

Over the Hills and Far Away
The One God Universe and Dreams of Space

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A critical analysis of control and control structures rests at the core of William S. Burroughs writing from *Naked Lunch* to the channeled voice of the cut-up experiments to the wondering thoughts captured in his final journals. Burroughs associates Control, (the capital his) with a process of imprinting objectives onto an unsuspecting general population. Burroughs artfully illustrated the ways in which culture and the media are utilized to produce a crisis of contradiction in the viewer that acts to reinforce a position of safety.

Within his work, Burroughs outlines the objectives he perceived underlying Control's plan and exposes the ways in which Control reinforces the

concept of the One God Universe (OGU) as a reality of contradiction that negates the dreaming subject. Burroughs argues that under the guise of the OGU, secular Control attempts to eradicate free thought by producing a world that is nonmagical, lacking both dreams and multiple gods. Burroughs theorizes that a universe predicated on a myth of multiple gods is necessary for one to dream. What is at stake in Control's attempts at maintaining a static OGU is a monopoly on Space, or immortality. Burroughs asserts that humanity is moving toward its own annihilation—both due to the implementation of the OGU and problems inherent in humanity itself as a species. Since Burroughs views the human condition as biologic dead end, the only choice humans have is to mutate or become extinct.

Burroughs argues Control masks itself behind the façade of the OGU, since, as he says, "all control systems claim to reflect the immutable laws of the universe." (Burroughs



1974, 43) The universe of the One God is a world of absolute control and “rationality.” The OGU is created in opposition to what Burroughs views as a magical universe consisting of many gods and a privileging of the dream space. Burroughs proposes that the objectives of the OGU are the destruction of the magical universe through the destruction of humans as a dreaming subject. Burroughs writes that the OGU “is controlled predictable, dead.”(Burroughs 1987, 59) For Burroughs, the OGU is a world of absolutes, where no one is allowed to be free to think for him/herself. Such a universe ensures its power through the destruction of critical communities, achieved by the processes of constructed contradiction and determined “safety.” In a system such as this, free or critical thoughts pose a substantial threat to the stability of the Control systems. Burroughs writes in *The Western Lands*:

So the One God, backed by secular power, is forced on the masses in the name of Islam, Christianity, the state, for all secular leaders want to be the One. To be intelligent or observant under such a blanket of oppression is to be ‘subversive.’(Burroughs 1987, 111)

The motivation behind the OGU, then, must be the eradication of intelligence and free thought. The immediate objectives of Control, as manifested under the guise of the OGU, are, for Burroughs, the destruction of magic, as characterized in a mythic component to human existence, and the cutting off of dream space. Through these secondary objectives, Control seeks to ensure its primary goal of maintaining a monopoly over Space, variously characterized in Burroughs’ work as immortality and evolution.

The world Burroughs presents in his writing is one filled with myth, magic and dream experience. The mythic components of Burroughs’ writing can be read as an expansion of his personal cosmology of a subversive magical universe within a world under the control of the One God. He states, “The most basic concept of my writing is a belief in the magical universe, a universe of many gods, often in conflict. The paradox of an all-powerful, all-seeing God who nonetheless allows suffering, evil and death, does not arise.”(Burroughs 1991, 266) Burroughs here is not merely resurrecting archaic forms of human religion—myths such as utopian matriarchies or primal androgyny. He is, instead, positing a cosmology, where mutation is a necessary corollary to existence that is in direct opposition to the OGU and the objectives of Control. If Control’s manipulative power rests on a world of contradiction, then the OGU is the only acceptable cosmology. A magical universe, as Burroughs discusses, is a world without contradictions, since all seemingly inherent contradictions can be ascribed to the



contendings of diverse gods, each with their own objectives and agendas. Burroughs perceives safety as an artificial construction on Control that cannot exist in a universe without a Supreme Being.

