

Can You See a Virus? The Queer Cold War of William Burroughs

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I

He has fertilized an A to Z of postwar creativity, quite literally from Kathy Acker to Frank Zappa; he has acted as godfather for literary countercultures from the Beats to the Cyberpunks; he has haunted our media zones as an icon of iconoclasm – and William Burroughs has remained a critical curse. Leaving aside what Burroughs’ academic marginality tells us – about Burroughs or academia – the main reason he has hexed his critics is also the key to the proliferation of his image and its power of mimetic magic: those he does not repel, Burroughs *fascinates*. This is the basis to his distinct iconicity, infectious now across four decades.

Self-styled as *El Hombre Invisible*, Burroughs fully inhabits Maurice Blanchot’s construction of fascination as “the absence one sees because it is blinding”: “Whoever is fascinated doesn’t properly speaking, see what he sees. Rather, it touches him in an immediate proximity; it seizes and ceaselessly draws him close, even though it leaves him absolutely at a distance.”¹ Unable or unwilling, Burroughs critics have done little with such knowledge other than to pass it on. Robin Lydenberg, author of the ground-breaking study *Word Cultures* (1987), could go back twenty years to quote Joan Didion praising Burroughs for “a voice so direct and original and versatile as to disarm close scrutiny of what it is saying”;² so too, Robert Sobieszek in his artwork catalogue *Ports of Entry* (1996), could go back twenty to cite Philippe Mikriammos’ formula, “vox

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¹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, translated by Ann Smock (Paris: Gallimard, 1955; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 33.

² Robin Lydenberg, “Sound Identity Fading Out: William Burroughs’ Tape Experiments,” in *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and The Avant-Garde*, Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead, eds., (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992) (409–37), 409.

Williami, vox monstrorum,” to account for the sound “which ultimately seduces the listener.”³ A voice that disarms scrutiny; a voice that seduces. In the critical context, to approach Burroughs disarmed and seduced has meant taking him on his own terms – and being taken in by him. Burroughs resists power to the extent that he also exercises it, understands power so well precisely because he has always worked from its deep insides. From the outset, this WASP scion of American big business (public relations on his mother’s side, adding machines on his father’s) was born to live out power’s painful contradictions. His life as addict, homosexual, and writer literalized that undesired inheritance with a perverse vengeance, queering the legacy of “Poison” Ivy Lee and Burroughs computers by reincarnating it as a pathogenic cultural virus. And so Burroughs dedicated himself to immortality by becoming what Richard Dawkins, in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), called a “meme”: “a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*” which propagates analogously to the genetic code and the parasitism of viruses, and is more than metaphorically “alive”.⁴ If memes survive by parasitizing human minds, so, reciprocally, can the mind survive through parasitic self-replication: the viral programme “simply says ‘Copy me and spread me around.’”⁵ This is Burroughs: “all poets worthy of the name are mind parasites, and their words ought to get into your head and live there, repeating and repeating and repeating.”⁶ He could scarcely be more explicit. And so to exempt Burroughs from the terms of his own critique is to miss the whole point of his textual politics – that is, not only his texts’ analysis of power, but their own relation to it – since complicity in all he opposes is the condition of his work’s extraordinary brinkmanship. As I have argued elsewhere, it may well be those who would gladly burn Burroughs who have best understood the unique force of his work, a force at its maximum in his two crucial decades, falling either side of *The Naked Lunch* (1959).⁷

The inadequacy of a criticism to match Burroughs is clear from publication of two starkly antithetical books that are curiously comp-

³ Robert A. Sobieszek, *Ports of Entry: William S. Burroughs and the Arts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 17.

⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: OUP, 1976; London: Granada, 1978), 206.

⁵ Richard Dawkins, *Climbing Mount Improbable* (New York: Viking, 1996), 249. See also Eric Davis, “Techgnosis: Magic, Memory, and the Angels of Information,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 92: 4 (Fall 1993), 585–616.

⁶ William Burroughs, “Introduction: ‘Voices in Your Head,’” in John Giorno, *You Got to Burn to Shine* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1994), 6.

⁷ See Oliver Harris, “It’s no calligraphy for school children,” in *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, 6: 3 (1996/97), 337–53.

lementary. Timothy Murphy's *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs* (1997) balances, in terms of critical gravitas, originality and (Deleuzian) theory, Graham Caveney's *The 'Priest' They Called Him* (1998), a glitzy, pastiche of a pop cult biography that is content to sport some clever journalistic one-liners. What unites academic and popular cultural approaches is a relapse into credulity. Caveney writes: "There is nothing hidden in Burroughs' image, no secret to be decoded";⁸ Murphy agrees: "Since he hides nothing, he has no secrets which can be revealed."⁹ Each takes up the myth of transparency that Burroughs has himself promoted, to the point of invisibility. "I have no secrets," Burroughs says, before adding: "There are no facts."¹⁰ The icon deconstructs into a bare statement of deception: I con. Since what follows is part of a larger case for revealing and decoding a secret(ed) history that Burroughs denies exists, the strength of my reading has to be its ability to account for prior misreadings – hence such attention to the state of critical play.

The literary criticism and popular reception of Burroughs have long been determined by an undisputed assumption about his work, its master-trope and driving force, an assumption grounded in his first decade as a writer. "Heroin addiction," writes David Ayers, "provides Burroughs with the metabolic model of control which structurally informs other models of control which he will subsequently deploy."¹¹ This critical commonplace accepts that the key subject of Burroughs' work – control – is rooted in and shaped by the "literal addiction" documented in his first novel *Junkie* (1953).¹² As the stencil through which his early texts have been read, and his iconic identity constructed, the identification of Burroughs with junk has generated a convenient paradigm that for thirty years has been largely followed, occasionally side-stepped, but never

⁸ Graham Caveney, *The 'Priest' They Called Him: The Life and Legacy of William S. Burroughs* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), 19. What makes the book so disappointing is that it never delivers on the promise in the Author's Note to deal very directly with issues of image, identity, and authenticity.

⁹ Timothy S. Murphy, *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 231.

¹⁰ William Burroughs Interview with Gerard Malanga (July 1974), in Arthur and Glee Knight, eds., *The Beat Book* (California, Pa., 1974), 111.

¹¹ David Ayers, "The Long Last Goodbye: Control and Resistance in the Work of William Burroughs," *Journal of American Studies*, 27 (1993), 223–36 (225).

