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“Prisoners of the Earth, come out”: Links and Parallels between William Burroughs’s Writing and Gnostic Thought

Abstract: William Burroughs’s works are rarely read in relation to any religious context. I would like to present a correspondence between the vision that emerges from his *Nova* Trilogy and some of the most popular Gnostic ideas. In the cut-up trilogy, mankind is left alone, trapped in a hostile cosmos ruled by antihuman forces. Through the manipulation of words and images, Demiurge-like agents spread their control over an illusory reality. Like Gnostics, Burroughs envisions the physical world, and also the body, as a prison to the transcendent spirit. To him, one way of escape is through cut-ups. The writer shows that by breaking away from arbitrary notions and a routine mode of thinking, one can attain gnosis — saving knowledge. Burroughs creates his own mythology which, like Gnostic teachings, promotes the ideas of self-knowledge, internal transformation and transcendence.

Keywords: William S. Burroughs, Gnosticism, *Nova* Trilogy, cut-ups, gnosis

In the following essay, I would like to present a correspondence between some of the most well-known Gnostic ideas and the vision that emerges from William Burroughs’s *Nova* Trilogy. I will try to demonstrate that what Burroughs and the ancient religious sect share is: a thoroughly pessimistic attitude towards the material world, a radical dualism, a sense of alienation and desolation, a denigration of physical existence, an anarchic approach to human organisation, and a longing for spiritual transcendence that can be achieved by means of saving knowledge.

Firstly, I would like to introduce the basic concepts of the Gnostic teachings. I believe that such a short introduction is called for — or even crucial — as in the second part of the essay, I would like to show how these ideas could be applied to William Burroughs’s novels.

The term “Gnosticism” is derived from the Greek word “gnosis,” meaning “knowledge” or “recognition.” It is used in reference to various religious sects which flourished especially in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD in the Greco-Roman world and which were characterised by a “mythology that distinguishes between an inferior creator of the material world — a demiurge — and a more transcendent god or order of being” (Britannica). However, it should be emphasised, that there is no uniform definition of Gnosticism. The scholars dealing with the subject indicate that the groups conventionally classified as Gnostic did not constitute a single movement with homogenous organisation, teachings and traditions. There were a great number of Gnostic sects; perhaps today the most well-known among them are the Simonian, Valentinian, Basilidian or Marcionite sects.

Gnosticism was a creation of antique syncretism. Hans Jonas, one of the most distinguished authorities on the ancient Gnostic religion, enumerates the Platonic, Hellenistic, Babylonian, Egyptian, Iranian, Jewish and, of course, Christian traditions as the main philosophical and religious systems that influenced and shaped Gnostic beliefs (49). The Church Fathers treated Gnosticism as a heresy against Christianity; the movement was driven underground by the formal Roman church as it became a threat to the official doctrine (Fort 1988: 2).

Although it has never been a uniform movement, there are certain myths and ideas that are common to all Gnostic sects. One of the central notions is the idea of the “divine spark” — *pneuma* — that is imprisoned in the human body. Due to a tragic accident in the pre-cosmic world, *pneuma* fell from the empyrean into the inferior material world and became unaware of its divine origins. It needs to be awakened and roused from its ignorance, because only then can it escape from the evil material world and be reunited with its divine identity (Rossbach 1999: 49). In order to free the divine spark from the material prison, one requires *gnosis*, knowledge of God, knowledge of one’s divine origins, and of the nature of this illusory world (Jonas 1994: 60).

All Gnostic movements share a radical anti-cosmic dualism (Matys 2006: 3). They contend that the true Deity is completely outside this world; its nature is alien to the nature of the universe, which is not of its creation and does not fall under its rule. The divine, transcendent world is a continuation of the essence of God (Rossbach 1999: 50). The material world, on the other hand, is a realm of darkness, a by-product of unwanted changes at the core of the Absolute. The earthly domain is an accidental creation of inferior, ignorant and arrogant forces — Demiurges or Archons — that do not know the true God. Each of them is a guardian of their cosmic prison (Jonas 1994: 59). The Archons’ reign is represented in the law of nature and in all manmade laws, governments, institutions, and conventions.

Humanity’s position in this world is characterised by “extreme alienation” (Rossbach 1999: 53). The cosmos is the world of death and it is not only an enemy to life — it is actively evil. The material world is an illusion, a projection contrived by the Archons to exert control over humans and prevent them from attaining

knowledge of their divine nature. Humanity is trapped in a world infected with pain and misery, as well as intellectual and spiritual blindness.