Burroughs, like his character Joe the Dead in *The Western Lands*, is engaged in a “desperate struggle” to alter the outcome of Control’s deployments. His fiction is an attempt to track down “the Venusian agents of a conspiracy with very definite M.O. and objectives,” i.e. Control. Joe understands these objectives to be the propagation of an “antimagical, authoritarian, dogmatic” universe. Control, therefore, is the “deadly enemy of those who are committed to the magical universe, spontaneous, unpredictable, alive.”(Burroughs 1987, 53)

Burroughs views dreams as one of the most important components of human existence. Free thought cannot exist without them and, therefore, Control attempts to destroy the dreaming self through the imposition of the OGU. Burroughs describes dreams as a “biologic necessity.”(Burroughs 1987, 181) Dreams are the only things that humans possess which are outside of the sphere of Control’s influence. Being spontaneous and unpredictable, they are contrary to its dogmatic objectives. When one is free to dream, Control’s power cannot be absolute:

These magical visions are totally devoid of ordinary human emotion and experience. There is no friendship, love, hostility, fear or hate. There are no rules, no series of steps by which one can see. Consequently such visions are the enemy of any dogmatic system.(Burroughs 1987, 241)

Dreams remove one from the conscious assumption of the forces that seek to define and confine one. Existing outside of Control’s direct conditioning, dreams can produce random constructions that have the potential to work to undermine Control’s influence over the reactive mind. Dogmatic paradigms must, therefore, alienate people’s connection to their dreams since as Burroughs argues:

Any dogma must postulate the way, certain steps that will lead to the salvation, which the dogma promises. The Christian Heaven or pearly gates and singing angels, the Moslem paradise of eternal whores and plenty of water, the Communists’ heaven of the worker state. Otherwise there is no place for the hierarchical structure that mediates between dogma and man, that dictates *the way*.(Burroughs 1987, 242)



Dreams provide a space where random options and alternatives can arise, and this possibility represents a threatening field of uncertainty for Control. In Burroughs' fiction, Control's very survival is based on its ability to establish and re-present *the way*. Thus a world with multiple ways of seeing is one where Control cannot long retain power.

The importance of the mythic, magical universe, as manifested in dreams and multiple deities, is central to Burroughs' work. As cited above, Burroughs regularly casts this as a basic premise underlying his theories. For Burroughs, humanity, dreams and the magical (multi-god) universe are fundamentally connected. In *The Western Lands*, he writes, "You need your dreams, they are a biologic necessity and your lifeline to space, that is, to the state of God. To be one of the Shining Ones. The inference is that Gods are a biologic necessity. They are an integral part of Man." (Burroughs 1987, 181) Control prevails when dreams are policed, since dreams allow one to project a future which is intrinsically different from one's present condition. Burroughs argues that the lack of dreams, or the alienation of the dreaming subject, works to contain one in a mode of stasis where future projection and creative thought are impossible. Control's ultimate objective, produced through the elimination of dreams, is the continuation of its monopoly on space.

Space is a central metaphor within Burroughs' work, which he uses as a signifier of all that is at stake in the resistance struggle against Control. Burroughs argues that in order to progress, humans must make the jump into space—a jump he sees as characterized by a movement outside of the confines of the body. Space for Burroughs, is a goal that requires a basic mutation of human life. He sees dreams as representing our connection to a fantasy of space. Control in its attempts to destroy human's capacity to dream through the construction of the OGU, is, then for Burroughs, manifesting Control's need to keep all thoughts of space, and thereby evolution, out of the minds of the populace.

Dreams on their deepest levels are projections of a future. Burroughs argues that "the function of dreams is to train the being for future conditions." Burroughs sees this "future condition" as space, or a future in space. "The human artifact is biologically designed for space travel," he writes. (Burroughs 1985, 136) Throughout Burroughs' work, he quotes his friend Brions Gysin's mantra, "We are here to go" along with his corollary phrase "Over the hills and far away." These maxims establish their opinion that a movement into space is necessary for human survival. Burroughs writes in the introduction to *The Place of Dead Roads*:



The only thing that could unite the planet is a unified space program [...] the earth becomes a space station and war is simply *out*, irrelevant, flatly insane in context of research centers, spaceports, and the exhilaration of working with people you like and respect toward an agreed-upon objective, an objective from which all workers will gain. Happiness is a byproduct of function. The planetary space station will give all participants an opportunity to function.(Burroughs 1983, iv)

Burroughs thus hypothesizes space, both the physical movement into space and the mutational step away from the body that he argues this implies, as the answer to human problems of happiness and survival. Indeed, he argues, it may well be the *only* answer possible.