¹² Steven Watson, *The Birth of the Beat Generation: Visionaries, Rebels, and Hipsters, 1944–1960* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995). Note that, for purposes of historical accuracy, I refer to *Junkie* (New York: Ace Books, 1953), while for purposes of reference I cite the re-edited *Junky* (New York: Penguin, 1977).

interrogated; never, that is, questioned for its adequacy or effects. For criticism, the autobiographical paradigm produces the neat diptych of “Before and After” offered in 1970 by Tony Tanner, when dubbing Burroughs “an addict turned diagnostician, a victim of sickness now devoted to the analysis of diseases”: here, pointing to *Junkie*, Tanner announced is “the actual in which his vision is grounded.”¹³ The side-effects of the junk paradigm have been catastrophic because it scores as abstract all Burroughs’ models of control and disease. As Ayers puts it, after junk “it will always be an abstract notion of control” that powers later models – including Burroughs’ central technology of control, language itself.¹⁴ Abstract is the key word, and it rings false. Nothing Burroughsian is abstract: the force of his ideas will not be separated from the effects of his words. That is why his work can be so potent and so extraordinary, stamped as it is with a strictly literal, overpoweringly *visceral* force. The junk paradigm produces abstraction at odds with the experience of reading Burroughs because it mediates the relation of control to language as an *allegorical* relation, just as Tanner’s diptych locates a force outside of language and prior to writing that elides the central action of Burroughs’ texts. Now, addiction is an important matrix, but that still does not make it Burroughs’ ground any more than it makes *Junkie* a “blueprint for all of Burroughs’ work,” a text that lays the “groundwork for the later novels.”¹⁵

If junk-as-fact becomes junk-as-symbol, likewise figure has been seen to embody thesis. According to most accounts, Burroughs adapted pre-existing theoretical models of language, specifically Korzybski’s General Semantics, so that Korzybski can then “be read as the origin of his ongoing war against the word.”¹⁶ This makes sense, but not of or for Burroughs. What makes Burroughs so interesting is inseparable from his *failure* to apply or develop theory “properly”. His cut-up project of the 1960s is a case in point: the priority Burroughs gave to experimental and material practices has been lost in the theoretical shuffle, as critics have

¹³ Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950–1970* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), 110. Along with Eric Mottram Tanner was an early and astute critic: what’s extraordinary is that his paradigm of addiction has not been critically reappraised.

¹⁴ Ayers, 224.

¹⁵ John Tytell, *Naked Angels: The Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976; Grove Press, 1991), 125; Jennie Skerl, *William S. Burroughs* (Boston; Twayne, 1985), 21. Again, my point is the uncritical perpetuation of paradigms; for example, Caveney, 77, still describes *Junkie* as “a blueprint.”

¹⁶ Caveney, 51. For identical assumptions, see also David Ingram’s essay, “William Burroughs and Language,” in A. Robert Lee, ed., *The Beat Generation Writers* (London: Pluto, 1996), and Kendra Langeteig’s article, cited below.

reread his texts in light of the “linguistic turn” of (post)-structuralism, when it was precisely the lack of such a theorized context that enabled Burroughs’ experimentalism in the first place. It is a major difficulty to deal with a writer so radically contemporary who seems so perversely ante- if not anti-theoretical, accustomed as we are to the generation of writers who followed Burroughs, and read him alongside the likes of Barthes and Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault. Since claims for Burroughs’ cultural centrality now rest largely on his prophetic formula that “the word is a virus” – a formula that has itself spread with viral fertility – this issue is absolutely crucial.

Conflating biology with technology, Burroughs’ understanding of language as a viral force identifies him as one of the major imaginative investigators of cybernetic communication systems, a writer whose cut-up Nova trilogy of the 1960s can be seen as early research into the word and image electronic culture of postmodernity. In this context, the junk paradigm is not only inadequate to Burroughs’ understanding of language, it also cannot account for the force of writing we name Burroughsian. This force is based not on figuring language as a viral disease, passively controlling the subject “like junk,” but on the *literal practice, active as well as passive*, of it as such. Burroughs always insisted word *is* a virus, although critics have taken his literalism as itself a figure: thus Kendra Langeteig, in an otherwise outstanding article, separates Burroughs from Baudrillard because, for him, the word functions “without expedient of advanced mass media technology,” yet still ends up speaking *figuratively* of “word and image virus, or its equivalent, junk.”¹⁷ To say that the word is a communicative sickness was not, for Burroughs, metaphoric analysis or poststructuralist platitude but an awareness integral and material to the act of writing, and this is what the toxicity of Burroughs’ textual politics insists upon, *ad nauseam*.

The junk paradigm has been convenient, operating as a sign of apparent continuity. It offered to bridge his first decade as a developing, autobiographical writer – the Beat Generation Burroughs – and his second as a radical innovator – the Postmodern Cybernetic Burroughs. In fact, junk has made it impossible to narrate Burroughs’ career with any conviction. When Murphy observes that “nothing in the early texts prepares the reader for the barrage of mass-media control technology”

¹⁷ Kendra Langeteig, “Horror *Autotoxicus* in the Red Night Trilogy: Ironic Fruits of Burroughs’ Terminal Vision,” *Configurations*, 5 (1997), 135–69. The most astute analysis of Burroughs and cybernetic systems remains that of David Porush in *The Soft Machine: Cybernetic Fiction* (London; Methuen, 1985).

from *The Naked Lunch* onwards, he is only half-right because as bound by the spell of *Junkie* as any previous Burroughs critic.¹⁸

If it is time for a complete reevaluation of the ground and so the identity of Burroughs' textual politics of control, on the basis that each has been misread, central to this reevaluation is a turning away from the first novel, *Junkie*, in favour of his long-unpublished second, *Queer* (1985).¹⁹ Although written back-to-back – *Junkie* between 1950 and 1952, *Queer* largely in 1952, both in Mexico City – the gulf between these texts is as vital as it is vast. To be reductive, *Queer* is the nearest thing to a Burroughs blueprint, and its historical recovery enables two essential outcomes. First, to secure *Queer*'s centrality to Burroughs' writing and its relation to the Cold War 1950s; and, second, to reconfigure the relationship between his two crucial decades of development and experiment. Burroughs' second novel encodes the essential queerness of *The Naked Lunch* and the cut-up trilogy, even as it frames the queer identity in cybernetic terms and so *does* prepare for the works that follow.

To argue the centrality of *Queer* is problematic and not just because of the novel's embarrassing slightness. To start with, the published text can barely conceal its exceptional contingency, which, too complex to discuss here, must qualify any attempt to rehistoricize its production.²⁰ Second, because *Queer* is already central, albeit for perverse reasons. I refer to the reception and effects of Burroughs' much-cited text of 1985 that purports to introduce his narrative of 1952. Context has entirely upstaged text because of Burroughs' momentous confession – the “appalling conclusion” he famously reaches – that this book and all his future writing as a war against Control, aka “the Ugly Spirit,” was motivated by an event that is over the text's horizon: the shooting death of his wife, Joan, in Mexico City during September 1951. It is no surprise that, a full decade after its appearance, *Queer* still had no critical presence as a work in its own right, so thoroughly has this extra-textual drama eclipsed a narrative whose autobiographical events precede and whose writing followed that fatal instant.²¹ And, if the Introduction has either deterred or determined

¹⁸ Murphy, 89. To clarify: Murphy passes over the implications of his own analysis of *Queer* – a text not available to most earlier critics.

¹⁹ William Burroughs, *Queer* (New York: Viking, 1985).

²⁰ On publication, *Queer* acquired not only a new context but also sections of new text, added to the original manuscript in the editorial process, including passages taken from contemporary letters. Even Burroughs' 1985 Introduction turns out to have been partly cobbled together from similar materials.

