



SCHIZOPHRENIC NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS'S *NAKED LUNCH*

K. Ananthajothi* Dr. T. Deivasigamani**

*PhD, Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, India.

**Assistant Professor, Department of English, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, India.

Naked Lunch, the 1959 magnum opus that won its writer, William S. Burroughs, international fame as, among other things, an avant-garde satirist and a central figure in the Beat movement, is a work of rare, brutal flagrancy and intensity. A novel in terms only of its packaging, it is a disconnected, amorphous, and jarring text that, as goes the legend, is compiled from the notes of a schizophrenic but savagely satirical talent - a talent that developed its wry, misanthropic voice in the social and technological Petri dish of the post-war global milieu and articulated the dark potentials of humanity in practiced cadences of American gutter-speak. In the book's retrospectively written introduction, "Deposition: Testimony Concerning A Sickness," Burroughs provides a key to its intended effect on "civilized countries," exhorting, "let them see what they actually eat and drink. Let them see what is on the end of that long newspaper spoon" (205). The effect of discomfit is clearly *Naked Lunch's* fundamental reason, but as viscerally as it continues to be felt by readers, the moral purpose can still be hard to discern.

From a historical and biographical approach, *Naked Lunch* can be placed marginally within historical literary modes including the descent into hell, satire, Romantic poetry, pulp fiction, and the picaresque in an alienated, relentlessly scatological fable of utter despair. Concurrently, the contexts of the unique biographical circumstances of the writer should not be ignored in assessing *Naked Lunch's* moralizing, cautionary message. To this purpose, the book's formal elements and techniques make it a many-sided assault on the expectations of novel-readers. In the book's surrealist, grotesque carnival landscape of perverse imagination, the conventions of narrative, including plot, focus of narration, and linearity, are shattered and recombined. The reader is continually forced to re-evaluate her own relationship to the narrator and to the book itself. Junk is Burroughs's favoured slang term for all opium derivatives, including all synthetics. Extending junk as a paradigmatic metaphor for all systems of control which negate individual will, Burroughs indicts the consuming nature of power in all levels of society and walks of life. Fragmentary, mystifying techniques result in a fantastic picture of total human depravity that draws its satirical force from Burroughs's own alienated life and rings, psychologically, very true. The metaphor of junk serves the moral purpose of making the reader aware of his own aptness to be conned and her capacity to control and be controlled, to addict and be addicted.

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

I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would have never become a writer but for Joan's death. So the death of Joan brought me into contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and manoeuvred me into a lifelong struggle, in which I had no choice except to write my way out. (xxii)

The "Ugly Spirit" Burroughs refers to here can be read as the all-consuming, antagonistic force present throughout *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs's traumatized guilt over his wife's death, and his period of heavy addiction and agonizing withdrawal.



Joan's only appearance in the novel, renamed Jane, though brief, mirrors this period in Burroughs's life and corresponds with the initiation of two important literary themes: the confession and the descent into hell. At the end of the third chapter, one of many nefarious, controlling characters is introduced, known only as the pimp trombone player. Jane is taken in by his personality and his pot. The narrator ditches them to have a beer in a restaurant and wait for the bus to town. An ominous sentence abruptly ends the chapter: "A year later in Tangier I heard she is dead" (18-19). This strangely detached reference to his wife, Mexico, and Tangier associates the narrator with Burroughs, but teasingly departs from literal, truthful autobiography. By skirting culpability, Burroughs obliquely highlights the trauma caused by the event, and offers for those familiar with his infamous deed a clue to the confessional despair, the Ugly Spirit that subtly underscores the book's relentless horror. In conjunction with guilt over Joan's death, the fictionalized structure of *Naked Lunch* reflects another confessional urge, the need to communicate and expurgate the sickest dregs of the addict-author's imagination. Burroughs acknowledges *Naked Lunch's* confessional lineage in a 1984 article, in which he also summarizes his period of addiction during the following six years in exile in Tangier. Burroughs writes from his real-life perspective of a person mortally struggling with a junk habit. Though his aim is more allegorical than autobiographical in the end, he is conscious of falling within the tradition, largely Romantic in origin of literature that seeks to describe drug-induced experiences to the square or inexperienced reader. "The question," says Frank McConnell in "William Burroughs and the Literature of Addiction," "whether Burroughs's talent has been helped or hurt by his long addiction is meaningless: his talent is, irreducibly, his addiction and his cure from it" (94). In other words, the action of the novel, be it satirical, farcical, confessional or even allegorical, is first and foremost to be understood as a reflection of the addict-author's private hell.