For Burroughs, space provides a motivating force, a unifying goal, which is contradictory to the divisive objectives of Control. In his essay “Immortality,” he writes, “Space exploration is the only goal worth striving for.”(Burroughs 1985, 134) The exploration of space represents, in Burroughs’ opinion, a goal that has the potential of unifying people in a way that excludes the current divides that characterize society. In his last interview, Gysin suggested that “the future is fairly predictable from a historical point of view, and it all points toward ecological, military, political, psychic ruin.” Like Burroughs, he suggested that “from this planet, somebody, some people are going to try to escape.”(Gysin 1982, 115)

Burroughs sees that the fundamental human drive is for immortality and he proposes that space is the means of obtaining immortality. Burroughs began the writing he termed his mythology of the Space Age with the material that became *The Wild Boys* and *The Port of Saints*. In a 1972 interview with Robert Palmer in *Rolling Stone*, Burroughs stated, “The future of writing is to see how close you can come to making it happen.” (Palmer 1972, 53) Like his namesake William Seward Hall in *The Western Lands*, Burroughs is attempting in his fiction “to write his way out of death.” (Burroughs 1987, 3) This process is the attempt at creating a modern mythology suited for humanity at the brink of the mutational breaking point. Burroughs holds the theory that the process of writing actually creates something real. This is expressed in his use of the Arabic work “mekhtub,” meaning “it is written,” a word traditionally used to seal magical spells to insure their success. This word embodies Burroughs’ belief that writing has the power to create, alter or transform actual events.



Burroughs texts then work at two levels. As signified by the word “mektoub” as a magical seal, his work reflects his understanding of the process of writing where the act is itself an evocation of future events. On another level, his texts work themselves as frontal assault on present conditions. His words are as potent a weapon as those wielded by the wild boy tribes in the book of the same name. The work of creating a mythology for the space age, represents, for Burroughs, the actual attempt at creating a new reality. In this manner Burroughs sets himself in opposition to the forces of Control, that seek to keep careful check on any possible movement into space. Burroughs argues that Control does this through its program of dream destruction as presented in the OGU film. Control is therefore an absolute enemy, which stands in the way of the realization of free people. Burroughs writes, “You will know your enemies by those who attempt to block you path. Vampiric monopolists would keep you in time like their cattle.” (Burroughs 1985, 134) Control is a force that acts contrary to human evolution, blocking the means of moving beyond present human conditions.

Burroughs cites studies that have shown that a person deprived of REM, dream sleep, will eventually die as a result of the deprivation. (Burroughs 1985, 135) It follows then that the policies of Control, the destruction of dreams and magic, can be seen as nothing other than genocidal. The current situation which Burroughs terms “control madness” is the implementation of a policy of human extinction. In *The Western Lands* Burroughs compares his theory of Control to George Orwell’s image of Big Brother:

The program of the ruling elite in Orwell’s *1984* was: ‘A foot stamping on a human face forever!’ This is naïve and optimistic. No species could survive for even a generation under such a program. This is not a program of eternal, or even long-range dominance. It is clearly an *extermination program*. (Burroughs 1987, 59)

Burroughs is not optimistic about the outcome for humanity if we remain at our present stage of development. He views the world as a prison, one created by Control, for the purposes of its own preservation. Its means of survival, however, is like a cancer cell whose will to live ultimately results in the death of the host, humanity. Later in *The Western Lands*, Burroughs writes, “The door closes behind you, and you begin to know where you are. This planet is a Death Camp. . . the Second and Final Death.” (Burroughs 1987, 254) This second death is “soul death,” which begins with the destruction of humanity’s capacity to dream.