²¹ The first to address *Queer* in any detail was Richard Dellamora, in an excellent chapter of his *Apocalyptic Overtures: Sexual Politics and the Sense of an Ending* (New Brunswick:

critical readings of *Queer*, this displacement has been aided by the text that has most influenced Burroughs' reception during the 1990s. Here I refer to David Cronenberg's cinematic version of *The Naked Lunch* (1991). Although this film has already been called to account for its various un-Burroughsian, de-historicizing, and hetero-sexualizing manoeuvres, what is more important is that each and every one of these manoeuvres, including the text's total eclipse by Joan's death, derive from Burroughs' Introduction to *Queer*.²² Cronenberg has simply followed his master's example, by rewriting a text in terms of this extra-textual tragedy. The Canadian filmmaker's motivations are one thing, but what of Burroughs'?²³ Working backwards from effects to intentions is deeply problematic, but Burroughs' dramatic confession is the acme of the genre: a revelation that conceals by pre-empting suspicion of an even more disturbing analysis. The irony is that this secret lies in open view, in the manner of Poe's Purloined Letter. If *Queer* – and not *Junkie* – is to be recognized as pivotal for Burroughs' writing, we need to recover text and rehistoricize context.

II

Significantly, Burroughs first mentions his "queer novel" in March 1952 in a letter to Allen Ginsberg that ends by discussing Donald Webster Corey's *The Homosexual in America* (1951).²⁴ Although the treatment of same-sex desire in early Beat culture was, as Richard Dellamora has argued, severely constrained by "the absence of public modes of expression that could have provided alternative narratives of personal experience,"²⁵ Burroughs dismissed Corey's social model and its message of tolerant liberalism out of hand: "I hate the stupid bastards who won't mind their own business," he snaps, "which is why I never could be a

Rutgers, 1994), reprinted as "Queer Apocalypse: Framing William Burroughs," in Dellamora, ed., *Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at the End* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 136–67.

²² For critiques of Cronenberg's film, see Dellamora, cited above, Murphy, and William Beard's excellent article, "Insect Poetics: Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch*," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* (September 1996), 823–52.

²³ See Chris Rodley's essay "So Deep in My Heart You're Really a Part of Me," for a brief but incisive analysis of Cronenberg's filmmaking as an "antidote" to Burroughs' influence, in Ira Silverberg, ed., *Everything Is Permitted: the Making of Naked Lunch* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), 112.

²⁴ My discussion of Corey (pseudonym for Edward Sagarin) draws on John D'Emilio's survey, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

²⁵ Dellamora, 150.

liberal” (*Letters*, 106).²⁶ From the vantage of Mexico, and the licence it afforded him, an ethnic minoritarian or civil rights model of same-sex identity held little appeal for Burroughs, even though he consistently related social environment to psychological conditioning in general and sexual behaviour in particular, especially when writing to Ginsberg. Refusing to accept compulsory heterosexuality in the figure of “the woman with the official federal stamp of approval” (129), Burroughs certainly understood that his narrative of undesired sexual identity would, of necessity, contest the binary politics of desirable national identity in force over the border.²⁷ In an earlier letter from Mexico, Burroughs had challenged Ginsberg for avoiding “any experience that goes beyond arbitrary boundaries (and boundaries set by others)” (68) – a challenge directed to the self-disciplining of consciousness, to the self-colonization of the body, and to the voluntary border-patrolling of sexual identity in Cold War America. Recall not just Burroughs’ maxim in *The Naked Lunch* – “A *functioning* police state needs no police” – but its context: “Homosexuality is a *political* crime in a matriarchy. No society tolerates overt rejection of its basic tenets.”²⁸

On the other side of the Mexican border a highly politicized psychopathology of sexual identity was being constructed, operating as a central rhetorical tactic in the postwar strategy of domestic containment and the consolidation of consensus. Working through a series of guilt-by-association equations that sought to naturalize a duality of health and disease mapped on to one of patriotism and treason, the paranoid style of American politics represented political dissent as un-natural and sexual deviance as un-American. The Kinsey Report of 1948 was crucial in this respect, in the short run serving to “magnify suddenly the proportions of the danger” posed by the homosexual menace.²⁹ In 1950, a key Senate report could state: “One homosexual can pollute a Government office.” After Kinsey, the menace was not just under the beds but inside them, and the paranoid rhetoric of public health at risk from contagion was especially potent, since the unspeakable and unnatural were figured as

²⁶ *The Letters of William S. Burroughs, 1945–59*, edited and introduced by Oliver Harris (New York: Viking, 1993), hereafter abbreviated as *Letters*.

²⁷ For an informed analysis, see Carla Kaplan, “Undesirable Desire; Citizenship and Romance in Modern American Fiction,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, 43: 1 (Spring 1997), 144–56.

²⁸ William Burroughs, *The Naked Lunch* (Paris: Olympia Press, 1959; New York: Grove, 1992), 36.

²⁹ D’Emilio, 37. See also David Allyn, “Private Acts/Public Policy: Alfred Kinsey, the American Law Institute and the Privatization of American Sexual Morality,” *Journal of American Studies*, 30: 3 (1996), 405–28.

virtually undetectable, viral threats to the integrity of national and individual immune systems. This added up to what Andrew Ross memorably calls “the Cold War culture of germophobia.”³⁰ And so when homosexuality was linked to national security, federal departments and the military responded by purging thousands classified simply as “undesirable.” Over the border, in May 1952 Burroughs was himself reporting a purge of “queers and hipsters” that had taken place at Mexico City College, describing it as “Un-Mexican” but typically American, and concluding (*Letters*, 125): “They aim to incarcerate all undesirables, that is anyone who does not function as an interchangeable part in their anti-human Social Economic set-up.” By definition, the queer and the hipster should represent, as Murphy claims, “points of departure for an exacting critique of the social organisation of late capital.”³¹ And, if the discourses of national security had an economic bottom line, so that, as Robert Corber has argued, they “marginalized forms of male identity that were not conducive to Fordism’s needs and aims” by representing them as deviant, if not potentially homosexual,³² then it becomes clear which identity in Burroughs’ blast against the Social Economic order should pose the more pressing threat.

Corber’s case for the politicization of homosexuality clarifies the historical potency of *Queer* over and above that of *Junkie* at the moment of Burroughs’ writing. As Gary Indiana has remarked, Burroughs was ahead of the times, prophetic indeed, with respect to junk: “drug hysteria” may have become a “major implement of state terror” in the 1980s and 1990s, but was a “relatively minor tool of social repression in the 1940s and 1950s.”³³ In sharp contrast, homophobic panic not only dominated the national agenda of those years, but, tied so closely to the red scare and to fears of disease and disorder, was instrumental in authorizing an unprecedented surveillance of the American body politic. When *Junkie: Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict* appeared in 1953, Burroughs’ paperback publishers not only chose the title (originally, *Junk*), but policed his text by packaging it with *Narcotic Agent*, and

³⁰ Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 45.

³¹ Timothy S. Murphy, “William Burroughs: Between Indifference and Revalorization, notes towards a political reading,” *Angelaki*, 1 (1993), 1 (113–24), 118.

³² Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in the Cold War: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 104. See also Corber’s *In the Name of National Security: Hitchcock, Homophobia, and the Political Construction of Gender in Postwar America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

³³ Gary Indiana, “Burroughs,” in Silverberg, *Everything Is Permitted*, 124.

represented this handcuffing quite literally via symmetrical cover designs. Ironically, when Ginsberg added an introduction to the re-edited *Junky* in 1977, he spoke of these books being “69’d”; doubly ironic, since it begs the question what text might have policed *Queer*, while the answer turns out to be Burroughs’ own Introduction.

For the effect of Burroughs’ 1985 Introduction to his 1952 manuscript is to depoliticize the title and text of *Queer*. The term itself passes without comment, although its deployment not only anticipated more radical usage – even before the advent of identity politics and the “queer theory” that rose to contest it – but was very deliberately adopted at the time of writing.³⁴ But, in *Queer*’s Introduction, there is no attempt to historicize desire, for example by contrasting Burroughs’ involvement in early emergent and later highly visible homosexual subcultures. We might at least have expected a repetition of Burroughs’ previous claims about the novel’s suppression – that it was rejected by Ace because in the early 1950s it would have endangered any American publisher – but that, too, despite the licence of three decades, is a story that goes untold. There is not a hint of this history here, a silence all the more significant given the enduring marginality of Burroughs within homosexual writing and queer criticism. Far from trying to rectify that peripheral status, by default *Queer*’s Introduction supports it.

Queerer still, when Burroughs turns to the narrative itself, he actually argues against a sexualized reading of its central relationship, the agonizing courtship by William Lee of Eugene Allerton. Since it is the sustained, realist representation of an interpersonal relation that makes *Queer* absolutely unique within the Burroughs *oeuvre*, such a flat denial of what constitutes the narrative is truly remarkable. In effect, he asks us not to see what is before our eyes. Rather, what Lee “clearly” seeks in Allerton is, Burroughs explains, “an audience, the acknowledgement of his performance, which of course is a mask, to cover a shocking disintegration” (*xv*): “So he invents a frantic attention-getting format which he calls the Routine: shocking, funny, riveting. ‘It is an Ancient Mariner, and he stoppeth one of three. ...’” Having passed over both the subject of homosexual identity and the pressing national history that was *Queer*’s original context, Burroughs completes the process of depoliticization by abstracting and aestheticizing his own personal history. Cut off from history in this way, *Queer* ceases to be a story of human, let alone homosexual, relations at all. Queer indeed.

³⁴ Clearly, I have not attempted to deal in detail here with the complex sexual politics marked by the historical progression from homosexual to gay to queer.

III

To grasp the textual politics of Burroughs' second novel we have to recover *Queer* as a narrative of the early Cold War, but this can not be done in terms of sexual identity alone. Burroughs' definition of Lee's routines as *aesthetic performances* takes us half-way. But the other half, blocked by his own analysis, can ground both the aesthetic and the libidinal in relations of power. This is where, quite literally, the action is: for Lee's routines are essentially performative, intended, that is, *to make things happen*.

As a term, "queer" readily takes on meaning through a well-ordered set of oppositions: unnatural/natural; counterfeit/genuine; spurious/honest; inexplicable/understandable. In *Queer*, these binaries lose their normative and hierarchic reassurance. Hence the text's initial pre-occupation with "borderline" sexual identity, and the repeated disputes as to who is or is not queer: when Lee is accused of "pretending" to be queer in order "to get in on the act" (34), this not only inverts the logic of the closet, but traps identity in theatricality. It should take one to know one, but, since there is no agreement among queers, there is no way to draw the border lines of straight identity either. Thus Lee's courtship of Allerton is troubling not just because, *en passant*, Lee identifies himself as a married man, and his partner appears heterosexual, but because the third point of this odd love triangle, Allerton's friend Mary, is described in exactly the same ambiguous terms as Allerton. She has "dyed red hair and carefully applied makeup," and he has hair "bleached by the sun like a sloppy dyeing job" and an "equivocal face" that conveys "an impression of makeup" (19, 16). Twinned by artificiality, the characterizations queer the presumed authenticity, integrity, and normativity of heterosexual identities.³⁵

Lee's pursuit of Allerton aggravates the site of pressing cultural and political fears post-Kinsey by showing sexual categories as not stable and mutually exclusive but, in Jennifer Terry's gloss, "permeable and highly contingent."³⁶ In this sense, Lee in particular embodies the alarming dissolution of distinct boundaries. But Lee is himself alarmed by this

³⁵ See John Nguyet Erni, "Eternal Excesses: Towards a Queer Mode of Articulation in Social Theory," *American Literary History* (1996), 565–81 (581): "We want to make queer the theory and the sociality that *depend on* a queer mode of articulation... to see heteronormativity as, well, not so 'normal.'"

³⁶ Jennifer Terry, "Anxious Slippages between 'Us' and 'Them': A Brief History of the Scientific Search for Homosexual Bodies," in Terry and Jacqueline Urla, eds., *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 159.

instability; a fact that attests to the force of the binary, its power to secure identity, however falsely. Equally, his alarm makes it clear that, rather than resolutely going beyond a net of controls, he is quite unable to assert a coherent self-definition. Under the propulsion of desire, Lee runs ever faster out of control and into a zone of disassociated fragmentation; a state at times of schizophrenia, of ontological crisis and breakdown. *Queer* presents an early version of Interzone, and defines it in queer terms as a no-man's land in excess of systematic classification. Putting knowledge into doubt is a source of subversive potency, as is embodying such indeterminacy. "Danger lies in transitional states," as Mary Douglass put it, while recognizing the double-edged implications: "The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others."³⁷ In *Queer*, Lee's disintegration is overwhelmingly negative and regressive – *pain* is his dominant feeling, always tied to images of betrayed childhood, and so to lost psychic wholeness³⁸ – but it also promises an alternative horizon; positive disintegration. That is, not "falling apart" but extrication from an integrated system;³⁹ Lee's state of trauma has itself the potential to traumatize; his horrified individual disintegration the potential to disintegrate the system with the powers of horror. Repeatedly "depressed and shattered," separated from life by "a glass wall," and so constantly feeling "the tearing ache of limitless desire" (58, 94, 96), Lee experiences the kind of masochistic abjection that, for Leo Bersani, might "shatter" identity itself.⁴⁰ From Lee's "curiously spectral" appearance early on (13), to his final transformation into the fantomatic Skip Tracer, a reposessor of bodies, *Queer* gestures towards "the positivity of horror and abjection" associated by Halberstam and Livingston with the Posthuman Body, as "functional dysfunctions that make other things happen."⁴¹ Since this gives an accurate gloss of *The Naked Lunch*, where the metamorphic deconstruction of agency is a constant, it is fair to say that *Queer* makes that text happen, opening the border into "The Land Where Anything Goes" (95).

³⁷ Mary Douglass, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 96.

³⁸ Sander L. Gilman, *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 2, 5.

³⁹ Gregory W. Bredbeck, "The New Queer Narrative: intervention and critique," *Textual Practice*, 9: 3 (1995), 477–502 (492).

