Hip Sublime

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William S. Burroughs is perhaps best known as an experimental writer, iconoclast, and countercultural figure who wrote frankly about his drug use and transgressive sexuality. Several scholars, however, have observed that Burroughs’s outwardly avant-garde writing follows the traditional linear structure of a “quest,” at times with striking parallels to the heroic quests we associate with classical myths and epics such as Homer’s Odyssey and Virgil’s Aeneid. While on the surface, Junky (1953), Queer (written in 1951–53), The Yage Letters (written in 1953), and Naked Lunch (written in 1955–57) may seem to be anarchic, hedonistic narratives of drug-fueled kicks, these early novels are, at the same time, structured around the framework of a single, continuing quest.

This chapter builds on important work by Stull (1981) and Skerl (1985) on the shaping presence of the quest in Burroughs and argues that classical versions of the quest can illuminate Burroughs’s own systematic and sustained engagement with the theme, specifically in his early novels. Burroughs did not explicitly evoke parallels to classical myth as, for example, Jack Ker-
ouac did, but as we will see, his work is informed by those traditional elements of the classical quest to which Dorothy Van Ghent called attention in other Beat writers—the denial of parents, the “mysterious call,” the “journey underground” into “the realm of death,” the “ordeals,” and finally, “the far and visionary goal of the hero’s quest—the return to the Kingdom, the transcendent kingdom of love and brotherhood and life.” In view of Burroughs’s stated intention to escape traditional forms and create a “mythology for the space age” (a phrase which Burroughs began using in the mid-’60s to describe his work; Skerl 1985, 107), his relation to the classical tradition was necessarily indirect, but this does not mean that it was inconsequential.

It is evident from his letters that Burroughs was aware of antecedents in classical literature through his education and wide reading. Even if Burroughs does not seem to have been unusually fascinated by the classical tradition, as was Corso, for example (see pp. 4–7 in this volume), and he did not draw explicitly on classical literature, the motivic and structural configuration of his novels can be helpfully illuminated through comparison with classical myth and epic.

My methodology in this essay bears some similarities to that of Vladimir Propp in his comparative study of folktales. Propp isolates certain narrative structures that do not depend on authorial intentionality but seem to recur across cultures as “motifs” or “type-scenes.” Propp’s work moves beyond individual intentionality toward something more universal or structural as an element of literary narrative and allows the comparison of works that may be—like Burroughs’s writing and classical quest narratives—disparate in content, characterization, or purpose. The approach taken by the classicist R. G. Edmonds (2004, 8) is similar: he states that the narrative of a myth contains “traditional motifs, patterns of action, plot elements and sequences” and in his own work identifies and compares these aspects of several mythic katalogs. Within Beat studies, Grace (2007, 4) takes a similarly structural approach in her analysis of the quest theme—and its parallels in the gnostic pearl tale—in Kerouac’s work. Although she “makes no claim that Kerouac modeled On the Road after the pearl tale,” stating instead that he “drew upon it as a general cultural reference,” Grace maintains that “the pearl template as an interpretive template is relevant as a source of experience that even today

2. See Gair’s chapter in this volume, and Skerl 1985, 22.
3. Van Ghent, quoted by Dickey above (15).
4. He calls “the Welfare State” a “Trojan Horse” in a 1949 letter to Ginsberg (1994, 57); refers to a “satyr . . . a mythological Greek creature characterized by insatiable lust” in a 1951 letter to Kerouac (75); and calls working on an early version of Naked Lunch “a veritable labor of Hercules” in a 1955 letter to Ginsberg (287).
holds significance and power.” She continues: “By examining On the Road as a variation of that much older story, one can see how particular features of the mythic plot and characterization remain viable” (ibid., 84).

I will argue in this chapter that, like the work by Kerouac that Grace discusses, Burroughs's early novels can also be seen as “variations” of a “much older story,” that of a quest, particularly as it was variously explored by the classical authors whom Burroughs would have encountered as part of his educational formation. We will find that some of the shared narrative structures of such quest narratives, like those discussed by Propp and Edmonds, and others detected in the Beats by Van Ghent, turn out to be strikingly present in Burroughs’s early novels, as well.

For anyone wishing to analyze the perceived similarities between otherwise disparate narratives (historically or chronologically), Propp emphasizes the need to move beyond localized contingencies— an author’s intentionality, for example, or the tale's relationship to the culture that produced it—in order to get to the deeper structures that recur with remarkable predictability across cultures:

If we are incapable of breaking the folktale down to its components, then we shall be unable to make a correct comparison. And if we don’t know how to compare, then how can we throw light upon, for instance, an Indo-European relationship or upon the relation of the Greek fable to the Indian, etc.? If we cannot compare one folktale to the other, then how is the folktale to be compared to religions or to myths?” (Propp 1968, 14)

Or, we might ask, how are we to compare classical myth and epic to the work of one of America’s most avant-garde writers if we are unwilling to move beyond the question of how well (or how poorly) acquainted Burroughs was with a classical tradition that seems, at any rate, to inform some aspects of his writing? Burroughs’s oblique engagement with the classical quest accords with the centrality of myth to Beat literature, which other scholars have noted. This aspect of Burroughs’s early work not only extends the range of expressive forms of myth in Beat writing but also reveals the power of the quest motif as a recurrent mechanism for organizing even that chaotic and aberrant experience that Burroughs sought to recount.