For Burroughs, however, this movement toward extinction is not simply a product of Control. It is also a situation that has been the logical outcome of factors endemic to the human condition since its inception. “Thoughtful citizens are asking themselves if the whole human race wasn’t a mistake from the starting gate,” Burroughs wonders. (Burroughs 1985, 124) Burroughs’ texts have often been attacked for being misogynistic. He himself stated in *The Job* that he felt that women “were a basic error, and the whole dualistic universe evolved from this error.” (Burroughs 1974, 116) In the decade following this problematic statement, Burroughs’ position on women softened—or, more appropriately, his position on humanity in general hardened. In “Women: A Biological Mistake?” Burroughs writes, “Women may well be a biological mistake; I said so in *The Job*. But so is almost everything else I see around here.” (Burroughs 1985 p.124)

Burroughs asserts that the causes of our extinction as a race have been with us since the beginning. He argues that the virus of our destruction has always been an endemic element of being human—“we are all tainted with viral origins.” In *Cities of the Red Night*, the virologist Dr. Peterson maintains that “the whole quality of human consciousness, as expressed in male and female, is basically a viral mechanism.”(Burroughs 1981, 25) Burroughs often writes that we carry our own death with us; Dr. Peterson further suggests that humans, as a species, carry their own extinction with them. This extinction is based on a world of humans trapped in a state of binary existence. Burroughs wonders if “the separation of the sexes” isn’t “an arbitrary device to perpetuate an unworkable arrangement.”(Burroughs 1985, 126) Burroughs theorist Robin Lydenberg writes that Burroughs sees “the only possible relationship between two sexes defined in binary opposition to each other is one of conflict.”(Lydenberg 1987, 162) For Burroughs this arena of perpetual conflict, enacted through and on the zone of the body, is one of the largest elements that stands between humanity and the potential to mutate into something with even half a chance of survival.

Burroughs suggests that these divisions have trapped humans in a state of neotany, arrested evolutionary development. He states that “I am advancing the theory that we were not designed to remain in our present state, any more than a tadpole is designed to remain a tadpole forever.” (Burroughs 1985, 125) Elsewhere he writes that “it is inconceivable that Homo sapiens could last another thousand years in present form.” (Burroughs 1987, 223) What he suggests is an evolutionary step away from binarism, which entails a movement out of the body itself. Dreams are the connection between humans and this mutational step, since they are, in Burroughs words, the “lifeline to space.” Burroughs views this movement to space a requiring a leap in evolution, since the body cannot exist in space.



In *The Place of Dead Roads*, Burroughs' spokesman Kim Carsons points out that the body's weight is inappropriate for space travel. (Burroughs 1983, 41) In his interview with Jorgen Ploog, Burroughs refers to studies that have shown that a body in weightless environment quickly loses its skeletal structure. He faults both modern immortality experiments and space exploration procedures for attempting to continue the body beyond its usefulness. Modern research meant to prolong life is centered on the replacement of body parts, which Burroughs sees as creating a world of tenuous immortality for the rich and rotting death for the poor. Those who can afford parts receive a new heart in a week, while "the poor wait in part lines for diseased genitals, cancerous lungs, a cirrhotic liver." (Burroughs 1985, 128) For Burroughs, immortality experiments along these lines are guaranteed to fail, since they don't address the problem of death itself. Instead they treat the symptoms of death as expressed in atrophy, cell death and decay. Death is a condition of having a body, as Gysin observes in *The Last Museum*, "When we are born, we start to die." (Gysin 1986, 181)

On the other hand, Burroughs sees that the modern space program is inherently flawed, since it is premised on the objective of carrying present human bodies into space. "The space program is simply an attempt to transport our insoluble temporal impasses somewhere else." (Burroughs 1985, 126) Burroughs likens modern space exploration to a fish attempting to bring an aquarium with him in his adjustment to land. "You need entirely too much," Kim argues. "To begin with there is the question of weight. A raw H.A. [human artifact] weighs around 170 pounds. This breathing, eating, excreting, sleeping, dreaming H.A. must have an entire environment essential to accommodate its awkward life processes encapsulated and transported with it." (Burroughs 1983) Burroughs believes that all these methods are destined to fail, as the body itself is a viral host and these solutions do not cure the human virus. He argues that ultimately "a problem cannot be solved in terms of itself. The human problem cannot be solved in human terms." (Burroughs 1987, 23)

Despite the pessimism above, Burroughs' position is not nihilistic. In *The Western Lands* he writes, "The human condition is hopeless once you submit to it by being born... *almost*. There is one chance in a million and that is still good biologic odds." (Burroughs 1987, 299) This "almost" is a very important almost for Burroughs, since it contains his hope that the present state of human affairs can be transcended or moved beyond. For Burroughs, the chance may be slim in human standards, but these standards, most importantly characterized by the relational construct of time, become entirely relative when one is discussing issues in biologic/evolutionary terms. Again in *The Western Lands*, he speaks of the Death Camp, that is Earth, as "the last game."