⁴⁰ See Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 39. See also Robert L. Caserio, "Queer Passions, Queer Citizenship: Some Novels about the State of the American Nation 1946–1954," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 43: 1 (Spring 1997), 170–205.

⁴¹ Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston, "Introduction," in Halberstam and Livingston, eds., *Posthuman Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 14.

The origins of *The Naked Lunch* in *Queer* are tied to the development of the routine as a form of humorous and horrific excess. *Queer* starts off as straight narrative, and you might say the text only becomes itself through its own narrative disintegration, its steady collapse into a series of barely connected episodes. Lee's routines turn increasingly autonomous. Given the form of *The Naked Lunch*, which disconnects its routines from any anchoring subjectivity or interpersonal relations, and short-circuits narrative continuity and closure, the fragmented incompleteness of the *Queer* manuscript is less a measure of failure, than a sign of things to come.

The routine is a queer – and queering – form, and Lee's routines beg awkward questions of authenticity in the course of articulating desire. More importantly, in these rhetorical performances the effects of desire on agency and identity are tied ever more tightly to the economic, racial, and ideological. His routines articulate a progressively *politicized* psychology, and one that becomes, for readings primed by such contemporary valorisations of homosexuality as found in the Beat movement, more and more problematic. Whereas Ginsberg would offer to put his “queer shoulder to the wheel,” defiantly asserting his legitimacy as an authentic upholder of America's historical project, Burroughs' novel has an entirely different take on desirable national and sexual identity.⁴²

To begin with, Lee's routines appear as bizarre, self-conscious allegorical fantasies, ironic ways to dispel the impression of being “a peculiar and undesirable character” (22). His first, the saga of the Texas Oilman, is the polyphonic performance of a shaggy-dog story that encodes, if Allerton can decipher it, the strategy of Lee's intended courtship. Lee's second routine openly confesses his “uh, proclivities” (39):

I thought of the painted, simpering female impersonators I had seen in a Baltimore night club. Could it be possible that I was one of those subhuman things? I walked the streets in a daze, like a man with a light concussion – just a minute, Doctor Kildare, this isn't your script.

Again, what seems clear is the routine's strategy: the arch, melodramatic tone allows Lee to exaggerate homosexuality as the *peccata contra naturam* in order to mock his own anxiety and disarm any residue of abhorrence or resistance in Allerton. Lee then introduces the character of Bobo, whose lesson to conquer prejudice with love – clearly modelled on Corey's derided book – is rewarded by a disembowelling and strangu-

⁴² Allen Ginsberg, “America” (1956), in *Collected Poems, 1947–1980* (New York: Viking, 1985), 148. See Catherine R. Stimpson, “The Beat Generation and the Trials of Homosexual Liberation,” *Salmagundi*, 58–59 (1982–83), 373–92.

lation Isadora Duncan style. It is at this point, as Lee glosses Bobo's words of wisdom, that his routines turn sinister (40):

“‘No one is ever really alone. You are part of everything alive.’ The difficulty is to convince someone else he is really a part of you, so what the hell? Us parts ought to work together. Reet?... What I mean is, Allerton, we are all parts of a tremendous whole. No use fighting it.” Lee was getting tired of the routine. He looked around restlessly for some place to put it down.

Simultaneously, his “script” takes on an unwanted, rather than parodied, momentum of its own, and declares a purpose that has less to do with overcoming another's prejudices than with overcoming the other altogether. Needing not only to deposit but to depose the routine, Lee finds himself a victim of his own libidinal and authoritarian intentions towards Allerton, as the tension between parody and sincerity collapses. Lee may adopt Bobo's rhetoric of physical and spiritual democracy – “we are all parts of a tremendous whole” – but he lets slip an aggressive will – “No use fighting it” – entirely at odds with the tenor of a tradition that runs from Whitman down to Ginsberg. If anything, there is a trace of Melville's Captain Ahab here, another great monologist and monomaniac, seeking wholeness by absorbing the other into the self and enslaving other bodies to his imperial will. That Lee does not see himself and Allerton as equal “parts” who can “work together” is apparent from the explicitly political episode that follows.

The episode begins outside the Russian restaurant featured in the previous scene, with Lee's promise of a Napoleon brandy that does not appeal “to the mass tongue” (41). The episode ends in Lee's apartment where, still playing on matters of taste, class, and manners in a knowingly decadent fashion, Lee seduces Allerton into bed. It is the action literally in between these two moments and locations that charges the personal relations with political significance. Lee calls a cab (41–42):

“Three pesos to Insurgentes and Monterrey,” Lee said to the driver in his atrocious Spanish. The driver said four. Lee waved him on. The driver muttered something and opened the door.

Inside, Lee turned to Allerton. “The man plainly harbors subversive thoughts. You know, when I was at Princeton, Communism was the thing. To come out flat for private property and a class society, you marked yourself a stupid lout or suspect to be a High Episcopalian pederast. But I held out against the infection – of Communism I mean, of course.”

Lee's characterization of political conditions during the New Deal years, where capitalism is queer and communism the norm, perverts the historical record in line with the Cold War climate two decades later. At

the same time, that Lee is himself a pederast and is *en route* to the seduction of a straight American – a national security nightmare, since Allerton is a veteran of Counter Intelligence Corps service (24) – clearly problematizes his status as an upholder of American capital against the infectious perversion of communism. If Lee’s encoded gags test Allerton’s former cryptographic intelligence skills, the message remains unclear to the reader: is Lee really putting his queer shoulder to the hegemonic wheel of American ideology?

The contradictions are unstable, inflammatory. But Burroughs carefully sets Lee’s actual behaviour into sharp relief against the ambiguous humour of his exchanges with Allerton. The power of a single peso speaks bluntly: he whose brandy does not appeal to the mass tongue can silence the tongue of the masses with a wave of the hand. When he cuts four pesos down to three, Lee performs in miniature the covert colonialist exploitation of “Point Four” – an arm of US foreign policy operating under the guise of a philanthropic “war against disease, poverty, and ignorance.”⁴³ In *The Yage Letters* (1963), which begins as an effective sequel to *Queer*, Burroughs would hammer this particular political point home, making open reference to “all this Point four and good nabor crap and financial aid,” while pressing Lee still further into the contradictions of American national identity.⁴⁴ Clearly, there is no romance of the *fellahin* for Lee. Contrast Kerouac’s contemporaneous *On the Road*, where Sal Paradise indulges in fantasized identification as a Mexican peasant – a fantasy that Robert Holton scathingly terms a naïve and depthless “racial version of cross-dressing.”⁴⁵ In *Queer*, there is no such temptation to vicarious alignment with other oppressed others, no promotion of the liberal “model of political solidarity” across “multiple axes of difference” celebrated in Robert Corber’s *Homosexuality in Cold War America*.⁴⁶ When a Mexican passerby insults Lee and Allerton in the street, Lee reacts with a blunt display of colonial power, dismissing the Mexican’s “little jerkwater country” under the benevolent economic imperium of his “good American dollars” (53). On the other hand, Lee’s reaction also implies the limits to American foreign policy, exposed as a national fantasy of control, since he has to resort to the threat of force – showing his gun – a threat based on fear: “Someday they won’t walk away.” But

⁴³ Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 57.