The tentative parallelism of the novel's action to Burroughs's life is reinforced by shifts in style and content, depicting a descent and re-emergence which mirrors his cycle of addiction and withdrawal. The novel begins as the junky William Lee, who had functioned as narrator and Burroughs's pseudonym in *Junky* (as will be discussed later, the narrator of *Naked Lunch* is not always Lee), escapes from a narcotics officer in the subway, catching the A train just in time. "I can feel the heat closing in," he begins, "crooning over my spoon and dropper I throw away at Ishington Square Station" (3). From the first sentence, *Naked Lunch* adopts the tough language and realism of pulp detective fiction, much like *Junky*. In "'Gentle Reader, I Fain Would Spare You This, but My Pen Hath Its Will like the Ancient Mariner': Narrator and Audience in William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*," Ron Loewinsohn notes that this is "a literal descent into the underworld" (566). The realism, however, soon fades into hallucination. Lee describes a "blind pigeon" (junky informant) known as Willy the Disk: "Willy has a round, disk mouth lined with sensitive erectile hairs... He can only eat the shit now with that mouth, sometimes sways out on a long tube of ectoplasm, feeling for the silent frequency of junk" (7-8). The motifs of blind need and grotesque, physical transfiguration are introduced, giving the impression of a descent into the hallucinatory depths of Burroughs's imagination. These motifs are likewise stained by an impression of the overpowering mental and physical transformation that junk has imposed on the author.

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



this structure is, at least on one level, the fact that Burroughs wrote it in a fluctuating state of junk use and withdrawal, and is laying bare his or, perhaps more accurately, his highly autobiographical avatar Lee's raw, psychic experiences.

The climax, or rather, the trough, of the book's descent into the hell of withdrawal occurs in the seedy, science-fiction-style underworld of Interzone, which further parallels this dark period of Burroughs's life. As McConnell observes, "'Interzone' is precisely that—the world between human will and its negation: the point at which, in the absence of the drug, speech at all becomes possible, but correlatively, the point at which the drive toward resumed addiction is at its strongest" (99). Interzone represents the deranged frontier of control, the desperate, intermediate no-man's-land between dependence and freedom experienced by the withdrawing addict. Literally, the inspiration for this imaginary place is the international zone, Tangier itself. Ted Morgan describes the city's appeal for Burroughs in 1954. Legally an international zone, it is straddling two worlds, a capital of permissiveness, and in it, Morgan notes, "boys were so plentiful you had to fight them off" (219). The drug trade openly flourished without interference from police. Tangier had been marked as a special zone by an agreement between the Spanish and the French in 1912. It overlooked both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean and is governed by the consuls of eight European nations, and had "three official languages - French, Spanish, and Arabic - and two official currencies, the franc and the peseta." Tangier is also a "hub of unregulated free enterprise. Anyone with a valid passport could become a citizen of the city" (236-237). Tangier provided a hiding-place for Burroughs, a place where one could literally sell oneself to a marketplace of addictions. It also provided the inspiration for the imaginative, literary locus of Interzone, a place where the sick fantasies of *Naked Lunch* run amok and find their culmination in total degradation and depersonalization.

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

Near the end of the narrative, with the chapter titled "Hauser and O'Brien," the surreal, gradually intensifying nightmare that characterizes the meat of the book abruptly shifts once again into the mode of crime/detective fiction, symbolizing, at least in a biographical analysis of the narrative cycle, the end of Burroughs's withdrawal and return to the living. Lee, reintroduced, is caught tying up for a shot in a hotel room by Narcotics detectives Hauser and O'Brien (also narcotics detectives in *Junky*), who are under orders to seize his manuscripts. Lee kills the detectives and makes plans to skip town. When he calls the Police Squad headquarters from a payphone, asking to speak with Hauser or O'Brien, the operator tells him there is no one in the department by those names.

Lee and Burroughs experience a kind of breakthrough and clarity of vision in a stable realm, free from the persecution of the heat, or police, who were ardently pursuing him in the novel's opening lines. The language parallels Burroughs's testimony to the apomorphine cure found in the "Deposition," where he insists, "The vaccine that can regulate the junk virus to a landlocked past is in existence" (202). This breakthrough coincides



with the physical end of Burroughs's stint as a self-destructive junk fiend, as well as the completion, or rather, expurgation of the confessional text.

Hauser and O'Brien, products of the writer's mind and representative of the urge to write and to kick the habit, are revealed as illusions. The writer and the reader are dumped back into reality, but with a lost innocence, an acquaintance with the evil spectre of an all-consuming vision of control. The episode has self-reflexive significance to *Naked Lunch* as a unified project - Lee's manuscripts have taken the place of his spoon and dropper as the incriminating object. "*Naked Lunch*" writes Ron Loewinsohn, "tells (or represents or dramatizes) the story of a cure... This is the story of Agent Lee's descent into the underworld of drugs and his successful re-emergence in the upper world as an artist who can get across to his audience some painful but liberating news" (567). Burroughs has lived through the shooting of his wife, the numb self-destruction of heavy addiction, and the nightmare of withdrawal, all of which are the basis for his authority on junk and the nature of blind need, the negation of personal will. In confessionally writing his way out of the struggle with the Ugly Spirit of guilt and addiction, he has, in an extension of his autobiographical tendencies already established in *Junky* and *Queer*, provided the reader with a psychological map of the process of breaking free from these possessive forces.

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