Toohey’s (2010) working definition of the epic hero will serve as the foundation for our examination of Burroughs’s conception of such a figure, which is central to his expression of the quest motif. For Toohey, the epic hero is

5. See Dickey in this volume.
someone who is “of superior social station and physique, is pre-eminent in fighting, courage, and perhaps in intelligence. Usually, as a result of a crisis or a war or an enforced quest, this hero will undergo some form of a change in status. After a period of being at odds (emotionally, physically, or even geographically) with his human and divine community he will assume his responsibilities and his duties to both groups” (Toohey 2010, 46).

The prologue of Junky introduces the theme of a quest and manifests the characteristics Toohey lists here, as well as those discussed by Van Ghent. William Lee, the protagonist of the novels and Burroughs’s fictional alter ego, is certainly of “superior social station” as the scion of a wealthy Midwestern family who lives a “safe, comfortable way of life” (Burroughs 1977, xi). The “crisis” he experiences, the call that inspires him to begin his journey, is self-determined and internal: it is the alienation he experiences in his community, which is made clear in the prologue. Lee feels not only as though the suburb in which he was raised was “cut off from contact with the life of the city” but also that “all contact with life was shut out” in this affluent milieu (xii). The phrases “cut off” and “shut out” and their contrast with the repeated term “contact” underscore the almost bodily separation and distance Lee feels from the society around him. Lee’s quest begins when he sets out from this “comfortable” upper-class setting of his youth (xi), which he considers barren of opportunity for connection, stating that his early “environment was empty” (xiii).

The prologue of Junky also establishes the major objective of Lee’s quest, which is the same across all four early novels. The dissatisfaction and yearning for a more exciting, more genuine mode of existence and a connection with others inspires Lee to set off on his journey. But even after leaving his hometown and traveling, he cannot shake his sense of alienation. In the prologue, the phrase “cut off” is repeated, now with reference to the cushion of his trust fund; because of it, Lee states, “I was still cut off from life as I had been in the Midwest suburb” (Burroughs 1977, xiv). He contrasts his drug of choice, opiates, or “junk,” with his sense of alienation, viewing it as a genuine, regenerating form of existence. In the last lines of the prologue, Lee states, “Junk is not a kick. It is a way of life” (xvi). This attitude toward junk persists into the main

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6. Quoted by Dickey (15).

7. Propp refers to the “lack” that can serve as a character’s motivation: “Prior to the beginning of the narrative, the situation in question [may have] gone on for years. But the moment comes when the dispatcher or searcher realizes what in particular is lacking, and in this moment originates the motivation for either dispatch or an immediate search” (1968, 69). Additionally, “a lack may at times be imaginary” (70).
text of *Junky*: initially, Lee sees junk as a vehicle for experience—a literal way of (experiencing) life—that would not have been available to him otherwise.

In *Junky*, as well as his later novels, Lee becomes frustrated by alienation and the limitations of physical existence and seeks to overcome these constraints through an expansion of consciousness that puts him in touch with a larger, universal reality, a more connected form of life. Such a goal, directed toward escaping the limitations of the alienated self, aligns Lee’s desires with those of other classical heroes, who also yearn for transcendence and some form of union with other humans. In classical myth and epic, such goals are expressed in various ways, symbolic or physical, typically at the end of a quest; one thinks of the union between lovers, such as Odysseus and Penelope or Orpheus and Eurydice, a long-sought homecoming, such as Odysseus’s delayed *nostos* to Ithaca after the Trojan War, or Aeneas’s cosmically ordained foundation of Rome after his own search following the Trojan War. Lee’s own search for union has various objectives, including drugs, closeness with a romantic partner and a community that will accept him, but his driving force throughout is his desire for a self-transcending life.

In the analysis that follows, I discuss the quest as a central theme in each of Burroughs’s early novels along with analogues in the classical tradition. Noteworthy shared motifs, for example, are the journey to the underworld, or *katabasis*, in *Junky*; the search to escape the prison of the self in *Queer* and *The Yage Letters*, even as Lee’s choices of vehicles for self-transcendence—homo-sexuality and drug use—mean that he remains “at odds” with the mainstream community; the hero’s return in *Naked Lunch*. In his afterword to *William S. Burroughs at the Front*, Burroughs makes a statement that illuminates his idea of “mythology for the Space Age,” asserting that his “purpose in writing has always been to express human potentials and purposes relevant to the Space Age” (Burroughs 1991, 268). I hope to demonstrate the ways that Burroughs expresses and updates the traditional elements of the quest narrative, so concerned with such “human potentials and purposes,” which is deeply rooted in classicism. Such analysis illuminates how Burroughs, like his Beat cohorts presents the “hip vision of antiquity” discussed in the Introduction, that “makes new” and newly relevant and resonant, the mythic imagination of the ancient world at the dawn of postmodernism.