⁴⁴ *The Yage Letters* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1963; 2nd edn, 1975), 11.

⁴⁵ Robert Holton, “Kerouac among the Fellahin: *On the Road* to the Postmodern,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, 41: 2 (Summer 1995), 265–83.

⁴⁶ Corber, *Homosexuality in the Cold War*, 4.

Lee does more than magnify the ugliness of the Ugly American, and the episode in the cab has a second function. This is to ally fellow Americans abroad, a tactic that, by seeking to resolve the hierarchic play of power between them, only underlines its existence. And this is the reason why, despite their overlapping autobiographical narratives, in *Queer* Lee's relationship to Mexicans is entirely different from that in *Junkie*. In *Junkie*, Lee learns the Idealist lesson that his worst enemy is "the frightened flesh" of his own body (152): addiction confers the illusion of self-sufficiency and heroin "trumps" desire.⁴⁷ In *Queer*, Lee's identity is destabilized by desire: he tries to shore up the walls of his psyche by aggressively policing the borders of his national identity, attacking the body politic's enemies without in a defensive reaction designed to deal with an enemy within. It is in the context of relations of power, more particularly the *frustration* of power, that Lee now takes on an identity so emphatically based on class, race, nationality, and money. What is shocking about Lee's scene of seduction is its conclusion, when he crudely offers to redeem Allerton's camera from the pawnshop for *four hundred pesos*. The economic articulation of Lee's desire not only suggests the market's colonization of all relations – hence his final fantasy of working for Friendly Finance – but implies the erotic, objectifying economy of predatory capitalism via the specific object of exchange: the camera. This becomes explicit in Panama, as Lee plays the colonialist predator, shooting the natives even as he recognizes "something obscene and sinister about photography, a desire to imprison, to incorporate, a sexual intensity of pursuit" (124).

Queer's insistent interchange between the particular of Lee's relationship with Allerton and a larger narrative of power reaches its apogee in Guayaquil. Ecuador is another "jerkwater country" to the Ugly American tourist, but what is arresting is Lee's alliance with its internal order of power, its "alarmed" rich people (106):

"What we need here is a security department, to keep the underdog under."

"Yes," said Allerton. "We must secure uniformity of opinion."

"Opinion! What are we running here, a debating society? Give me one year and the people won't have any opinions."

As a national security expert hired out to the imperial state, Lee asks no questions: he has "not come to psychoanalyze Caesar, but to protect his person." Allerton's repartee plays the game, but Lee drives it to a point of uneasy excess. Our discomfort that this is not parody at all is, as before,

⁴⁷ David Lenson, *On Drugs* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 33.

borne out by the way Lee's exchange with Allerton is followed by direct and unambiguous action. When his hotel neighbour – overhearing through a ventilation gap – says “something in Spanish to the effect Lee should be quiet,” Lee's reaction is fascist without being funny (107):

“Ah shut up,” said Lee, leaping to his feet. “I'll nail a blanket over that slot! I'll cut off your fucking air! You only breathe with my permission. You're the occupant of an inside room, a room without windows. So remember your place and shut your poverty-stricken mouth!”

Again, Lee plays the Ugly American all too convincingly. His malicious performance oddly exceeds narrative necessity, which makes it difficult to motivate as a tactic to make bonds with Allerton by outbidding him, since all the money in the xenophobic pot is Lee's own. Rather, his sadistic aggression towards racial others seems to be an act of hysterical compensation for the impotence in his sexual relationship. The aggression also appears directed at Allerton himself, fantasizing the power of absolute economic leverage, and threatening to act out Lee's suffocating demands. Given the context, it is hard not to read Lee's relationship with Allerton through the lenses of contemporary political power struggles, and vice versa. Allerton is made to occupy a number of positions, from fellow American to Third-World “underdog” to superpower opponent. And yet – *Queer* is not a political allegory. Rather it is *about* allegory, in the sense that Lee is possessed by the allegorical impulse; by a coding of desire that he cannot control and which “speaks” Lee in terms of his imperial class identity. Constantly bringing private and political narratives together, Lee exposes the pathology of American demonology as analysed by Michael Paul Rogin. If Lee's Mexican cab driver “harbors subversive thoughts,” his own behaviour demonstrates the fantasmatic roots of countersubversive politics, since, in Rogin's words, “a political tradition that splits off and demonizes the other convicts itself of psychological disturbance.”⁴⁸ Indeed, *Queer* bears out Rogin's claim to open up “the deep sources of countersubversive fantasy” by documenting what he identifies as the “connections in political demonology between political and sexual chaos.”

In *Queer*, homosexuality becomes politicized, then, through the common power structures of national and individual relations, and specifically through the toxic fascism of shared fantasies of control. For all its heightened autobiographical intimacy, *Queer* not only has far more

⁴⁸ Michael Paul Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 285; 290.

direct political reference and commentary than *Junkie*, but makes that political engagement, through Lee, integral to its narrative – and to his *narrating* – action. With the exception of one late scene, *Junkie* never actually describes the relationship of pusher to addict in terms of power, “the power to give or withhold” (140). This is an extraordinary refusal, not only because you would think such an economy is intrinsic to the relation, but given the ubiquity of addiction as Burroughs’ defining model of control. *Junkie* reduces meaningful interpersonal relations to a virtual degree-zero. *Queer* moves in the opposite direction, polarizing into mastery and subordination the effects of power by turning interpersonal relations into a zero-sum game.

The distinction between the two texts’ political potency within the early 1950s, and between their textual politics, rests, therefore, on the perverse structural symmetry that in *Queer* aligns Lee’s economy of diseased desire with a pathology of the national political imaginary. It is Lee’s unbearable, masochistic dependence on the other, embodied in Allerton, that brings into play his own fantasies of an enslaving imperial will, so that Lee dreams the Cold War dream of total control, a dream whose corollary is frustration and whose hidden logic is its own autonomy.

In tune with post-war laboratory and field research, and specifically with the CIA’s secret drug and mind control programme MK-ULTRA, set up in 1953, Lee becomes obsessed with finding the supposedly telepathic *yagé* vine. Lee’s speculations that the Russians and Americans are following in the steps of the ancient Mayans by experimenting with tools of mass “thought control” (50) are historically alert. There really was a Cold War Yagé Race, and the search for the Manchurian Candidate begins, presciently here.⁴⁹ Both sides are acknowledged to be developing ultimate techniques of social control, and their economic and military applications. The era’s defining political issue – the conflict between totalitarianism and individual freedom – no longer defines one side of the Cold War against the other. Like Boris, who “did excellent work with the Reds in Barcelona and with the Gestapo in Poland” and whose skills of interrogation, Lee fantasises, will now help him obtain information on *yagé* (77), they speak a common language of technological rationality and social engineering. But, like Boris, this language is for Burroughs not only amoral but autonomous, a machinery of control with a deadly life of its own. What