The situation would be entirely hopeless if not for “a messenger from the world of light who penetrates the barrier of the spheres, outwits the Archons, awakens the spirit ... and imparts to it the saving knowledge [...]” (Stephenson 1990: 63). The divine messenger is sent to bring the *pneuma* back to the primary substance that it has been taken away from. To some Gnostics, Jesus was such a heavenly messenger.

Men, according to Gnostic teachings, were also created by a lesser being; however during the act, the true Deity, out of mercy, enclosed the divine spark — *pneuma* — in the human body (Matys 2006: 6). The claim that humanity is descended from the transcendent realm and is destined to achieve salvation has its roots in this belief.

Gnostics believe that the divine spark has not been corrupted by its imprisonment in the material body; it remained pure and intact (Matys 2006: 5). As bearers of the spark, Gnostics are independent, their morality is defined by a deep contempt towards the material world and all bonds that keep them attached to it. Such a stance may manifest itself in two opposite attitudes — ascetic or libertine (Jonas 1994: 61). The former is based on the conviction that one must totally limit one’s participation in this evil, corrupt world. The latter assumes absolute freedom. The rules or commandments revealed by the Demiurge are just one more manifestation of the cosmic tyranny. The spirit is free from the consequences of moral law — everything is permitted, because the *pneuma* is predestined for salvation and cannot be soiled by any misdeeds or be afraid of any punishment. Systematic and purposeful noncompliance is not only a privilege of the Gnostics — it is an obligation, because the violation of the demiurgic laws subverts the evil cosmic plan and helps Gnostics attain salvation. Thus, Gnosticism relies on personal religious experience as its primary authority (Rossbach 1999: 48).

In my opinion, this basic theological structure applies to almost all of William S. Burroughs’s works. His novels are rarely read in relation to any religious context, but I think (following Gregory Stephenson’s lead) that the revolutionary *Nova* Trilogy lends itself easily to interpretation along Gnostic lines.

Gregory Stephenson — a senior researcher at the University of Copenhagen, the author of a number of books and commentaries on the literature of the Beat Generation and an astute article on Burroughs’s Gnostic vision — observes that *The Soft Machine* is one of Burroughs’s key works, as it introduces his avant-garde cut-up technique, establishes a new key image, “parasitism,” and provides the basis for Burroughs’s cosmic myth (66). Stephenson places his primary focus on *The Soft Machine*; nonetheless, I will refer to all novels from the *Nova* Trilogy, as I think this gives a fuller overview of the cosmic myth that Burroughs creates and of its Gnostic overtones. Stephenson explores Burroughs’s cut-up technique in relation to Rimbaud’s “colour vowels” and the idea of a “systematic derangement of the

senses” (*Poetry Foundation*). I, however, would like to also present Burroughs’s trilogy in the context of 20th century American experimentalism and to show links between his technique and the ideas of the Dada art movement.

“In 1984, in Boulder, Colorado, an interviewer asked Burroughs, ‘What religious persuasion would you consider yourself?’ Without hesitating, the writer replied, ‘Gnostic, or a Manichean’” (Lotringer 2000). Despite this straightforward statement, I would not consider William Burroughs to be a devotee or supporter of Gnosticism. However, it clearly shows that the Gnostic ideas or a “Gnostic imagination,” appealed to him and strongly influenced his vision.

In his novels, Burroughs projects what is precisely a Gnostic vision of the universe and mankind’s plight in it. His concept of a cosmos ruled by evil warring forces that are hostile to men is a radically dualistic one. He also readily shares the Gnostic denigration of the corrupt flesh and of the material world in general; for Burroughs, the body and the senses are a prison to the transcendent spirit, an obstacle on the way to true knowledge and true identity (Stephenson 1990: 59).

In reference to the *Nova Trilogy*, Burroughs stated: “A new mythology is possible in the space age where we will again have heroes and villains with respect to intentions toward this planet” (Burroughs and Gysin 1978: 97). In the series, Burroughs explores the basic trope of all religious and secular literature — the war between good and evil. However, for Burroughs this everlasting clash is best exemplified in the continuous struggle between Freedom and Control. In his novels, these forces are often portrayed as the Nova Police and the Nova Mob. The Nova Mob, also called the Board, contrives a plan of absolute domination, enforcing limits, authority and mindless obedience; the Nova Police, on the other hand, strive for independence, “restoration of multitudinousness, [and] the liberation of consciousness from matter” (Stephenson 1990: 62).

