

'The Way OUT is the Way IN': Junk and the Subversion of the Nation/Symptom in William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* **Brodie Beales**

In his introduction to a collection of work entitled *Man at Leisure* by the author of *Young Adam* and *Cain's Book* Alexander Trocchi, William Burroughs described its author as a 'cosmonaut of inner space'.¹ In so doing Burroughs turned Trocchi's own description of the role of a writer on the author himself. Trocchi shared a number of lifestyle similarities with Burroughs. Both writers identified with the Beat movement, were published by Olympia Press, prosecuted for obscenity and addicted to heroin and (as their as yet unpublished extensive private correspondence indicates)² were well acquainted with one another. Yet it is in the essential concern of their writing that a more meaningful similarity emerges: a naked engagement with authenticity and a desire to separate that which Nietzsche termed 'the way of seeing from the origin of seeing'.³ Reading the work that is later to characterise Burroughs' own style seen in *Naked Lunch*, the same description of the writer as a cosmonaut of inner space may just as aptly be applied to Burroughs himself.

The application of a brief phrase to describe the concern of a particular writer is often glib and more often than not reflects the role (if not motivation) of the critic and their interests rather than probing the style and revealing the origins of a writer's creative engagement or style. However, in Burroughs' case, it may reasonably be argued that he recognised in Trocchi's work the trace of an exploration with which he was himself familiar. As Burroughs wrote the introduction to Trocchi's *Man at Leisure* after the publication of *Naked Lunch*, *Junkie*, and *Queer*, it may be argued that his poetic labelling of Trocchi's essential creative concern reflects an understanding achieved in relation to his own work: that he too is exploring the reality of being, and by pursuing this exploration in text that he too is engaged in a similarly strange and precarious game the kind for which space travel is an appropriately perilous parallel.

To travel in space is to immerse oneself in a dangerous realm as yet unexplored. Space provides an excellent metaphor for the state of being human that Burroughs seeks to explore in so far as it is omnipresent and oft the subject of speculation and consideration but rarely of exploration. As humans we look for the science of the symptom rather than the possibilities of a meaning. People live their lives within society, within roles, nations and languages all without truly exploring the reality of being, a

1 William Burroughs, 'Introduction', Alexander Trocchi, *Man at Leisure* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1972).

2 See Timothy S. Murphy, 'Exposing the Reality Film: William S. Burroughs among the Situationists' in *Retaking the Universe: William S. Burroughs in the age of Globalization* ed. David Schneiderman and Philip Walsh (London: Pluto Press, 2004) 33.

3 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Wille zur Macht: Versuch eine Umwertung aller Werte*, selected and ordered by Peter Gast assisted by Elizabeth Foerster Nietzsche (Stuttgart: Alfred Kroener, 1964) 317 (trans. mine).

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reality that exists apart from these scaffolds. For Burroughs the national was a symptom of the social; of the consensus real world. The reality of the 'all American' was as much of a disguise and an excuse as the concept of the husband, the wife, the pusher, the President or the pimp. Thus, it may be argued that the transnational dimensions of the work of William S. Burroughs are of the purest possible sort. Burroughs is concerned with transnationality in so far as he is concerned with subversion of the social and engaged in a guerrilla campaign to make molecular that which is molar. Nation, nationality and the restrictions that Burroughs understands that nationality represents are elements of something Burroughs scholar Timothy S. Murphy calls 'the reality film'.⁴ And the reality film is something that can be spliced and played at different speeds.

In *Naked Lunch* Burroughs is overtly concerned with themes of control and escape. The Word Virus, The Junk Virus and Social Reality are all agents of power expressed through control. Escape is realised through madness, intoxication and a sort of super-collaboration with the reality film that is itself total insanity.⁵ Burroughs pre-dates Deleuze and Guattari in his employment of the schizoid condition as a means of depicting the infinite and potentially debilitating profusion of trajectories available to the molecular agent. Burroughs' lunatics burst from their asylums and rage through the streets. A schizophrenic has no nation apart from the one he is given by his context, and context is, as Burroughs attempts to make clear, defined by dominance and control. Burroughs describes the interaction between the so-called lunatics (a 'Queen') and a tourist caught in the riot unfolding around him: 'What do you want' snaps one of the Queens. 'We want to *understand* you'.⁶ Understanding is a process of assimilation of any possibility into the dominant apparatus, it is, in effect, a normalisation, a colonisation of the unknown. The tourist, confronted with the unknown, immediately seeks to amalgamate it into his catalogue of symptoms through understanding. As such he does not seek to know something (gaining knowledge through exploration), only know what it is *like* (the addition of a new series of symptoms to the catalogue of dominant context).