In *Junky*, Lee’s decision to enter the world of junk begins a descent—his own heroic *katabasis*—from a sheltered world of privilege to a dangerous yet enticing underworld. This downward movement from middle-class respectability into an underworld of experimentation with drugs, crime, and homo-

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8. See Dickey and Gair in this volume for other Beat *katabases*. 
sexuality is a major aspect of Lee/Burroughs’s journey in *Junky* as well as in the other early novels. Paradoxically, though Lee’s overarching goal is to attain the “transcendent kingdom of love, brotherhood, and life,” he must journey through the land of the dead to attain this objective.

The various settings of *Junky* are characterized as, or in some cases are literally, either underground or related to death. After his initial experiences with junk, Lee is arrested and “taken to the Tombs” (Burroughs 1977, 27), the nickname for the Manhattan Detention Complex. His wife bails him out, but immediately after physically leaving the Tombs, he envisions “New York in ruins. . . . Weeds were growing up through cracks and holes in the pavement” (28): it is clear his *katabasis* is only beginning. After his release, Lee and an acquaintance, Roy, attempt to make money by “lush-working”: descending into the subway and stealing money from the pockets of revelers intoxicated to the point of unconsciousness, a process which they call “working the hole” (33).

Lee’s description of the junkies he meets during this time reads like a register of shades. These junkies, like the “hollow shades” of the unburied that Virgil describes waiting out their allotted term before being allowed to cross the river Styx, seem to inhabit a liminal space between life and death: they, too, can be seen as “shadowy likenesses of those deprived of light” (*Georgics* 4.472: *simulacra luce carentum*). Bill Gains has a “talent for invisibility” (Burroughs 1977, 55), while others “all looked like junk. There was Irish, George the Greek, Pantopon Rose, Louie the Bellhop, Eric the Fag, the Beagle, the Sailor, and Joe the Mex. Several are dead now, others are doing time” (30). The use of the euphemistic argot “doing time” also recalls the suspended limbo of the shades of the unburied: a state outside the normal passage of time yet still controlled by it. Lee’s description of another underground acquaintance, Mary, as having “something boneless about her” and “look[ing] at you through a viscous medium she carried about with her” recalls the moment in Homer, *Odyssey* 11 (219–20) when Odysseus’s mother describes her own incorporeality in the land of the dead: “Sinews no longer sinews hold the bones and flesh together”; thus, she “slipped through” Odysseus’s arms when he attempted to embrace her (cf. *Od*. 11.205–6).

Even when Lee eventually travels on, leaving the subway, his shady acquaintances, and the Tombs behind, there is no resurrection: when he heads south to New Orleans, he describes the city as “present[ing] a stratified series of ruins” (Burroughs 1977, 68). Moving on to the Rio Grande Valley marks a further descent: “The Valley is a place where the new anti-life force is breaking through. Death hangs over the Valley like an invisible smog” (106). Burroughs’s description of the Valley is similar to Ovid’s depiction of the
underworld through which Orpheus and Eurydice traverse: “thick with dark-
ened vapor” (Ovid, Met. 10.54: caligine densus opaca). Its noxious “invisible
smog” also makes it resemble Avernus of the Aeneid, “above which no crea-
tures flying could / ever makes its way with its wings unharmed: such a vapor
pouring forth from / its black jaws made its way to the vaulted sky” (Virgil
6. 239–41).9 Again, the people Lee meets, particularly those connected to the
junk underworld, are portrayed as ghostly; now, they are overtly described in
spectral terms: “Old Ike, the pusher . . . often manifested himself like a pol-
tergeist, throwing something or knocking on the walls” (Burroughs 1977, 134).
Stull, too, (1981, 22), sees this part of Lee’s quest as paralleling the descent of
epic heroes into the land of the dead. He states that, toward the end of Junky,
Lee comes back from this experience “a new person . . . who knows the junk
equation and can sense when it is time to move on,” but Lee’s anabasis, his
return to life and home, does not come about so quickly. In later work, Lee
will arrive at “the knowledge or burden gained from the dead . . . [and] alter-
tation of the traveler’s sense of both world and self,” to use Dickey’s phrase in
the preceding chapter (16), but not yet: he must acquire further experience in
the land of the dead.

Lee’s need for junk grows stronger and stronger as Junky progresses, and
through his experiences with addiction, he comes to realize that junk not only
contains in it the promise of life but also the danger of death. This danger-
ous aspect of junk connects it to another recurrent element of heroic quest
narratives: the ordeal. By endangering the life of its user, junk functions as
an initiatory ordeal, of the sort detailed by Propp (1968, 54–55).10 Not only
does Lee travel through the underworld and meet those shades who occupy a
liminal space between death and life but he also comes to occupy that space
himself through his drug use; he must pass through such an ordeal before he
can become “a new person.”