In the *Nova Trilogy*, Burroughs develops a quasi-science-fictional, paranoid fantasy wherein Earth and its inhabitants have been taken over by the Nova Mob, a parasitic alien race that controls human minds and bodies through the manipulation of images and language. The planet is on the verge of total destruction; fortunately the intergalactic Nova Police come to the rescue. The Nova Police and the inhabitants of Earth discover how to fight the Nova Mob with their own weapons and are engaged in a guerrilla war with the Nova Criminals.

The Soft Machine depicts a world of violence, malevolence, subjugation and hypocrisy. It is a wicked universe in which mankind is the victim of a cosmic power struggle. One of the central characters is a Demiurge-like figure called Mr. Bradley-Mr. Martin, also known as Mr. & Mrs. D or the Ugly Spirit. Bradley-Martin leads the extraterrestrial Nova Mob, that has helped him to keep the Earth enslaved for thousands of years. His arch-enemy is Inspector J. Lee of the Nova Police. In *The Third Mind*, a text written in collaboration with Brion Gysin, Burroughs provides a purely Gnostic description of Mr. Bradley-Mr. Martin:

Mr. Bradley-Mr. Martin, in my mythology, is a God that failed, a God of Conflict in two parts so created to keep a tired old show on the road, The God of Arbitrary Power and Restraint, Of Prison and Pressure, who needs subordinates, who needs what he calls “his human dogs” while treating them with the contempt a con man feels for his victims — But remember the con man needs the Mark — The Mark does not need the con man — Mr. Bradley-Mr. Martin needs his “dogs” his “errand boys” his “human animals” — He needs them because he is literally blind. They do not need him. In my mythological system he is overthrown in a revolution of his “dogs”. (97)

Mr. Bradley-Mr. Martin bears a striking resemblance to the demiurgic figure found in ancient Gnostic texts, where he is called either “Ialdabaoth” (“child of the void”), “Samael” (the “blind god” or “god of the blind”) or “Saklas” (“the foolish one”) (De Conick 2016). Bradley-Martin is Burroughs’s blind god. Like the Gnostic Demiurge, by means of manipulation, he wants to “[keep] human consciousness confined to the body and reduced to the body consciousness of the ego self” (Stephenson 1990: 62).

Mr. Bradley-Mr. Martin and his Nova Mob treat Earth as their colony. They use its resources and when there is nothing more left to exploit they will move on to a different planet. His Archon-like posse includes: “Sammy the Butcher,” “Green Tony,” “Iron Claws,” “The Brown Artist,” “Jacky Blue Note,” “Limestone John,” “Izzy the Push,” “Hamburger Mary,” “Paddy the Sting,” and “The Subliminal Kid” (*Nova Express*: 55). However, Bradley-Martin also has accomplices on Earth. His agents are parasitic, virus-infected control-freaks — according to Burroughs, all authorities, establishments, and systems — the army, the police, businessmen, priests, inspectors, teachers, or anyone in a position to impose their vision of reality on another (Stephenson 1990: 62).

The most powerful weapon of the Nova Mob’s control machine is image conveyed through language. By the manipulation of words and images, the Mob projects an illusory reality, what Burroughs calls “the Reality Film” (*The Soft Machine*: 151). The strategy that the Mob uses to maintain control over the planet is very simple: “Always create as many insoluble conflicts as possible and always aggravate existing conflicts — This is done by dumping life forms with incompatible conditions of existence on the same planet — [...]” (*Nova Express*: 53).

The conflicts that the Nova Mob create and multiply take on various forms — they can refer to the “rapacious corporate manipulation” (Robinson 2011: 48) exercised by the mass media. This issue is tackled in the chapter called *Trak Trak Trak*, in which Burroughs is a writer for the Trak News Agency — an organisation whose work ethics are contained in the motto — “We don’t report the news — we write it.” In the chapter *The Mayan caper*, Burroughs deals with an “elitist theocracy” (Robinson 2011: 48), based on the example of one of the most efficient control systems in the world — the Mayan calendar. Mayan priests invented a calendar that set tasks for the working class for virtually every day of the year. Only the priests knew the order of those tasks, so their control was total. In the chapter, the priests are

overthrown by a time traveller who destroys the machinery by mixing the order of the recordings that feed the calendar.

