias: Annexia and the Freeland Republic. The real narcotics agencies of the world fail to treat, as Burroughs identifies it in the "Deposition," "the one irreplaceable factor in the junk equation," the "addict in the street who must have junk to live."

In the self-proliferating "war on drugs," government and medical authorities busy themselves "tilting quixotically for the 'higher-ups' so called, all of whom are immediately replaceable," and in so doing, according to Burroughs' calculations, they display their vested interest in maintaining the "junk pyramid" (202). In Burroughs' paranoid, junk-inspired socio-

political paradigm, the only thing that can satisfy the mania of the control addicts, those shadowy figures concealed by bureaucracy and middle-men like Benway, is more control. The processes of law and government, always expanding and self-replicating like a virus or a junk habit, must eventually lead to the destruction of their host, the body politic itself. The mesmeric effect of endless circumlocution and disguised inefficiency provide a smokescreen behind which the control-addicts can slowly and stealthily strip the people of all their rights. The "junk pyramid" and the virus are Burroughs' favored satirical metaphors for governmental control.

Consequently, it should be noted here that not everyone has been convinced of the satirical efficacy of *Naked Lunch*. One such criticism centers on perhaps the most controversial section of the book, a scene that occurs in the chapter titled "Hassan's Rumpus Room." The scene depicts a vile spectacle, put on by the nefarious Salvador Hassan O'Leary for the entertainment of "men and women in evening dress [sipping] pousse-cafes through alabaster tubes." A Mugwump, one of a horrible species native to Interzone with "eyes blank as obsidian mirrors, pools of black blood," sodomizes a boy while hanging him (62-65). In the "Deposition," Burroughs, uncharacteristically, makes a sort of apology for this section and the recurring orgy of sex and hanging that follows in "A. J.'s Annual Party." He claims they were "written as a tract against Capital Punishment in the manner of Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal*. These sections are intended to reveal capital punishment as the obscene, barbaric and disgusting anachronism that it is" (205). Burroughs purports to isolate the satirical intent of his work by focusing on a section that critics have found most viscerally disturbing and gratuitous.

However, David Lodge, in part of his 1966 essay "Objections to William Burroughs," takes issue with this stance:

It may be that the disgust Mr. Burroughs feels for Capital Punishment has been transferred to the antics of his sexual perverts, but the reverse process which

should occur for the reader is by no means to be relied upon. . . . In *The Naked Lunch*, instead of [Swift's] subtly controlled irony we have a kinetic narrative style which suspends rather than activates the reader's moral sense, and incites him to an imaginative collaboration in the orgy. (79) In part, Lodge makes a valid criticism, noting that the text itself does not suggest a strong satirical correlation between capital punishment and the hanging orgies of "Hassan's Rumpus Room" and "A. J.'s Annual Party." In fact, without Burroughs drawing the connection *post facto* in the "Deposition," it may not occur to most readers. But it is not clear how any work of fiction can "suspend" a reader's moral sense. Lodge's language of the reader's supposed "collaboration" is telling. He mistakes the book's explicitness and even gratuitousness, admittedly the products of a different brand of satire than Swift's, for pornographic titillation. In fact, Lodge's objection extends to the whole book in an example of what Timothy Murphy, responding to Lodge among others, identifies as "many critics' misguided persistence in reducing [Burroughs'] work to the status of an unmediated expression of a lifestyle they find personally or politically abhorrent" (*Wising Up*, 8).

While we are not obliged to take Burroughs completely at his word regarding the interpretation of the chapters involving ritual, sexualized hanging, they are certainly not a defense or an incitement to such practices. They are no more so than the figure of the junky, who "regards his body impersonally as an instrument to absorb the medium in which he lives, evaluates his tissue with the cold hands of a horse trader" (57), is an enticement to drug use. Lodge, and other critics who take a morally indignant position against *Naked Lunch*, fail to recognize the unmistakably satirical power of its theme of depersonalization, deception and control. Agree with it or not, the moral message (and it *is* fundamentally a moral position) is

always present: the basic principle of human society is control, everyone is addicted in some way, and the force of this addiction to control makes people into instruments and objects.

For example, if taken together as the book's structure encourages, the infamous "pornographic" scenes in "Hassan's Rumpus Room" and "A. J.'s Annual Party" can be seen as an extension, admittedly orgiastic, of the theme of control. (These chapters have led to totally offended readers such as publisher Victor Gollancz, who in a 1963 letter to London's *Times Literary Supplement* called *Naked Lunch* "spiritually as well as physically disgusting, and tasteless to an almost incredible degree") (Calder et al. 49). They treat the themes of sexual domination and the ambiguousness of good and evil in a way that provides a key to the aggressive moral purpose of *Naked Lunch* as a whole.

