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“A new mythology”: religious beliefs and motifs in the works of William S. Burroughs

William Seward Burroughs is one of the most original contemporary American artists. He is well-known for his radical literary innovations and formal experiments. From the late 1950s, he was composing his texts with the use of the avant-garde “cut-up” and “fold-in” techniques (variations of collage). Burroughs is also famous for tackling taboo subjects in his prose. He openly wrote about his drug addiction, rehab therapy and non-heteronormativity. His works have been labeled as scandalous, pornographic, post/modern, post/apocalyptic and/or nihilistic.

Apart from the innovative elements and controversial content found in Burroughs’ oeuvre, numerous scholars and critics have noticed a strong “gnostic strain” running through most of his works. The aim of the dissertation is to broaden the scope of the search for gnostic and neo-gnostic elements in Burroughs’ prose. While the focus is predominantly put on the vision that emerges from the *Nova* trilogy, in the dissertation the analysis is extended to the *Red Night* series as well. A closer look is taken at Scientology and transhumanism; elements of the belief systems developed by these movements are traced in Burroughs’ texts. Both movements and the visions that they created provide an interesting example of the modifications and “updates” that the ancient Gnostic mythos has undergone across ages and disciplines.

The dissertation presents Burroughs’ unconventional religious and philosophical stance. It is argued that spiritual progress, a search for answers to the most fundamental questions concerning life, death, life after death, and humanity’s destiny were a priority in Burroughs’ artistic quest. It is suggested that by recognizing and considering certain religious motifs and references in Burroughs’ novels, the reader gains a deeper understanding and broader perspective of these works and a more complete overview of Burroughs’ overall artistic vision.

The most substantial part of the dissertation is devoted to Burroughs’ gnostic vision. Selected texts – the *Nova* trilogy (*The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, *Nova Express*) and the *Red Night* trilogy (*Cities of the Red Night*, *The Place of Dead Roads*, *The Western Lands*) –

are analyzed in relation to the following Gnostic themes: the belief that people are the bearers of a “divine spark” and thus are destined to achieve salvation from the wicked universe; a radical dualism between the transcendent, ideal world and the failed, physical realm, which is an illusory spiritual prison created by an inferior, evil creator – the Demiurge; a distinction between the true Deity and an inferior, malevolent being (the mentioned Demiurge); a belief in the saving knowledge (gnosis) which can be attained through revelation, imparted by a “Heavenly Messenger” or achieved with the use of specific rituals/techniques.

The dissertation consists of four chapters. Chapter 1 describes the history of Gnosticism and discusses the foundational myths common to most Gnostic sects. It takes a closer look at Manichaeism as the beliefs held by this particular sect strongly correlate with Burroughs’ ideas. It also includes a concise record of the origins and development of the Church of Scientology and presents the main tenets on which it is based. In the chapter Scientology is identified as a contemporary variety of Gnosticism. Lastly, the chapter includes a brief introduction into transhumanist thought and looks at ideas that link this contemporary philosophical movement to ancient Gnosticism.

Chapter 2 offers an analysis of, as well as comparison and contrast between the vision emerging from the *Nova* trilogy and some of the basic Gnostic myths. The chapter first presents the villains of Burroughs’ trilogy. They are compared with the forces of Darkness found in Gnostic mythology. Secondly, the heroes of the trilogy are juxtaposed with the Gnostic forces of Light. The chapter also includes a description of the means of liberation and enlightenment that Burroughs mentions in his novels; these are: apomorphine, silence, and the cut-up technique.

The third chapter focuses on the avant-garde cut-up and fold-in techniques. It explains the origins, history and different variations of these methods of literary composition. It is argued that the unconventional texts created with the use of either or both techniques enable a release from arbitrarily imposed notions and a routine mode of thinking. Thus, in the context of the interpretation suggested in the dissertation, they can be seen as means that facilitate the attainment of gnosis. The chapter offers an analysis of several collage passages taken from the *Nova* trilogy. The source texts that Burroughs uses for his collages are: *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot, *The Trial* by Franz Kafka, and *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare. The analysis follows the changes that Burroughs applied to these classical texts.

The fourth chapter addresses the second trilogy – *Red Night* – and includes a discussion of the three novels in relation to the same Gnostic ideas that were analyzed in the context of the *Nova* trilogy. It was found that Burroughs continues and develops most of the motifs introduced in his first trilogy; however, he also enriches his mythology with new elements and ideas. He refers to Egyptian and Mayan beliefs and to the elements of the myth of the American West. The plots of all three novels are based on the motif of the power struggle between good and evil. Burroughs persists in his belief that reality is an illusion created by inferior deities that want to control and exploit mankind. The writer remains convinced that secret knowledge, which holds the key to achieving immortality, exists and that with the use of particular techniques/rituals people are capable of attaining it.

The analyses included in the dissertation reveal the abundance of Gnostic motifs that appear in Burroughs' trilogies. Burroughs' myth, seemingly very original and futuristic, is revealed to be composed of ancient blocks and thus shows the continuity of the gnostic thought throughout centuries. Burroughs' formal innovations are indeed radical and revolutionary; however, in terms of content he relies on familiar, or at least recognizable patterns. Through the form and content of both trilogies, Burroughs expresses his unconventional literary theories and religious beliefs. It is important to acknowledge these aspects of Burroughs' oeuvre since the awareness of his religious and philosophical stance provides the key to understanding most of his artistic output and helps to fully appreciate it.