Throughout the series, the Mobsters manipulate the ignorant masses until they lead Earth to the “nova state” — total destruction. Fortunately, in the Nova Mythology, as in Gnostic mythology, a “messenger from the world of light” also appears (Stephenson 1990: 63) — in this case it is the Nova Police — who can save mankind from its terrible plight. The Police sabotage the Mob’s operations, and finally break the rule of Mr. Bradly-Mr. Martin. In an open letter addressed to the “peoples of the earth”, Inspector Lee of the Nova Police explains:

The purpose of my writing is to expose and arrest Nova Criminals. In *Naked Lunch*, *Soft Machine* and *Nova Express* I show who they are and what they are doing and what they will do if they are not arrested. Minutes to go. Souls rotten from their orgasm drugs, flesh shuddering from their nova ovens, prisoners of the earth to come out. With your help we can occupy The Reality Studio and retake their universe of Fear Death and Monopoly — [...]. (*Nova Express*: 7)

The Police launch “Operation Total Exposure” (*Nova Express*: 15) to reveal the Mobsters’ evil scheme and induce gnosis on the unenlightened masses. The particular method they employ to achieve this goal is the cut-up.

The cut-up technique was developed along with one of Burroughs’s principal theories that the “word is a virus.” In his opinion, language is the most powerful instrument of control and indoctrination and the only way to break away from this arbitrary system is by deconstructing it. The cut-up is a variant of collage; is it simply the cutting of an original text and the mixing of it with parts of other, different texts. This method, according to Burroughs, broadens the reader’s perception by creating new associations and collocations. It forces the reader to consider the text from a new, “untrained” perspective. Burroughs wanted to disrupt the artificial linearity common to most of literature and to enable the reader to travel freely on the axes of time and narration. The author called for the destruction of fictitious connections between words; he strove to move outside of the system of binary oppositions so deeply rooted in Western culture. He wanted to “Cut the word lines — cut music lines — Smash the control images — Smash the control machine [...]” (*The Soft Machine*: 92). The cut-up method was an attempt at de-conditioning the reader from commonly accepted (erroneous) ideas and values; “an attempt to restore truth to writing” (Hemmer 2007: 290).

When developing his cut-up technique, Burroughs was certainly strongly influenced by the works and experiments of Arthur Rimbaud (as indicated by Stephenson). However, he also most definitely relied on the ideas introduced in the 1920s by the Dada group. While living in Tangier, Burroughs met Brion Gysin in 1959. Gysin was a renaissance man — a painter, writer and performance artist. As noted by Burroughs’s biographer, Ted Morgan: “Gysin [...], became a close associate, friend, catalyst [...] speeding up certain processes in Burroughs’s mind” (Morgan 2012: 318). In the 1930s, Gysin was a member of the French Surrealist

movement (eventually, he was expelled from the group by Andre Breton). Gysin believed that “writing is fifty years before painting” (Odiar 1989: 27) and suggested to Burroughs that he should experiment with words, in the same way that “collage artists,” such as Georges Braque or Pablo Picasso, experimented with their paintings. However, Gysin must have been aware of Tristan Tzara’s “chance poems,” as Tzara was also a member of the Surrealist movement (and was also expelled from it by Breton). In a manifesto from 1920, Tzara explained his technique:

TO MAKE A DADAIST POEM

Take a newspaper.

Take some scissors.

Choose from this paper an article of the length you want to make your poem.

Cut out the article.

Next carefully cut out each of the words that makes up this article and put them all in a bag.

Shake gently.

Next take out each cutting one after the other.

Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag.

The poem will resemble you.

And there you are — an infinitely original author of charming sensibility, even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd. (MoMA Learning)

This is almost precisely what Burroughs does with his texts, although there is one vital difference. He does not “[c]opy conscientiously in the order in which they [the words] left the bag.” He makes a careful selection of the fragments he wants to use and if some of them do not work together in a new configuration, he rearranges them again. In this way, he limits, or in a way controls, the “randomness factor” of his texts. Burroughs explains:

I would say I follow the channels opened by the re-arrangement of the text. This is the most important function of the cut-up. I may take a page, cut it up, and get a whole new idea for straight narrative, and not use any of the cut-up material at all, or I may use a sentence or two out of the actual cut-up. It’s not unconscious at all, it’s a very definite operation... [...] (Odiar 28)

Such an attitude is in turn quite similar to John Cage’s “chance-controlled compositions,” which were created with the use of *I Ching* — a classical Chinese text, commonly used as a divination system.