⁴⁹ See John Marks, *The Search for the ‘Manchurian Candidate’: The CIA and Mind Control* (London: Allen Lane, 1970), which directly cites Burroughs’ research into *yagé*. See also Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain, *Acid Dreams; The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, the Sixties, and Beyond* (New York: Grove Press, 1985; 1992).

he refuses is not only the comforting antithesis between ideological systems, but the human control of those systems. Clearly, Boris is a draft for Benway in *The Naked Lunch*. More intriguingly, his example also predicts Burroughs' 1960s Nova Trilogy, constructed as a geo-political allegory in which America and Russia barely figure because they are mere pawns of a higher alien power, the Nova Mob. Among their key weapons are "parasitic organisms occupying a human host, rather like a radio transmitter, which directs and controls it," so that technology parasitizes human insides and humanity disappears inside technology.⁵⁰

In light of the above, the key passage in *Queer* – placed at the literal centre of the narrative – precedes Lee's recognition that he "could not give up" his hopeless pursuit of Allerton (63–64):

Lee was interested in the theory of games and the strategy of random behavior. As he had supposed, the theory of games does not apply to chess, since chess rules out the element of chance and approaches elimination of the unpredictable human factor. If the mechanism of chess were completely understood, the outcome could be predicted after any initial move. "A game for thinking machines," Lee thought.

Chess is the game played continually by Allerton and Mary to the exclusion of Lee, but his interest here conflates, with exemplary economy, the intimately personal narrative action and the activities of a larger cultural history of technology and power. For Lee is tuning into an absolutely central understanding of the Cold War years as the emergent age of cybernetic systems, an age defined famously by Norbert Weiner as that of "communication and control."⁵¹ And, as Burroughs clearly knew, chess was a vital link between the key players in the early development of computer science, cognitive psychology, and information theory: Weiner, Von Neumann – whose *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* he effectively quotes here – Claude Shannon, and Alan Turing.⁵² In *The Human Use of*

⁵⁰ William Burroughs, Interview in George Plimpton, ed., *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews* (New York: Viking, 1967; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 172.

⁵¹ See Norbert Weiner, *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (1948; 2nd edition; New York: MIT Press, 1961). For a detailed and illuminating history of the politics of computing technology, see Paul N. Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).

⁵² See John Von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), 125: "if the theory of chess were really fully known there would be nothing left to play." The continuity from *Queer* to the Nova Trilogy is confirmed by his allusion to Von Neumann, who he would next name a decade later in relation to his cut-up techniques. Turing's history is particularly relevant, because the man whose code-breaking skills constituted the Allies' secret

Human Beings (1950), Wiener specifically warned of the “very sinister possibilities” implied by computerized chess programmes, concluding: “The steps between my original suggestion of the chess-playing machine, Mr Shannon’s move to realize it in metal, the use of computing machines to plan the necessities of war, and the colossal state machine... are clear and terrifying.”⁵³ Wiener might be predicting the plot of *Terminator* here, just as Burroughs is hatching the germs of *The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express*. What Lee is confronting is the possibility that, in a world where the stochastic is eliminated, the human is no more than the automaton of Von Neumann’s dreams – the possibility, in short, that he is only a soft machine, coded and wired so perfectly he does not realize it. As Sadie Plant observes of the cyborg: “What makes this figure so tragic is the extent to which he has been programmed to believe in his own autonomy.”⁵⁴ This passage marks the basis to Burroughs’ interest in the man–machine interface and in the relation between chance and determinism, and the point of departure is the context of desire.

In Manta, Lee’s determination to assert his own agency and subjectivity takes the form of acting out, via his own fantasy of controlling and objectifying Allerton, the totalitarian and technological fantasies of state power (89):

“Think of it: thought control. Take anyone apart and rebuild to your taste. Anything about somebody bugs you, you say, ‘Yagé! I want that routine took clear out of his mind.’ I could think of a few changes I might make in you, doll.” He looked at Allerton and licked his lips. “You’d be so much *nicer* after a few alterations. You’re nice now, of course, but you do have those irritating little peculiarities. I mean, you won’t do exactly what I want you to do all the time.”

In Lee’s reveries of reconstructing the other towards conditions of absolute predictability, the affectionate “doll” is synonymous with automaton, the “irritating little peculiarities” with “the unpredictable human factor,” and his routine a fantasy in miniature of the rending and reassembly of human minds as mechanical brains to suit the specifications

weapon of World War 2, was driven to suicide because of his inability to keep secret his homosexual identity – and went on trial in March 1952, the very month Burroughs began work on *Queer*.

⁵³ Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1950), 203, 209. Note the – usually ignored – emphasis in Wiener’s title.

⁵⁴ Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women + The New Technoculture* (London: Fourth Estate, 1997), 99.

of power. This would indeed be the “basic con” described earlier, beyond seduction and rhetoric (50): “No build-up, no spiel, no routine, just move in on someone’s psyche and give orders.” Lee’s interest now progresses from the instruments of control to the psychiatric and pathological conditions that control both manufactures and manifests, and once again this crosses the Cold War divide (91): “Automatic obedience, synthetic schizophrenia, mass-produced to order. That is the Russian dream, and America is not far behind. The bureaucrats of both countries want the same thing: Control. The superego, the controlling agency, gone cancerous and beserk.” By first equating the mechanisms of superpower hegemony with his phony narrative performances – build-up, spiel, routine – and by then following his own narcissistic fantasy of control with an analysis of bureaucratic state power, Lee thoroughly psychopathologizes control as itself queer.

As a form of macro–micro criticism, *Queer* might be understood in Foucault’s well-known terms, or as an instance of what Joseph Gabel, proposing “the structural identity of ideology and schizophrenia,” termed “masochistic autoanalysis.”⁵⁵ No reading of the text’s political analysis can be made in isolation from its articulation of individual desire, but it would be a mistake to read Lee’s behaviour as ideological contradiction or “schizoid enculturation”;⁵⁶ that is, as the internalization by a homosexual of a homophobia that necessarily splits the subject and alienates him from his own desires. Lee certainly is not self-possessed – which is why his routines cannot be naturalized as parodies or satires – but the progressive autonomy of his speech and spectralization of his body suggest less ideological disturbances of psychology than the literal effects of an embodied parasitology. That this was understood by Burroughs from the outset is clear from the very titles of his first two novels: not as they came to be published – *Junkie* and *Queer* – but as intended: *Junk* and *Queer*. As a sequel to *Junk*, what *Queer* denotes is not an identity but an entity, precisely a parasite as distinct from its human host.

Lee comes face to face with powerlessness, with possession, in the very course of articulating power and fantasizing possession, when, that is, his routines prove fascinating not to the listener but to the speaker. Hence the

⁵⁵ Joseph Gabel, *False Consciousness: An Essay on Reification*, translated by Margaret A. Thompson (Paris: 1962; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 81. See also Gabel’s *Ideologies and the Corruption of Thought*, edited by Alan Sica (New Brunswick and London: Transaction, 1997).