(Burroughs 1987, 254) Burroughs thus argues that humanity may be in the last stages of its own annihilation, but he does not see this process as completely inevitable.

Burroughs' texts are his attempts to create a new mythology formulated to assist humanity in thinking in the terms that will be required for its continuation. His writing is in a sense both a glimpse of hope and an austere warning of impending annihilation. In *The Western Lands*, he discusses a picture "of a balloon suddenly and unexpectedly soaring and some people still holding the ropes." Most of these people, he writes, "didn't have the survival IQ to *let go in time*." Seconds later it's too late—the distance to the ground having become too great. Burroughs points out that they did not heed the "basic survival lesson" of letting go "when your Guardian tells you to let go." He continues by posing a question to the reader:

Suppose you were holding one of those ropes? Would you have let go in time, which is, of course, at the first upward yank? I'll tell you something interesting. You would have a much better chance to let go in time now that you have read his paragraph than if you hadn't read it. Writing, if it is anything, is a word of warning... LET GO! (Burroughs 1987, 213)

The above quote demonstrates that Burroughs does hold out some hope for humanity. His fiction is an artful word of warning. His message: "Let Go!" Throughout his work, Burroughs tells his readers to let go of that which traps them, outmoded forms of human existence, and move into the as yet unknown.

The mutational escape Burroughs proposes is intrinsically connected to sex. "This is the space age," he writes in *The Wild Boys*, "And sex movies must express the longing to escape from flesh through sex. The way out is the way through." (Burroughs 1992, 82) For Burroughs, sex, male homosexual sex in particular, becomes the means of beginning the break with Control. While engaged in sexual acts, one of the wild boys envisions himself as a celestial body. "I see myself streaking across the sky line a star to leave the earth forever. What holds me back? It is the bargain by which I am here at all. The bargain is this body that holds me here." (Burroughs 1992, 102) Space is again depicted as requiring a move away from the body, a vision which begins in sexual machinations.

For Burroughs the body itself forms the greatest obstacle to human evolution. Burroughs' principle criticism of Egyptian immortality experiments is that they included a reliance on the corpse, the mummy, for one's survival in the afterlife. The human flesh



is regularly characterized as a prison within his writing. When asked if a person could be truly free in the modern world, he answered “that free men don’t exist on this planet at this time, because they don’t exist in human bodies, by the mere fact of being in a human body you’re controlled by all sorts of biologic and environmental necessities.” (Burroughs 1974, 37)



In Burroughs’ work, the moment of homosexual union represents the beginnings of a new imagining. In *The Place of Dead Roads*, he writes, “Sex forms the matrix of a dualistic and therefore solid and real universe. It is possible to resolve the dualistic conflict in a sex act, where dualism need not exist.” (Burroughs 1983, 172) Thus, male same-sex desire represents the means of reaching a state beyond binary existence—a state where biologic mutation is conceivable. It stands in direct opposition to the sexual and cultural imperatives enforced by Control. Simply put, it is ill-defined territory.

The sex in Burroughs’ fiction, especially as exhibited in *The Wild Boys* and *Port of Saints*, is the sex of young males—who are beginning the processes of sexual identity construction. When he speaks of the desire to “escape from flesh through sex” and the shift in “sex movies” that this entails, he follows with an example. Johnny and Mark are



wild boy agents who “become astronauts playing the part of American married idiots,” i.e. the traditional middle American, heterosexual, married couple. They remain thus until months after take-off, at which point they disconnect radio contact with Earth. At this point, Burroughs describes how “the sex scenes of their adolescence are seen as image dust in space through which they pass to other planets.” (Burroughs 1992, 82-3) This routine, as Burroughs called his fictional sequences, then shatters with the images of their sexual memories lifted from their 1920’s childhoods. “Lawn sprinklers,” “classrooms,” “frogs in 1920 roads” and “a naked boy hugging his knees sunlight in pubic hairs” are all resurrected in the explosion of space sexuality. Burroughs appears to view the personal sexual mememic landscape as a film written in early adolescence. This “sex film” then becomes in space, and his texts, a catalog of individual metaphor. Within his work, sex becomes the present-time invocation of these personal sexual encodings of history and memory.