The Socratic axiom runs 'The unexamined life is not worth living'. However for Burroughs an examination culminated in a catalogue of symptoms, an exploration went below the surface. As Burroughs writes of his own work in his introduction to *Naked Lunch*:

As always, the lunch is naked. If civilized countries want to return to Druid Hanging Rites in the Sacred Grove or to drink blood with the Aztecs and feed their Gods with blood of human sacrifice, let them see what they actually eat and drink. Let them see what is at the end of that long newspaper spoon.⁷

4 Murphy 29. This quote draws on Burroughs' own description of reality as a film, reported in Conrad Knickerbocker, 'White Junk' in *Burroughs Live: The collected interviews of William S. Burroughs 1960-1997*, ed. Sylvere Lotringer (Los Angeles; New York: Semiotext(e), 2001) 60-81.

5 For an example of this super-collaboration with reality as symptomatic of complete derangement see the character of Dr Benway in *Naked Lunch*.

6 William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (London: Flamingo, 1993) 42.

7 William S. Burroughs, 'Introduction', *Naked Lunch* (London: Flamingo, 1993) 12

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Facts are defined by their context. For Burroughs the media of a dominant culture necessarily presents a majoritarian view of what is experientially a multiplicitous reality. Thus, finding little more than reactive symptoms in the world outside, Burroughs set about exploring his inner space. Writing the text that was to become *Naked Lunch* served to lay open this exploration to others so that they might see their own reality for what it was. But ultimately, his was a personal project of exploration, as *personally* was the only possible, if not the only accessible truth: 'Speaking *Personally* and if a man starts speaking any other way we might as well start looking for his Protoplasm Daddy or Mother Cell'.⁸ For Burroughs the personal existed in opposition to the lie. Eric Mottram describes Burroughs' concept of the personal as the product of 'a self that one is apart from imposed thinking'.⁹ But try as Burroughs might he is still writing words, his personal is less the product of a self *apart* than it is the exploration of a self *between*. He laments: 'I don't like human beings [...] Still I must live in and on human bodies.'¹⁰ Reality was epitomised by the physical necessities of continued life, and as such possessed an inescapable gravity. Viewed longitudinally and with the benefit of hindsight, Burroughs' career has been made out of plotting and making escapes and planning and creating subversions of, attacks on and hijackings of the reality film. But in order to see reality as the controlling device he was to argue it was, Burroughs first had to move as far beyond its grasp as he could, and the most immediate way in which this was possible was through the auspices of intoxication.

Marshall McLuhan writes in his 'Notes on Burroughs' that 'the central theme of *Naked Lunch* is the strategy of bypassing the new electric environment by becoming an environment oneself'.¹¹ Taking the experiences related by the protagonist in *Junkie* it may be argued that in text (if not in life) it was Junk (Burroughs' preferred term for morphine and related opioid derivatives) that made this bridge. Junk provided the bypass and by a process of isolation and sedation made the inner the only real, allowing social and physical life to pass by like a coded collage of sound, word and colour that Burroughs was to argue in his later works that it was.

Burroughs writes of morphine that it 'diminishes awareness of surroundings and bodily processes'.¹² It is this state of sedation, in which the user is receptive only to Junk, that serves to disassociate the addict with that which is recognised as reality, leaving his body to rot in as his mind nestles into the den of his dreams. Burroughs validates the consuming nature of addiction, commenting that addiction itself 'takes up all of the

8 Burroughs, 'Introduction', *Naked Lunch* 12.

9 Eric Mottram, *William Burroughs: The Algebra of Need* (London: Marion Boyars, 1977) 149.

10 William Burroughs, 'The Beginning is also the End', *The Burroughs File* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1984) 62.

11 Marshall McLuhan. 'Notes on Burroughs' in *William Burroughs at the Front: Critical Reception, 1959–1989*, ed. Jennie Skerl and Robyn Lydenberg (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991) 70.

12 William Burroughs, 'Academy 23', *The Job: Interview with William Burroughs*, ed. Daniel Odier (London: Cape, 1970) 132.

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addict's time',¹³ and of heroin: 'Junk is a pain-killer, it also kills the pain and pleasure implicit in awareness'.¹⁴ It is in part because of this effect of isolation and reduction that Junk is vitally important to Burroughs' own journey inwards from the hard boiled mean streets of *Junkie* to the supernova of *Naked Lunch*. Arguably *Naked Lunch* would simply not have been possible if Burroughs had pursued an active life in Tangiers. Burroughs describes his life in Morocco during the period in which *Naked Lunch* was written as follows:

I lived in one room in the Native Quarter of Tangier. I had not taken a bath in a year nor changed my clothes or removed them except to stick a needle every hour in the fibrous grey wooden flesh of terminal addiction. I never cleaned or dusted the room, empty ampule boxes and garbage piled up to the ceiling. Light and water had long since been turned off for non-payment. I did absolutely nothing. I could look at the end of my shoe for eight hours. I was only roused to action when the hourglass of junk ran out.¹⁵

Through its inability to be bypassed altogether, the body of the addict becomes an allegory of the greater world against which MacLuhan argues Burroughs is seeking to anaesthetize himself,¹⁶ precisely because the body of the addict is vital to the very act of anaesthesia. Burroughs explains: 'The addict regards his body impersonally as an instrument to absorb the medium in which he lives',¹⁷ the body is a means, an anchor in the real: the representative of the addict on earth. This conception of the physical gives new resonance to Burroughs' assertion 'The way OUT is the way IN'.¹⁸ By drawing attention to the barrier between the real and inner space Burroughs may be seen to make literal the premise that the way beyond the real was through a hole in the skin made by a needle.