While in New Orleans, Lee overdoses, and his experience of the incident
is described much as one would describe physical death. “Holy Jesus, this man
is dying!” Lee’s friend, Pat, who witnesses the overdose remarks (Burroughs
1977, 75), and Lee’s own report of the overdose could easily be mistaken for a
description of the process of death. He narrates: “As soon as I took the needle
out of the vein, I knew it wasn’t all right. I felt a soft blow in the heart. Pat’s

9. quam super haud ullae poterant impune volantes
tendere iter pinnis: talis sese halitus atris
faucibus effundens supera ad convexa ferebat . . .

10. See also Nagy (1990, 136–45) on the ritual ordeals that Greek athletes undergo in com-
petition. Nagy notes the frequent analogies of athletic ordeals in Pindar’s epinician poetry to
those of figures from myth (see, e.g., 137).
face began to get black around the edges, the blackness spreading to cover his face. I could feel my eyes roll back in their sockets” (74).

It is not just the effects of junk use that bring Lee closer to death, but the withdrawal from the drug. Lee, incarcerated in New Orleans and unable to use junk, describes the experience:

The worst thing is lowering of blood pressure with consequent loss of body liquid, and extreme weakness, as in shock. It is a feeling as if the life energy has been shut off so that all the cells in the body are suffocating. As I lay there on the bench, I felt like I was subsiding into a pile of bones. (92)

These symptoms parallel the process of dying: first weakness, then a feeling that “life energy has been shut off,” and then, “subsiding into a pile of bones.” Again, we are reminded of the body’s postmortem decay in Homer’s description of the dead in *Od. 11* and that final state in which the body can no longer “hold bones and flesh together.” Now junk is associated with fragile and corruptible bodily existence, rather than the expansive, integrating, transcendent life that Lee originally sought. While he initially believed junk might bring him the latter, he has discovered that it only brings him the former, trapping him within his addicted body.

Lee fully identifies junk with death by the end of the text. After becoming addicted once more, while in Mexico City, he remarks: “Junk is an inoculation of death that keeps the body in a condition of emergency” (127). Lee’s junk ordeal has taught him that the drug will not bring him the life he seeks. He now invests his hope for self-transcendent experience in other drugs, such as peyote and *yagé.*

I decided to go down to Colombia and score for yage. . . . I am ready to move on south and look for the uncut kick that opens out instead of narrowing down like junk. . . .

Kick is momentary freedom from the claims of the aging, cautious, nagging, frightened flesh. Maybe I will find in yage what I was looking for in junk and weed and coke. Y age may be the final fix. (152)

Here, the phrase “claims of the aging, cautious, nagging, frightened flesh” describes the life cycle, in which Lee is subordinated to his physical needs, “narrowed down” to the mindset of an animal. What he desires, though, is to

11. Burroughs consistently misspells the name of the drug *yagé* as “yage” in his writing. I have preserved this idiosyncrasy when quoting from his texts, but use the correct spelling in my own writing.
open up—rather than to contract—his psyche. What Lee seeks now is not so much life as transcendence of the limitations of (physical) life, and at the end of the text, Lee is hopeful that the new object of his quest, *yagé*, will serve as his salvation, his “final fix” (Burroughs 1986b, 57). 12 Lee continues his quest for transcendent experience in *Queer*. Although it was written in 1952, directly after *Junky*, *Queer* was not published until 1985. This delay is due to the novel’s frank homosexual content, which would have been considered unpublishable during the period in which it was written. Burroughs initially envisioned the two, along with *The Yage Letters*, as part of one book about his experiences with junk (Burroughs 1994, 244). The action in the first half of *Queer*, which takes place in Mexico City, overlaps chronologically with the Mexico City section of *Junky*. In this novel, Lee’s quest continues, but his object subtly shifts. Lee begins to look for *yagé*, but his search for the drug is subordinated to his search for what Van Ghent (quoted by Dickey, 16) terms “brotherhood” in her discussion of the Beat quest: human contact, companionship, and extreme intimacy. This shift of interest may seem surprising, but underlying it is the same longing to overcome the limitations of the body and the self that Lee experiences in *Junky*. Lee hopes, in his mainly homosexual relationships with others, to surpass the limitations of the body and mind in the form of a complete, literal fusion of two people. He wishes not only to enter his lovers’ bodies sexually, but literally: to think as they think, to experience things as they experience them, and ultimately, to escape the alienating prison of the self, which by its nature prevents such intense identification.