According to Keith Forth, the author of an article on Gnosticism and satire, Gnostics — similarly to Burroughs — have a profound mistrust of language because it is “generated by the psycho-empirical consciousness and so is part of that great mistake which is the world created by an inferior God” (14). As Forth rightly notices, “pneumatic truth cannot be expressed directly: it can only be suggested because that truth itself is beyond all language [...] »real« meaning [...] is always »elsewhere,« outside of inadequate language and the observable world of which it is a part. Language is only valuable for the Gnostic if it is metaphoric” (14). When truth is captured by language, which in itself is corrupted, it is necessarily no longer true; it loses its meaning. According to Burroughs, the language we use becomes our reality and also imprisons us within that reality. We need to break out

of that pattern in order to see what is beyond. As Gregory Stephenson observes: “[f]or Burroughs the cut-up method is a tool of escape from language reality into a multiverse. The cut-up can release us from the discreteness, the exclusiveness of an either/or universe into a multivalent infinity where all sets intersect. By cutting the word lines we can restructure our reality, our consciousness” (63–64).

An even more straightforward example of Burroughs’s belief that language is the principal device of control can be found in *Nova Express*, where Inspector J. Lee addresses the human race:

What scared you all into time? Into body? Into shit? I will tell you: ‘the word.’ Alien Word ‘the.’ ‘The’ word of Alien Enemy imprisons ‘thee’ in Time. In Body. In Shit. Prisoner, come out. The great skies are open. I Hassan I Sabbah rub out the word forever. (4)

This message is also striking in its resemblance to the Gnostic vision. Burroughs not only calls for the rejection of the “word-virus”, but also for the repudiation of the body. The quotation shows Burroughs’s unanimity with the Gnostic imagination that seeks “oneness with the interdependent senses of seeing matter as undifferentiated sameness and transcendent, egoless consciousness as one with distant God” (Fort 12). The passage also expresses Burroughs’s Gnostic attitude towards time. For the Gnostic, time is a lie. Keith Forth explains that “[t]he transcendent pneumatic consciousness is a-temporal [...]” (12). Hence, Gnostic consciousness is not bound by causality, order or linearity. According to Stephenson, in the “multiverse of the cut-up all time is simultaneous. [...] The modes of sense perception overlap and fuse into synaesthesia” (64). Taken from that perspective, time is seen spatially because the series of images show fragments of the present, past and future all at once. Throughout the whole trilogy, Burroughs insists on the movement “out of time and into space” as there is “no word in space” (*The Soft Machine*: 158). To get rid of the parasitic “word-virus” that we are all infected with, we need to move outside language, we need to move “from speech to silence,” which is the most “desirable state” (Stephenson 1990: 65). The writer believed that men’s future would not only be outside this planet but also outside the physical body; he exhorts: “Come out of the body word “thee” forever. [...],” or more straightforwardly: “Come out of your stupid body you nameless assholes!” (*The Soft Machine*: 158).

Burroughs seeks a “non-body” experience also to get away from the confines of the “ego consciousness.” In his work, *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs*, Timothy S. Murphy suggests that subjectivity in Burroughs’s work “is a form of addiction to language, to the »I« of self-consciousness and identity as an instrument of control, both of the phenomenal world by the »I« and of the »I« itself by the ideological structure of its socius” (58). In order to break or escape from the addiction to the ego and the self, Burroughs refuses to create characters with a fixed identity. The protagonists of his fiction have multiple selves — one character suddenly changes into another, puts on a disguise, gets cloned, dismembered and