In "Hassan's Rumpus Room," the Mugwump's hanging sodomy is followed by a short succession of vignettes depicting the sodomy of young boys, then the description of boys plummeting by the hundred "through the roof, quivering and kicking at the end of ropes." The guests "run hands over twitching boys" and "hang on their backs like vampires" until A.J., a recurring character/alter ego for Burroughs a la Dr. Benway, crashes the gathering. The "copulating rhythm of the universe" and "a great blue tide of life" flood the room. A "horde of lust-mad American women" rush in and pounce upon the horrified, fleeing guests and the hanging boys while A.J. sings pirate songs and gleefully swashbuckles his way through the melee. Hassan is outraged, shrieking, "This is your doing, A.J.! You poopa my party!" and "Go and never darken my rumpus room again!" (68-70).

The hanging and sodomy scenes are an intricate and shocking expurgation of the narrator's darkest sexual fantasies. Anthony Hilfer asserts: "The mutual cannibalism and hangings (reflecting the legend that a hanged man gets a monstrous erection thus becoming a

perfect sexual object—lots of equipment and no personality to worry about) of the novel are the narrator's grotesque images of modern sexuality" (256). Aside from the graphic, pedophilic details, morally repugnant to most readers in themselves, the ultimate horror of Hassan's party is the perverse objectification and fetishization of the hanged male. More so than the socialized spectacle of capital punishment, this fetishization represents the ugliness of commercialized sex, the victimization inherent in sex-for-pay. Sex can be another form of invasion and domination. Its parasitic nature is necessarily exaggerated and amplified in Hassan's rumpus room to bring out the evil possibilities of man, whose intensely sexual psychology lies at the very heart of the social need for control.

By contrast, in "A. J.'s Annual Party," two chapters later, the same motif of the hanged man's exhibition is transformed. A.J. introduces the Great Slashtubitch, "that internationally known impresario of blue movies and short-wave TV." Slashtubitch has directed the blue movie (a term for a pornographic movie) that makes up most of the chapter. The cinematic transitions "...Fadeout..." and "*On Screen*" precede another graphic section of sexual description. The principal actors are the young Mary, Johnny, and Mark, who cannibalize each other and ultimately take turns being used much like the hanging boys in Hassan's rumpus room. At the final "Fade Out," however, "Mary, Johnny and Mark take a bow with the ropes around their necks. They are not as young as they appear in the Blue Movies . . . They look tired and petulant" (74-87). The Great Slashtubitch's movie gives a sort of Hollywood treatment to the inhuman vices of Hassan's rumpus room, but the titillation is achieved through the catharsis of cinematic special effects rather than actual participation.

Through the blue movie screened at A.J.'s party, Burroughs exemplifies the ambiguousness of *Naked Lunch* itself. Ron Loewinsohn says that even "a very generous and

attentive reader will find it hard to distinguish between the pornography of the one and the pornography of the other" and, "the apparent similarity [between Good Guys and Bad Guys in the novel] is literally played out" in this pair of routines (579). The tortures of Hassan's rumpus room are real, whereas those at A.J.'s party are fictional. Once the actors in Slashtubitch's movie emerge unharmed and in their real, older and considerably less sexual aspect, the question then becomes why screen the movie at all? For the same reason, as Anthony Hilfer proposes, that Burroughs wrote *Naked Lunch*. He says, "the narrator believes the 'square's' [sic] world is as grotesque as anything *Naked Lunch* portrays (indeed, he believes it is what *Naked Lunch* portrays), but the properly illuminated artist *sees* the horror and can . . . try to infect the square with a set of metaphysical shakes—as a kindly therapeutic device" (261). Hilfer asserts that the conflation of good and evil characters, performing roughly the same acts in the contexts of both real and cinematic orgy, is a technique designed to shake the reader out of any moral complacency by implying a parallel between the "real" world and the fictional abuses in *Naked Lunch*.

Similarly, Loewinsohn argues that "A.J.'s party is a miniversion of the entire project of *Naked Lunch*," and that, to Burroughs' mind, both his and his reader's addictions to control are so ubiquitous "that only a forcible intervention can cure the marks, an intervention as forcible as A.J.'s invasion that 'poops' Hassan's party, or as forcible . . . as this novel" (580, 584). The duplicity, the near interchangeability, of reality and representation exemplified in "Hassan's Rumpus Room" and "A. J. 's Annual Party" is one key to interpreting *Naked Lunch*. The gratuitous degradation and violence of the book's sexual mythology, as abhorrent and personal as its origins may be, is organized in a way that mocks the flirtatious, hypocritical relationship of society and the media with the obscene, the alien and the taboo. Nothing but a thin, satiric veil

of fictionality separates our perceived world from the antithetical, negative world of *Naked Lunch*.

The ever-threatening, self-reflexive tenuousness of this line between reality and its filtered and transmitted representation is further developed by the figures of the Senders and the Ancient Mariner. The Senders, one of four political parties maneuvering for complete control in Interzone, operate on the gimmick of "one-way telepathic broadcast," and the Coordinate Factualist, a member of the party of the Interzone "good" guys, warns emphatically that "Some maudlin citizens will think they can send something edifying, not realizing that sending *is* evil." There can only be one Sender, and he can never receive because "that means someone else has feelings of his own could louse up his continuity [sic]." "Artists," says the C.F., "will confuse sending with creation. They will camp around screeching 'A new medium!' [. . .] not knowing that *sending can never be a means to anything but more sending, like junk.*" Since the Sender, or mother cell, cannot "recharge himself by contact," the "screen goes dead [. . .] The Sender has turned into a huge centipede" (137-141).