In *Queer*, it is clear that Lee is much more interested in others around him, which foreshadows his longing for the perfect union. This work is written in the third person, which distances the reader from Lee and reflects his attempt to reach outside the self. Lee’s attitude toward *yagé* changes in this text, reflecting his new longing for human communion. He no longer describes it as a personal “final fix” but as a vehicle for the ultimate connection of minds: telepathy. Rather than wishing to expand his own consciousness and enable a different subjective experience of reality, he now longs to link his own mind to that of others and participate in a form of communication that does not neces-

12. Burroughs’s concern with escaping the limitations of the body, and the connection between this concern and his understanding of myth, is made evident in a March 1964 BBC interview. Burroughs states, “I feel that the old mythologies are definitely broken down and not adequate at the present time. . . . Heaven and hell exist in my mythology. Hell consists of falling into enemy hands, into the hands of the virus power, and heaven consists of freeing oneself from this power, of achieving inner freedom, freedom from conditioning” (quoted in Stull 1981, 19). Burroughs sees a mythic struggle between personal autonomy and a “virus power”: the use of the word “virus” to characterize this villainous power strongly evokes associations to the body: its weakness to disease, its physical vulnerability.
sitate verbal expression. The drug is first mentioned in the text in conjunction with telepathy: “In South America at the headwaters of the Amazon grows a plant called Yage that is supposed to increase telepathic sensitivity” (Burroughs 1986b, 57). Lee’s desire for a superhuman, psychic link stems from his feelings of failure in connecting romantically with an acquaintance, Eugene Allerton, in a normal manner. He mentions the drug when his relationship with Allerton is not progressing ideally—just before, Lee speaks of it: “Allerton was somewhat sullen, and Lee felt depressed and ill at ease” (55). This failure only intensifies his wish for some form of perfect merger.

This desire is expressed even more intensely when Lee and Allerton see Cocteau’s Orpheus at a cinema. A rare direct classical reference in Burroughs’s work, the myth the film re-imagines can be seen as a parallel to Queer’s quest: a hero journeying through hell—in his case, a psychological hell of rejection and uncertainty—hoping for union with a loved one, yet ultimately unable to achieve that objective. As the two watch the film, Lee yearns for a physical union: “Lee could feel his body pull towards Allerton . . . straining with a blind worm hunger to enter the other’s body, to breathe with his lungs, see with his eyes, learn the feel of his viscera and genitals” (48). Although Lee is attempting to overcome his bondage to his own body by entering Allerton’s, the language in this passage reveals that this very urge is underscored by a base, bodily longing that overpowers Lee, as did his desire for junk. Lee’s wish to surpass corporeal limitations is always brought about by a feeling of enslavement to physical needs.

Lee’s longing for human connection intensifies when he and Allerton travel to South America, searching for yagé, and this craving for a connection overshadows his desire for the drug. The point at which Lee’s wish for intimacy is made most evident comes when he is walking the streets of Guayaquil:

[Lee] walked on, looking at every face he passed, looking into doorways and up at the windows of cheap hotels. An iron bedstead painted light pink, a shirt out to dry . . . scraps of life. Lee snapped at them hungrily, like a predatory fish cut off from his prey by a glass wall. He could not stop ramming his nose against the glass in the nightmare search of his dream. (92; ellipsis in orig.)

Now, rather than searching for life (the object of his overall quest) in junk or even yagé, the things Lee considers to be “scraps of life” are the faces of oth-

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13. For my analysis of The Yage Letters, I use the latest edition of the work, which is entitled The Yage Letters Redux. The parenthetical references throughout my discussion of The Yage Letters refer to this work.
ers, and the items of everyday, domestic humanity. He feels that the integrated existence in which he sees other people take part is unachievable for him, as though he is separated from it “by a glass wall,” which only intensifies his sense of desire and frustration. This expression of alienation through an image of separation is reminiscent of those in the Prologue of *Junky*. At this point in *Queer*, despite having traveled far from his hometown, Lee has the same problem he experienced there; such a lack of progress indicates that he is far from attaining the goal of his quest.

As Lee’s desire intensifies, so does his yearning for a physical union: now, he actually imagines himself in the body of a boy, who “vibrated with life like a young animal,” whom he sees on the streets of Guayaquil. Lee “could feel himself in the body of the boy. Fragmentary memories . . . the smell of cocoa beans drying in the sun, bamboo tenements” (93; ellipsis in orig.). In this passage, again, “life” is associated with other people, from whom Lee feels alienated. Lee then imagines a sexual experience between the boy with whom he identifies and another boy (93–94). But the fantasy is only fantasy, and when it ends, it leaves Lee feeling unfulfilled (94). Ultimately, Lee’s yearning for intense human connection—elevated by the intensity of his desire to the status of the “transcendent kingdom,” the union and integration that is the goal of the hero’s quest—only leaves him more frustrated, more aware of his confinement and isolation within his self. At the end of *Junky*, while the quest remained unrealized as it does here, Lee set forth a specific new course of action, the search for *yagé*, which would bring him fulfillment. But here, there is no such new course of action, and the ending is much more uncertain.