This scene suddenly shifts from these loosely connected, isolated images to “a suburban room afternoon light bleakly clear.” (Burroughs 1992, 83) Mark says he heard that Johnny “got laid” and Johnny replies that it was a prostitute “down on Westminster Place.” He admits that since that encounter his crotch has itched. Mark orders Johnny to drop his pants and begins inspecting his genitals. During the process Johnny gets an erection: “Christ it is happening he can’t stop it.” The focus then shifts to fragments of solitary sexual conditions with “sad muscle magazines over the florist shop pants down green snakes under rusty iron in the vacant lot the old family soap opera look of yellow hair stirs in September.” (Burroughs 1992, 84-5) The story continues to shift with brief glimpses of past sexual relations and fantasies. “The film stops...” and shifts again—moves to Mexico City, London and St. Louis—until “the film stops in his eyes” at the point of orgasm:

A shooting star silence floats down on falling leaves and blood spit the
smell of decay shredded to dust and memories pieces of legs and cocks
and assholes drifting fragments in sunlight ass hairs spread on the bed
dust of young hand fading flickering thighs and buttocks smell of
young nights. (Burroughs 1992, 85)

Sex is a catharsis formed by “drifting fragments” of image and memory; each act is the product of all that has gone before. Burroughs presents homosexual intercourse as particulate matter in the light projection of Control’s film, the OGU. In the case of Johnny and Mark, “the sex scenes of their adolescence are seen as image dust in space



through which they pass.” (Burroughs 1992, 83) As dust in the light, it both obscures and refuses the image on screen thus breaking down Control’s monopoly on space.

In Burroughs’ novels sex between boys begins the process of space exploration, but in his theories humans are actually incapable of envisioning the full scope of the movement into space. In his essay “Immortality” Burroughs suggests, “Mutation involves changes that are literally unimaginable from the perspective of the future mutant.” (Burroughs 1985, 135) Elsewhere Burroughs compares the evolutionary step he projects for humans with the step made by fish onto land. As the great seas, which once covered much of the Earth, began to recede, certain fish developed rudimentary lungs. These they used to move over land from one body of water to another. At some point they lost the use of their gills and were forced to remain on land. In this way, in their search for water, they found land. Burroughs suggests that the human jump may be made in much the same way. “The astronaut is not looking for space; he is looking for more *time*—that is equating space with time... Like the walking fish, looking for more time we may find space instead, and then find there is no way back.” (Burroughs 1985, 126)

The changes required in Burroughs’ vision of an evolutionary shift are not conceivable to present humans. For Burroughs, space will involve taking “a step into the unknown, a step that no human being has ever taken before.” (Burroughs 1985, 135) Just as the fish could not envision a world of gravity, Burroughs argues, humans are unable to conceive of a life in weightlessness. Also like the fish who can never return to water, humans once in space will never be able to reverse the evolutionary process. “Evolution,” Burroughs points out, “would seem to be a one-way street.” (Burroughs 1985, 125)

In one of his last interviews, mythologist Joseph Campbell was asked, “Why should we care about myths? What do they have to do with life?” His reply stressed the importance of myth as a constitutive component for understanding daily experience. Campbell blamed the nihilism and lack of direction evidenced within modern society on the loss of myth. He spoke of myths, “stories,” as once providing ever-present interpretive paradigms with which to access experience. “When the story is in your mind,” he said, “then you see its relevance to something happening in your life.” (Campbell 1988, 4) For Campbell the lack of modern mythologies has created an environment where one has no choice but voice their lives as purposeless and random—a world without meaning or motivation. Burroughs continued importance is not as a erotic writer or literary experimenter, but as a creator of postmodern myths. Burroughs routines are most invigorating when they work as stories capable of providing paradigms that



make lived experience accessible and intelligible. Burroughs often spoke of his work as being the creation of a mythology—"a mythology for the space age."

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