The Sender is the consummate control addict, constantly sending telepathic messages to exploit others, yet in the end he is terminally alone and irreversibly dehumanized. The figure of the Sender teases out quite readily an allegorical interpretation that might correlate with the devouring and dominating force of mass media, which constantly and compulsively sends powerful messages to subtly influence thought and behavior. However, it goes deeper than that. "The site of language [in *Naked Lunch*]*—*sending, representing, naming," says Robin Lydenberg, "is always blind and always empty. It is language that robs us of individual life and of the world itself, creating a 'grey veil between you and what you saw or more often did not

see" (68). Sending, and its insidious nature, is a qualification of the project of *Naked Lunch*. In many ways, the audience is held captive and exposed to the "telepathic" projections of the writer's consciousness. Murphy observes that

the power of language as an instrument of control, one of the central themes of the novel, cannot simply be asserted in a direct statement, since such a statement would itself be another example of that control; it must instead be insinuated, implied in such a way that the reader can see through not only the forms of verbal control that the novel depicts but also the powerful verbal control gesture that the novel itself is. (Murphy, "Intersection Points" 84) The narrator is sending a message warning against his own practice of sending, which makes his position duplicitous in relation to the reader, who is a kind of complicit victim of one-way telepathy.

This self-reflexivity, implicating the potential of language itself for manipulation and control, posits the figure of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner as its principal clue for the reader. Burroughs saw himself as a kindred spirit of Coleridge, and was very much like the Ancient Mariner in that poet's famous fantasy piece. "I have to have receiver for routine," he wrote to Allen Ginsberg in 1954: "If there is no one there to receive it, routine turns back on me and tears me apart" (qtd in Loewinsohn 562). The Ancient Mariner, whose hell is initiated by shooting the albatross (compare with Burroughs' own albatross, Joan), likewise feels the demonically driven necessity to impart his confessional tale of horror and despair to the innocent Wedding Guest. In the "Benway" chapter, while describing a panoramic scene of bedlam after maniacs have escaped from Benways Reconditioning Center, William Lee (narrating) parodies the vocative intrusions of Victorian novelists. "Gentle reader," he says, "I fain would spare you this, but my

pen hath its will like the Ancient Mariner" (34). This first reference to the Mariner coincides with the first really graphic, shocking sequence of the book.

Later, between the two aforementioned and infamous chapters of orgiastic decadence, the reader is introduced to a professor at Interzone University. He refers once to his "multiple personalities," and further lectures:

. . . consider the Ancient Mariner without curare, lasso, bulbocapnine or straitjacket, albeit able to capture and hold a live audience [. . .] What the Mariner actually says is not important. . . He may be rambling, irrelevant, even crude and rampant senile. But something happens to the Wedding Guest like happens in psychoanalysis when it happens if it happens. (73-74). These passages subtly alert the reader, who may be wondering exactly who this narrator is and what his intentions are, to the presence of an impish, vacillating consciousness behind the whole work, a consciousness that is deliberately conditioning her to question the barrier between thought and language, between the author's antisocial fantasies and the viral power of language to infect her with those fantasies. Hilfer notes the satirizing of "rhetorical impositions" throughout *Naked Lunch* and says that, by the end, "[the narrator] is addressing a reader so toughened up by the rhetorical exercises of *Naked Lunch* as to have lost his gentleness [. . .] The novel's paradoxically enabling gesture is to create readers capable of rejecting its most seductive overtures" (265). Control is an addiction, a condition endemic to the Human Virus, and the paradox of *Naked Lunch* lies in its controlling nature. It uses the same verbal, rhetorical process of representation that it denounces as manipulative. Through the figure of the Ancient Mariner, the reader can discern that the purpose of this paradox is to arrive at the rawest and most honest treatment of control addiction possible, which includes a self-reflexive nod towards the author's own confessional, purgative need to captivate and infect.

The moral message of *Naked Lunch* is not a typical or conventional one, and the episodic, schizophrenic narrative structure perhaps intentionally makes interpretation precarious and frustrating. However, when viewed in the context (encouraged by Burroughs' appended "Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness") of the writer's drug addiction, confessional urge and descent into hell, it is revealed primarily as a cautionary tale. *Naked Lunch* is a surreal, picaresque journey into the addict-writer's consciousness, the violent transmission of his vision of the root paradigm of control, which he sees at the heart of all things "brutal, obscene and disgusting" (205). By satirizing what he sees as evil, exploitative control mechanisms at work in all levels of society, from the drug trade to religion, sex, media and government, and by extending this act of negation to an inherent critique of the novel's narrative technique and language itself, Burroughs' mesmeric narrative cautions and even inoculates the reader against the capacity, the very need to control and be controlled. *Naked Lunch*, in all its grotesque, obscene glory, is a satirical manifesto against the hypocrisy that prevents the "marks" from awareness of the operations of this control-need, all the way from the basest levels of life to the top of the social pyramid.

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