Lee’s quest for transcendent experience continues, though, in the “In Search of Yage” section of *The Yage Letters* (Burroughs and Ginsberg 2006, 16–22). *The Yage Letters* followed *Junky* as Burroughs’s second published work, due to the delay in the publication of *Queer*, and in many ways follows directly from its conclusion. In this work, Lee gives up his search for intimacy with others, and now is fully focused on the goal set out at the conclusion of *Junky*: that of *yagé* as the “final fix” that will admit Lee to the “transcendent kingdom.” In addition, the first-person viewpoint used in *Junky* is restored, reflecting this text’s focus on personal fulfillment and an inward quest.

Early sections of the text emphasize Lee’s frustration with the limitations of the human condition. This frustration is symbolized by Lee’s movement on his quest, which alternates between Sisyphean circularity—for example, his backtracking due to a mistake with his tourist card¹⁴—and stasis. When Lee is

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¹⁴. Under the category “The hero acquires the use of a magical agent,” Propp includes an agent that is “eaten or drunk,” which then produces magical results (1968, 41).
delayed in Peru, he writes: “This place gives me the stasis horrors. The feel of location, of being just where I am and nowhere else is unendurable. Suppose I should have to live here?” While Lee’s frustration with both circular motion and stillness may at first seem contradictory or simply peevish, both conditions evoke feelings in Lee of being trapped, triggering his longing for transcendence. Whether confined in a cycle of junk addiction, a dreary Peruvian town, or his own body and mind, Lee cannot bear to be “just where I am and nowhere else” (ibid.).

In Mocoa, Lee has another, stronger experience with yagé, which, far from providing transcendence, only further confines him within his physical self. Lee describes the experience:

I vomited violently leaning against a tree and fell down on the ground in helpless misery. . . . I kept trying to break out of this numb dizziness. I was saying over and over, “All I want is out of here.” An uncontrollable mechanical silliness took possession of me. Hebephrenic meaningless repetitions. . . .

I was on all fours convulsed with spasms of nausea. (Burroughs and Ginsberg 2006, 27)

In this passage, Lee’s body takes over with strong physical sensations such as vomiting, numbness, and “mechanical silliness.” Phrases like “trying to break out” and “all I want is out of here” reflect Lee’s intense, but unfulfilled, desire to transcend these physical sensations and limitations.

The text ends with a letter describing Lee’s second experience with yagé. Although this experience seems to be more fulfilling than the previous one, it is still unclear whether the drug has allowed him to surpass the borders of his body and self. Initially, Lee’s impressions of his yagé episode point to some sort of transcendence being achieved: the experience is described in terms of fully unimpeded motion. He states, “Yage is space time travel,” and under the influence of the drug, he has the sensation of moving “through” not around, seeing “migrations, incredible journeys through deserts and jungles and mountains.” His consciousness can be seen to expand in that he is able to experience the various effects of extensive travel at once, having visions of various landscapes—“minarets, palms, mountains, jungle”—and their inhabitants in an instant. Also, being under the influence of yagé gives Lee a sense of “brotherhood” with “many races, Negro, Polynesian, Mountain Mongol, Desert Nomad, Polyglot Near East, Indian”; he feels their “blood and substance” as they “[pass] through [his] body” (50): precisely the integration with others Lee longed for in Queer. Yagé provides Lee with all the exhilarating sensations of a journey—a sense of motion and knowledge of the various areas and peoples
of the world. While, as we have noted above, yagé can certainly take its toll on the body in the search for spiritual transcendence, the outward physical exertion one normally associates with heroic quests here takes place internally. It is a continual effort for Lee to triumph over the obstacles of alienation and stasis he faces along his journey, and it is yagé—the “magical agent” in Proustian terms—that helps him accomplish this.

The final images from Lee’s yagé experience suggest that while the drug may have temporarily expanded Lee’s consciousness, his larger quest for the “transcendent kingdom” remains unfulfilled. One of Lee’s later visions is that of a “Composite City,” which, far from being a place where human limitations are overcome, offers detailed imagery of the bodily processes Lee longs to conquer, such as eating, sexuality, and excretion. There are “bars and rooms and kitchens and baths, copulating couples on rows of brass beds, criss cross of a thousand hammocks, junkies tying up, opium smokers, hashish smokers, people eating, talking, bathing, shitting back into a haze of smoke and steam” (50–51). These descriptions are overwhelming in their scope; it is as if Lee experiences the sheer proportion of human life and its manifold daily tasks all at once.

The final image of the composite city—and of the letter and the text itself—also suggests that complete transcendence has not been achieved. In the last sentences, Lee describes the city as “a place where the unknown past and the emergent future meet in a vibrating soundless hum. Larval entities waiting for a live one” (53). These last lines make the narrative end on a note of anticipation, rather than satisfaction. While the penultimate sentence begins with a potential image of unity, the past and future remain vague, not fully realized: “unknown” and “emergent.” They only “meet” like two strangers: they do not become one. The image of “larval entities” suggests a sense of dormancy preceding growth and the realization of purpose, and the phrase “waiting for a live one” indicates the lack of such fully realized life. The “larval” image also points to the role of the biological cycle in limiting that maturity: the larval stage is a limiting, yet inescapable part of the life cycle of the organism that must be endured on the way to adulthood. Such an ending for this narrative implies that Lee’s overarching quest has not been completely fulfilled. Although Lee’s consciousness has been expanded via the yagé experience, the unclear note on which this text ends prevents a sense of ultimate achievement and final resolution.