⁵⁶ David Savran, *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 14, 84.

text's essential scene is indeed the queerest, and occurs when ends and means undergo a thorough perversion. Immediately after his speculations about chess, game theory, and computers, Lee makes a desperate bid to break up Allerton's relation with Mary by disrupting their game of chess with a routine that encodes a counter-allegory of chess as an all-male, zero-sum competition (65–66). At the very moment Lee pauses from this “monologue,” Mary instructs Allerton in silent “lover code” that they “have to go now.” The game of chess is a matriarchy, ruled by its Queen, and again Burroughs anticipates *The Manchurian Candidate*, where the Queen of Diamonds is the control card, figuring a classic Cold War conflation of brainwashing, momism, and communism. *Queer* cannot exorcise the spectre of the domineering mother, conventionally tied to homosexual aetiology, since Lee – a name that declares Burroughs' maternal identity – fantasizes wielding over Allerton exactly the telepathic power of control exercised here by Mary – a name that is recurrent throughout Burroughs' work.⁵⁷

At this point, with Allerton and Mary gone, Lee's routine is “coming to him like dictation” (66), putting him in a passive position before words that issue forth in an elaborate polyphony of ventriloquial voices. This is less Vaudevillian theatricality and more like the radio ventriloquism of Edgar Bergen: it is what Adorno meant by language as a “zone of paranoiac infection” – “Everyone is his own Charlie McCarthy” – as words “acquire a magical sway over their users” and “take on a life of their own, bringing woe on anyone who goes near them.”⁵⁸ This begs the question: if Lee is scripted here, does he only appear to speak elsewhere, as the dummy only appears to talk? If so, then Lee, a fascist in fantasy, experiences Burroughs' version of the fascism of language, understood, in Barthes' dictum, not as a form of inhibiting censorship, not as the prohibition to speak, but rather as the obligation to speak, where speech is always on alien and alienating terms and always an intermingling of “servility and power.”⁵⁹

As “The Chess Master” routine gives way to “The Slave Trader” –

⁵⁷ Figures of emasculating and controlling maternal women are prominent early on in *Queer*, and Lee is vocal in criticizing them. But his one reference to being married gives away Lee's own position by anticipating Allerton's subjection to Mary – “I had to go home to my wife” (21) – while Burroughs' choice of the name Lee implies the contradictions in his position.

⁵⁸ Theodore Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, translated by E. F. N. Jephcott (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1951; London: Verso, 1978), 137–38.

⁵⁹ Roland Barthes, “Inaugural Lecture: College de France” (1977), in Susan Sontag, ed., *A Barthes Reader*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982; London: Fontana, 1983), 461.

where the colonialist commodification of Third-World boys' bodies shows the Ugly American at his ugliest – the Hegelian terms are reversed. It is Lee's drive to impose power which reveals that drive as itself an imposition of power, and the colonist himself colonized, penetrated by "dirty" words; "The Slave Trader" predicts the anatomy of human agency and the body politic in Burroughs' most famous routine of ventriloquy, viral growth, and the return of the anally repressed – "The Talking Asshole". Lee no more coincides with his speech than he does with his body. As the polyvocal performance plays on and on, Lee remains a speaker only in the sense of a piece of amplifying sound equipment, a transmitter of received messages. From "Sorry... wrong number" onwards (3), *Queer* repeatedly figures Lee's desires in terms of telephonic connections or radio reception, and its disembodied voices exist in the fantasmatic technology–schizophrenia–desire nexus mapped by Avital Ronell ("There is always a remnant of the persecuting, accusatory mother in the telephone system"), Ellis Hansson ("To be queer is to hear strange voices, to answer an obscene call"), or Allen Weiss ("sound appears without any corresponding visual correlate – the very feature which permits radio to be experienced as a spiritual or paranoid receiver, as well as an artistic muse").⁶⁰ What film should Lee take Allerton to see but Cocteau's *Orpheus* (36–37), where technologies of communication are nested one inside another; the medium of film representing the poet's muse as a dictating car radio.⁶¹ However, *Queer*'s interest in media, as in cybernetic systems of communication and control and in the sender–receiver structure of telepathy, is grounded in an old *techne* because based on the very technology employed by Burroughs to produce the text. Allerton's disappearance from the scene of Lee's autonomous routine is the telling instance. In narrative context we read the routine as speech; we might better hear it as *writing*. This is what the absence of a listener transforms the monologue into, a technology of voice to disarm, seduce, and fascinate – the reader.

If Lee's routines and Burroughs' writing bear the stamp of power, then this is, absurdly, *literal*. As I have set out elsewhere, Burroughs' routines

⁶⁰ Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 144; Ellis Hansson, "The Telephone and Its Queerness," in Sue-Ellen Case, Philip Brett and Susan Leigh Foster, eds., *Cruising the Performative: Interventions into the Representation of Ethnicity, Nationality, and Sexuality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 53; Allen S. Weiss, *Phantasmic Radio* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 80.

⁶¹ Of course, Cocteau's film is also preoccupied with the death of the poet's wife, so that the reference, typically, slips between different levels of meaning.

were the result of the most extraordinary sequence of tortuous courtships by correspondence.⁶² The epistolary scene produced a *literal economy* of writing – at once exercising and exorcising fantasms of power – that in the case of *Queer* was structurally identical to the speaker–listener relationship. To be clear: this is not a recourse to speculative, extra-textual biographical history; *Queer* is no allegory of the writer–reader relation, it *is* that relation – and the published correspondence only hints at the traumatic knowledge that Burroughs must have learned from such complicity. Burroughs’ investment in the routine form and in the epistolary coincide and together originate the workings of power within the activity of writing. The power exercised through the epistolary medium by the sender against the receiver is instantly recognizable as Burroughs’ model for modern technologies of communication as methods of control, and the technofantasies of “biocontrol” in *The Naked Lunch* are a technical updating of the diabolic principle that drives Burroughs’ epistolary machine: again, it is a quite literal and material *sending* that underwrites the “unqualified evil” of the Senders in *The Naked Lunch* (167). In *Queer*, Lee’s abject failure to dictate to Allerton desires and demands that succeed in dictating themselves to Lee short-circuits this machinery of control – and, as the ground of Burroughs’ textual politics, this is exemplary. The point is that Lee fails; Allerton disappears, leaving nothing behind but words on the page.

What is being played out in *Queer* is communication not *of* a disease – homosexual desire – but *as* a disease. The will to communicate occludes human agency in a solipsistic continuous circuit, a circuit sabotaged methodologically in Burroughs’ cut-up texts through feedback, a “self-feeding system seeking its own catastrophe.”⁶³ In *The Ticket That Exploded*, which begins by rewriting Lee’s relationship with Allerton as a chess match subject to a cut-up queering – “I took his queen in the first few minutes of play by making completely random moves” – Burroughs could not be more explicit; “Communication must become total and conscious before we can stop it.”⁶⁴ Are the Nova Criminals “ghosts? phantoms?”: “Not at all – very definite organisms indeed... Can you see a virus?”

⁶² See my Introduction to Burroughs’ *Letters*.

⁶³ Weiss, 6.

⁶⁴ William Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* (Paris: Olympia Press, 1962; 2nd edition; New York: Grove Press, 1967), 7, 51; 55. For Allerton’s real-life original, Marker, as chess-player, see *Letters*, 230.