transplanted into another body or turned into a different species. This amorphism is also expressed in the characters' names; one example is the aforementioned Mr. Bradley-Mr. Martin, who is known also as Mr. and Mrs. D or the Ugly Spirit. One of the most extreme “multiple-characters” character appears in *Naked Lunch* and goes by the names of: “Salvador Hassan O’Leary, alias The Shoe Store Kid, alias Wrong Way Marv, alias Afterbirth Leary, alias Slunky Pete, alias Placenta Juan, alias K.Y. Ahmed, alias El Chinche, alias El Culito, etc., etc., for fifteen solid pages of dossier” (142). These are not mere funny names, these are different personas that can, but do not necessarily have to, be combined into one character. What facilitates the assuming of multiple personalities are the ubiquitous conspiracies that Burroughs develops in his fiction. A plot against humanity is foiled by the Nova Mob; the planet swarms with secret, double, triple, or quadruple agents. One of them, Clem Snide confesses: “I am a Private Ass Hole — I will take on any job, any identity, anybody — I will do anything difficult, dangerous, or downright dirty for a price...” (*The Soft Machine*: 67). The shift of perception, or a shift of the whole persona, applies not only to characters but also to the narrator. Burroughs’s usual alter ego is Inspector Lee of the Nova Police. However, he often changes from the Inspector to a third-person nameless narrator, or a narrator referred to as “Bill”, “I&I” or “Bill&Iam.”

In the *Nova* trilogy, Burroughs introduces a recurrent figure from his mythology, the legendary leader of the assassins, Hassan i Sabbah. Hassan’s maxim, “Nothing is true—everything is permitted,” has a very Gnostic undertone. According to Hans Jonas, Gnostic groups were counter-cultural, counter-traditional movements (62). Arbitrary rules imposed by the authorities did not apply to them. They wanted to release themselves from any involvement with the vulgar, material world. Gnostics rejected social conventions and divisions not because they were unjust, but because they were pointless. They believed that they did not belong in this world so they were not bound to it by any commitments or obligations. In some cases, the enlightened — *pneumatics* — placed themselves entirely outside the reach of any law or authority. Such an attitude is reflected in the characters that Burroughs creates in his novels, but if one is familiar with any facts from his biography, one knows that he lived his life not only as a “literary outlaw” (Morgan 2012), but also as an outlaw in a literal sense.

The cut-up can be considered as one path to gnosis. However, in his novels and also in his life, Burroughs gives the example of a different, more dangerous way. Artists, sometimes seen as visionaries, often use unorthodox methods to break away from the illusory reality. In Burroughs’s case, apart from the cut-up, these methods included: drugs, orgone energy, hypnosis, shamanism, hermetic magic, telepathy, experimental therapy and scientology, to name but a few. Burroughs became addicted almost out of boredom. As the offspring of a respected, wealthy Saint Louis family, he did not have any contact with drugs or the criminal world until he was an adult. When living in New York in the 1940s, Burroughs discovered morphine and quickly

became addicted. The habit stayed with him for the rest of his life. The attractiveness of drugs lies not only in their pain killing properties. Most psychoactive substances induce hallucinations or visions that offer a boarder or alternative perspective. Some artists believe that narcotics facilitate transcendence, a desirable experience if considered in the context of Gnostic teachings. For the Gnostic, drugs may be attractive also due to their “ability to disrupt and dissolve the ego; the temporary nature of narcotic use (of all drug use) is such that it inevitably involves a regrouping of the ego” (Boon 2002: 79). According to Marcus Boon, the author of *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs*, Burroughs used drugs to escape the “repugnant material world and the trap of corporeality” (79). What is more, narcotic addiction became for Burroughs a powerful metaphor for the processes of control that shape and run our societies. Burroughs’s theory, what he calls the “algebra of need,” assumes that all society and social transactions are built on addiction; every human being is addicted to something, be it money, sex, power, drugs or TV (*Naked Lunch*: 4). This concept is introduced in *Naked Lunch* and developed in the *Nova* Trilogy. Let us not forget that *The Soft Machine* of the title is the human body (as precisely stated in an appendix added to the 1968 British edition) and, as already mentioned earlier, the main theme of the novel concerns how control mechanisms invade the human organism. The body’s vulnerability to addiction — drug addiction, addiction to sex, image addiction — is precisely what is being exploited by the Nova Mob and what makes it so easy for them to stay in control.

Despite the illusive “benefits” of the other-worldly drug-induced experiences, Burroughs continuously searched for “alternative methods of attaining gnosis” (Boon 2002):

This is the space age. Time to look beyond his run-down radioactive cop-rotten planet. Time to look beyond this animal body. Remember anything that can be done chemically can be done in other ways. (qtd. in Hibbard 1999: 136)

In this essay I have attempted to highlight the concepts underlying most of William Burroughs’s works that strongly resonate with basic Gnostic ideas. Although not obvious at first sight, after a closer reading, I think that interesting parallels can be found between the ancient religious sect and the 20th century experimental American author.

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