_Naked Lunch_ narrates the final stage of Lee’s quest. In some ways, the novel seems to suggest that Lee is far from achieving the transcendence and renewal

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he desires. With recurrent imagery of violence, death, and decay that is more intense than that presented in the previous novels; it is as if, in the final step of his quest, Lee finds himself again in the land of the dead. America is presented as “old and dirty and evil” (Burroughs 1993, 24), one nation under “the black wind sock of death” (176). Its “dead armadillos in the road and vultures over the swamp” (25) evoke a contemporary Cocytus, the “unlovely swamp with its sluggish water” (Virgil Georgics 4.479: Cocyi tardaque palus inamabilis unda). The fragmented style of Naked Lunch differs markedly from the linear structure and factual tone of the three works which precede it, and this stylistic change means the quest lacks the sense of forward motion that previously propelled it through its moments of stasis.

In Naked Lunch, the two main means by which Lee previously sought transcendence—junk and sex—no longer serve as opportunities for redemption. Now, as a result of the knowledge he has gained during his quest, he presents them to the reader as enslaving systems of control. As at the end of Junky, junk serves as a manifestation of death: junkies are described as having “the cancelled eyes of junk” (84, 88) and voices “strangely flat and lifeless” (152). In scientific, distanced tones, Lee calls junk the opposite of “the whole life process” and states that it “suspends the whole cycle of tension, discharge and rest” (41). The life of a junky contains none of the ordinary activities that characterize human life: “No sexual outlet, no social contacts, no work, no diversion, no exercise, nothing but morphine” (195).

Sexuality, in which Lee earlier sought a kind of communion, is now presented as a sadistic act characterized by exploitation, waste, and bodily fragmentation. An early fantasy sequence reads:

One youth hath penetrate his comrade, while another youth does amputate the proudest part of that cock’s quivering beneficiary so that the visiting member projects to fill up the vacuum nature abhors and ejaculate into the Black Lagoon where impatient piranha snap up the child not yet born nor—in view of certain well established facts—at all likely. (45)

Here, the act of amputation makes the sexual act depicted serve the opposite of its typical unifying function: bodies are divided, not joined. The act is anonymous: the participants are nameless “youths,” “comrades,” and “beneficiaries”; it is not a moment of creation but of waste and loss. There is no womb in which the semen can grow; instead, it is rent by the teeth of piranha. Burroughs’s use of the word “child” for the semen makes the waste of a bodily fluid into an act of murder, increasing the sense of horror and loss, and reflects Burroughs’s conclusion that sex will never be the “final fix.”
In a later scene evocative of *Queer*, sexual longing is similarly characterized by fragmentation; it is also, like junk, allied with death and spectrality. Watching boys playing outside a school, Lee “project[s] [him]self . . . across the street, a ghost in the morning sunlight, torn with disembodied lust” (58). Here, Lee is doubly divided: not only is his ego fragmented through the psychic tearing that enables his projection, it is his lust—typically a craving for unity—which is the reason for the rupture. Furthermore, this lust is characterized as “disembodied”: Lee divorces sexual desire, a biological drive, from its typical locus. These multiple acts of splitting mirror physical death, rendering him a lifeless “ghost,” again recalling the katabatic underworld of *Junky*.

The failure of junk and sex to bring Lee transcendence, however, and the fact that in *Naked Lunch* Burroughs ultimately seems to end up in the same land of the dead where he began, does not repudiate his earlier quests for transcendence. His condemnation of the things he previously viewed as potential routes to transcendence reflects the experience he has gained on his journey. As Dickey makes clear in chapter 1, the classical hero may pass through the land of the dead, but he does not join their ranks; the separation between the living hero and the dead is clear. In *Junky*, this line is blurred: Lee did become one of the shades, experiencing death-within-life through his drug experiences. But in *Naked Lunch*, he remains separate from the junk-using shades, and his goal takes on a different form. Although it is clear that Lee now equates junk with death and totalitarian power, his drug experiences have opened his consciousness. As Skerl and Stull point out, junk use has revealed to Burroughs that addiction is the human condition and has aided his progression to a mature fictional form that allows him to communicate his new knowledge to his audience. Through his writing, Lee/Burroughs is able to achieve the transcendent unity he has sought throughout his quest, connecting with readers and thus the wider community in a form of hero’s return. Lee/Burroughs’s overall objective is not just the knowledge of the “junk universe,” as Stull suggests, but the corpus that this knowledge allows him to create and the connections this corpus can facilitate. Although Lee/Burroughs still inhabits the land “under the black wind sock of death,” the text of *Naked Lunch* allows him simultaneously to remain there and yet “return” to his community of readers with some measure of enlightenment.