Whilst Burroughs used Junk to anaesthetise reality, Junk was addictive and whilst it removed the immediate concerns of the flesh with a hit, as soon as the rush was metabolised away the needs of the body returned, heightened in their urgency. Validating the idea that Junk opened Burroughs' inner space beyond the real world are his comments on withdrawal as 'a nightmare interlude of cellular panic, life suspended between two ways of being'.¹⁹ The irony of increased reliance on the physical as a means of absorbing the means of its own transcendence was not lost on Burroughs. The body again represented something other than a social self. Freedom was itself impossible, Junk

13 William Burroughs, 'Academy 23' 133.

14 William S. Burroughs, 'Afterthoughts on a Deposition' in *Naked Lunch* (London: Flamingo, 1993) 15.

15 William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (London: Flamingo, 1993) 9-10.

16 Marshall McLuhan. 'Notes on Burroughs' in *William Burroughs at the Front: Critical Reception, 1959 - 1989*, ed. by Jennie Skerl and Robyn Lydenberg (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991) 70.

17 Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* 68.

18 Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* 180.

19 Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* 56.

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simply made the relationship between the addict and his tether more apparent: '[F]ree men don't exist on this planet at this time, because they don't exist in human bodies. By the mere fact of being in a human body you're controlled by all sorts of biologic and environmental necessities.'²⁰ Addiction to Junk pulled the world into sharper focus by reducing the world of the addict to the means of its removal. Writing his preface to *Naked Lunch* from the supposed clarity of a post-addiction, rehabilitated state, Burroughs draws the reader's attention to the addict as a metaphor. Burroughs is not encouraging heroin addiction any more than he is discouraging it. He does not *want* one outcome over another, he simply seeks to show the reader what he, William S. Burroughs, knows really is happening. He frames his introduction as a deposition, as notes concerning a sickness. His emphasis is entirely personal, yet the ramifications of his ideas are universal and political. Making clear his didactic intent Burroughs' concludes his introduction thus:

Paregoric Babies of the world Unite. We have nothing to lose but Our Pushers.
And THEY are NOT NECESSARY.

Look down LOOK DOWN along that junk road before you travel there
and get in with the Wrong Mob....

A word to the wise guy.²¹

He is not insisting on a universal truth knowable by all, he is recounting and reflecting on a personal exploration. He is speaking personally, for there is no other honest way.

The irony of the 'honest junkie' is not lost on Burroughs. *Naked Lunch* is littered with references to 'Junk talk', 'Junk lies' and 'that tired old Junk Con'. Yet the exploration of inner-space that the novel may be argued to undertake is profoundly personal. In Burroughs' inner space there is no lie because there is no reason to lie and nobody to lie to. Burroughs' use of Wittgenstein illustrates the necessity of utility in the personal 'If a proposition is NOT NECESSARY it is MEANINGLESS and approaching MEANING ZERO'.²² Without an effect to desire the lie is not necessary and in Burroughs' inner space he is in control of all the chimeras. The external world however, is a different matter. Connections, friends, families and lovers represent grey areas; complications and ties. Burroughs is Spartan in his pursuit of the personal, detailing the idea of an all-male academy in which men are stripped of association and 'trained to exist in total independence'.²³ This academy would train men to make the journey into space. But before making the trip beyond that which is known they were schooled to rid themselves of the regular connections, schemes, systems and scaffolds that allowed them to function within a social world:

To travel in space you must learn to leave the old verbal garbage behind: God talk,

²⁰ William Burroughs, 'Minutes to Go' in *The Job: Interview with William Burroughs*, ed. Daniel Odier (London: Cape, 1970) 22.

²¹ Burroughs, 'Introduction', *Naked Lunch* 14.

²² Burroughs, 'Introduction', *Naked Lunch* 13.

²³ Burroughs, 'Academy 23' 191.

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priest talk, mother talk, love talk, party talk, country talk. You must learn to exist with no religion no country no allies. You must learn to see what is in front of you with no preconceptions.²⁴

Whilst Junk did not rid the user of his ability to converse in these modes, it did remove his will to do so. Addiction concentrated all desire into the desire for Junk and as soon as the hit was taken the rest of the world dissolved and the addict was free.