Paradoxically, *Naked Lunch* facilitates a successful and heightened union of author and reader through its fractured form. Skerl states that the work’s

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16. Burroughs discusses his view on the role of the reader in shaping literary texts in the essay “Critical Reading” in *The Adding Machine* (1986a); his discussion of “intersection reading” (42–43) is an example of how the reader’s perceptions at the time of reading influence the text itself.
“montage” style “asks the reader to make connections between the elements that are set next to each other. The new mental associations are a form of expanded consciousness” (Skerl 1985, 44). Burroughs makes this didactic element of the novel clear in various paratexts that instruct the reader; the Atrophied Preface at the end of the work states that “Naked Lunch is a blueprint, a how-to book” that can explain “how-to extend levels of experience by opening the door at the end of the long hall” (176–77). In order for such a transformation of consciousness to occur, the reader’s active participation is required: he or she must also undertake a quest—a “long hall/haul”—of his or her own, must decide how to relate the text to lived experience. As Murphy (2000, 96) states, “Naked Lunch doesn’t offer a single coherent linear reading but an irreducible multiplicity of lines. . . . It is up to the determined reader to decide which of those lines and directions to follow from the text out into the world.” The reader’s enhanced role serves to connect him or her closely to the author: the two, in a way, “collaborate” in the experience of Naked Lunch.

Naked Lunch also connects reader and author through its status as a direct “record of the writer’s consciousness.” The novel is highly personal, and reading it is a literal glimpse into the author’s mind: “the mythic content is autobiographical. . . . The plot, his inner conflicts; the structure, that of his actual experience” (Skerl 1985, 44). By presenting his consciousness to the reader in this way, Lee invites the fusion of minds he craves in Queer and The Yage Letters but fails to achieve. In the Atrophied Preface, Lee states: “The Word is divided into units which be all in one piece and should be so taken, but the pieces can be had in any order being tied up back and forth, in and out fore and aft like an innaresting [sic] sex arrangement. This book spill off the page in all directions” (Burroughs 1993, 180). These images of unity within fragmentation provide insight into how Naked Lunch’s splintered structure brings together author and reader, describing the relationship between the two in terms of sexual intercourse. Although the Word is externally fragmented—“divided into units”—there seems to be an unassailable, almost magical accord behind them: despite their division, they remain “all in one piece.” This transcendent unity is framed in terms of sexual possession: the reader is invited to “take” and to “have” the words Lee offers. This can be done as the reader pleases, and this highlights his or her enhanced power in the experience of Naked Lunch. Each of the following three phrases—“back and forth,” “in and out,” and “fore and aft”—exemplify wholeness within fragmentation: although each phrase contains two words that have opposite meanings, these phrases are taken as single expressions in everyday speech, serving as apt examples of separate “units” that can be seen to remain “all in one piece.” These images of fragmented unity build up to the orgasmic, dynamic “spill” of the book “in all
directions.” Such a description suggests the novel’s myriad possibilities, such as the reshaping of the reader’s consciousness; it is an image of the consumption of the union between author and reader. Unlike the wasted orgasms of the young “comrades” and the hanged man, unlike the failed grasping toward Allerton in *Queer*, *Naked Lunch*’s “spilling out” to the reader has the potential for true union. For Burroughs, the sexual act is one of violence, bodily fragmentation, waste, and loss, but the textual act serves to unify even amidst the novel’s multiplicity of interpretations and splintered structure.

In *Junky, Queer, The Yage Letters*, and *Naked Lunch*, William S. Burroughs provides the narrative of a quest that bears parallels to those present in classical myth and epic. His hero Lee casts off his “superior social station” and undergoes a “change of status” as he attempts to escape the alienation characteristic of twentieth-century humanity and find an integrated form of life. Lee first undergoes a katabatic ordeal in the underworld of junk, populated by those whom the drug has rendered living specters; in *Queer*, he seeks to escape alienation through a homosexual relationship that, even as it promises unity, places him at odds with the mainstream community. When this fails, Lee places his hope in the mystical herb *yagé*, enduring the further ordeals that finding and using it bring. Finally, Lee/Burroughs achieves a hero’s return through the writing of *Naked Lunch*. This *anabasis* may seem unconventional—he remains physically in a liminal state, still inhabiting an underground milieu that he sometimes characterizes as the same land of the dead that he passed through in *Junky*. But if his quest has taught him anything, it is that it is only from this place, the place that Norman Mailer called “hell precisely,” that Lee is able to carry himself back into life. By serving as a “record of the writer’s consciousness” and “intersection point” for author and reader, *Naked Lunch* serves as a spectral literary return that has the potential to reshape the consciousness of a nation. More of an Aeneas founding a new home than an Odysseus returning to an old one, Burroughs is able to create, through his writing, a novel community, a “transcendent kingdom,” in which he can escape the limitations of the self, experiencing a sense of affinity and integration at last.

**Bibliography**