So what happened in this inner space when the scaffolding of the real was removed? The answer is everything. Images from the real world were torn apart and reassembled into new collages of meaning. Desires thwarted by the predominant moral code of the world in which his body lived were animated and realised in his inner space. Burroughs became pornographer, ethnographer, painter, surgeon, journalist and spectator.

Hassan's face swells, tumescent with blood. His lips turn purple. He strips off his suit of banknotes and throws it into an open vault that closes soundless.

'Freedom Hall here, folks!' he screams in his phoney Texan accent. Tenggallon hat and cowboy boots still on, he dances the Liquefactionalist Jig, ending with a grotesque can-can to the tune of She Started a Heat Wave.

*'Let it be! And no holes barred!!!'*²⁵

Fellow author Wright Morris called *Naked Lunch* a 'haemorrhage of the imagination'.²⁶ Whilst Burroughs was unimpressed with the analogy, Morris' comment may be seen to provide support to the argument made above: that Burroughs' inner space explored in *Naked Lunch* was free of the restrictions of morality, society and direction that direct the flow of action in the real world. Morris draws on the biological example of blood flow through a circulatory system to illustrate ordinary existence as directed and enabling.

Morris' explosive biological metaphor is intuitive for a number of reasons. Burroughs' disembodied Junk space is the region (if not, in fact, the fall-out-zone) surrounding the collision between reality, country, nation, being and becoming collapsed out into a null equation in which everything is possible because nothing is real. Burroughs' intoxicated space facilitates the fragmentation of normative objects, situations and states and reconstitutes their constituent elements in a new way using the engine of libido, thus continuing, diverting and initiating what Deleuze and Guattari call flow. Yet this explosion is not enough to cause a rupture, a permanent break in which the past no longer exists. Only in a complete rupture is escape possible (in the sense of a final movement away from a given restriction), and Burroughs always returns to the restrictive real. Rather, the explosion simply creates an interruption or proliferation in flow or trajectory, perhaps best seen as a trip, a voyage or a detour. Burroughs is not leaving the

²⁴ Burroughs, 'Academy 23' 191-192.

²⁵ Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* 72.

²⁶ Burroughs, 'Minutes to Go' 42. Burroughs did not take Morris' description as a compliment, replying 'I wouldn't really take it as a compliment. What do you think of there? You think of a cerebral haemorrhage, of someone with fuses blowing out in his brain. No, I don't take it as a compliment at all.'

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real world with a one-way ticket, he is simply avoiding its demanding, pressing and imposing immanence for a while.

In seeking intoxication Burroughs may be seen to chasing in disassociation what Deleuze and Guattari define as 'the real truth of the matter – the glaring, sober truth that resides in delirium – is that there is no such thing as relatively independent spheres or circuits'.²⁷ Burroughs' escapes are little more than day trips from a reality he defines as utterly restrictive. At no point is it transcend-able. Burroughs dogged pursuit of the personal is an attempt to achieve molecularity. Yet the inescapable, urgent reality of libido melts his molecular dream and confronts him with the primal state of undifferentiated desire of which he is himself a coded constellation. In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari pose the question 'Can it be that voyages are always a return to rigid segmentarity?'²⁸ For the Burroughs of *Naked Lunch* the answer is yes.

Burroughs was later to comment that 'anything that can be done chemically can be done in other ways.'²⁹ The cut-up (elaborated in *The Third Mind*), Burroughs' and Gysin's textual fragmentation technique, may be seen as evidence of Burroughs' desire to recapture the dissociation of Junk without the sedative lull, using a blade rather than a needle to fracture reality. But the emphasis of the technique remains the desire to fracture reality and create from broken forms a new imagery, in much the same way that Burroughs' use of Junk cut the addict off from the real world, ushering him into a space within which he was able to reassemble fragments of the real world at will.

Burroughs is an explorer of the world both within his skin and beyond his control. Yet moving between the inner realm and the real world Burroughs is forced to acknowledge (if not concede) that reality has a gravitas and cannot forever be avoided. Yet the realm in which Burroughs sets the action of his texts is somewhere between reality and his own inner space. The events of *Naked Lunch* take place in a space that is born of the real world with which we as readers are familiar and embellishes, perverts, decorates and desecrates this stage with actors, motivations and ideas that emerge from the writers' inner world. This hybrid world bears enough of a resemblance to our own for Burroughs' alterations to create resonances for the reader that move the reader beyond their own situation – their own *now* – and by prying a tiny hole in a reader's reality he opens the reader to input from their own inner world. Burroughs makes the world bolder, madder, louder and more bleak, but by leaking these amplifications into the reality set he is making it bigger, annexing his inner space to the rest of the world and encouraging people to open theirs and join the riot he has begun.

27 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 4.

28 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1983) 199.

29 Burroughs, 'Academy 23' 130.

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