Chapter 13

"Virus-X": Kerouac's Visions of Burroughs*

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This Legend Business

The mythic narrative of Beat legends has either been told and retold, taken up by generation after generation of fascinated and uncritical listeners, or it has been critically ignored, dismissed as an essentially false and empty story. Rarely has this narrative been subjected to close textual or historical analysis. But the very durability of Beat myths suggests their cultural power, and that we need to ask questions about their material origins, their precise forms, and their often complex functions and effects. My specific purpose here is to bring together Jack Kerouac, as the greatest Beat mythmaker, the one who joked that he had "worked harder at this legend business" than the rest (*Vanity of Duluoz* 157), and William S. Burroughs, as the greatest object of Beat mythmaking. I am interested particularly in how representations of Burroughs's image in Kerouac's fiction define the role that Burroughs played for the Beats, and the degree to which the legendizing of the Beats shaped not only the reception of Burroughs's early work but also its *production*. Going beyond issues of biographical infidelity, my point is that Kerouac's representations served particular needs for his own work and the work of the Beats at large, and that his image-making had a material impact on Burroughs's identity and practice as a writer at least as significant as any other influence Kerouac may have had.

Finally, I propose that Kerouac's visions of Burroughs belong to that order of phenomena which exercise *fascination*—not in the term's casual, everyday use, but in its fullest philosophical and psychoanalytical sense: as a powerful but profoundly ambivalent relation between subject and object in which there is a meaningful blindness at the very heart of vision. Several critics, such as Allen Hibbard (ix) and Graham Caveney (12), have briefly addressed

Burroughs's image's power of fascination directly. What has been missing to date is any attempt to go back to Kerouac as a crucial point of origin, to see how, from the very beginning of Burroughs's career as a writer, Kerouac so exactly and astutely inscribed Burroughs's participation in what might be called an economy of fascination. As well as going back to the image's historical origins and material effects, what also remains to be done is to inform the term itself by drawing on the rich range of meanings it has acquired in cultural and political theory and in philosophy and psychoanalysis, through such theorists of fascination as Walter Benjamin, Jacques Lacan, Maurice Blanchot, Jean Baudrillard, and Slavoj Žižek. To Benjamin, for example, fascination is not simply an irresistible state of illusion, but represents, as Ackbar Abbas puts it, "a willingness to be drawn to phenomena that attract our attention yet do not submit entirely to our understanding" (51). For Blanchot fascination names another type of interminable obscurity, an ambivalent experience of attraction–repulsion provoked by what Lacan called the enigmatic and traumatic "thing" that marks the psychoanalytical "real" of desire. Perhaps Lacan offers the most salutary and therefore relevant account because he was so directly concerned with the relation of desire to *authority*, especially the seductive authority of the teacher supposed to know the secret: "The lesson of the master," Adam Phillips observes, referring to Lacan but with relevance for Burroughs, "is the one we should stop listening out for" (112). Since space doesn't permit a rigorous inquiry into the distinct and complex dynamics of blinding and revelation, seduction and signification sketched here, in what follows I read Kerouac's representations of Burroughs as a material parable of the psychology and politics of fascination.

Shadowy Unknown Genius

Everything about William Burroughs's cultural debut is suitably paradoxical and eerily prophetic. He looms into view for the first time at the dead centre of the twentieth century in the guise of a "malicious-looking smile" that appears in Kerouac's own debut novel, *The Town and the City*, published in March of 1950 (373). This enigmatic smile, which is at once sinister and comic, intensely material and weirdly spectral, is an image that initiates and seems to predict Burroughs's equivocal presence across the next fifty years. To adapt a line of hyperbole from the better-known character sketch in *On the Road*, you might say all of Burroughs is in that smile.

What enables us to read a condensed history of Burroughs's future in a smile? Most obviously, the way that he first appears as a character imaged in another writer's novel. That is to say, from the very beginning the appearance of his identity had the quality of a fiction, and this trope of a fantasy projected by others would remain the dominant model for representing Burroughs. Take, for example, Leslie Fiedler's double jibe from 1964, that "Burroughs is himself a character out of science fiction," rather than a writer

of it, and that "Ginsberg invented Burroughs" (186). Or, from the same year, take Carl Solomon's similar, but more considered, observation that Burroughs's "character and personality seem to have had reflections in fictional characters in the writings of his protégé, Jack Kerouac. This is particularly evident in the character of Dennison in Kerouac's first novel, *The Town and the City*" (6). The appearance that Kerouac first projected and that Fiedler and Solomon and so many others since them have repeated describes, in fact, less a fictional identity than a *simulation*, a copy reproduced by others behind which there was no original.

This is what makes the first sighting of Burroughs in *The Town and the City* so remarkable, because it establishes precisely the unique form of artistic mediation that would shadow Burroughs's career. For Kerouac presents an extraordinary *double* displacement, an uncannily *twice*-mediated representation, since it is not actually Burroughs's own persona, Will Dennison, who sports his "malicious-looking smile," but Levinsky, the character based on Allen Ginsberg. More curious still, this imitated smile, this spectral grin without a material Cheshire cat, is present not only in Dennison's absence but ahead of his first appearance proper in the novel, so that the image of the man precedes the real thing. Burroughs's reputation during the decade that followed *The Town and the City* was almost entirely mediated by Kerouac and Ginsberg, given the neglect of *Junkie* (1953), the non-appearances of both *Queer* (1985; written 1952) and "In Search of Yage" (published in *The Yage Letters* 1963; written 1953), and the publication of *Naked Lunch* (1959) outside America. It is easy to grasp therefore how Kerouac's scene marks the creation of Burroughs as a legendary persona *of* the Beats *by* the Beats, as well as being more broadly symptomatic of how his identity has been fabricated and mediated in advance of his own work.

The Town and the City's drama of ambiguous anticipation was a compelling prototype, the first of a script written out again and again during the Beat decade: in John Clellon Holmes's *Go* (1952), the "first Beat novel" (Cook 46), a roman à clef which simply borrowed "Will Dennison" directly from *The Town and the City*—and sought Kerouac's permission, but not that of Burroughs (Holmes xix); in Ginsberg's dedication to "Howl" (1956), where the unwritten *Naked Lunch* was promised as an "endless novel which will drive everybody mad" (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems* 802); in Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), where "Old Bull Lee" is endowed with "phenomenal fires and mysteries" and appears like "something out of an old evil dream" (145, 151); in articles such as that co-written by Ginsberg and Gregory Corso at the height of Beat media attention, which advertised Burroughs as "the shadowy unknown genius behind the more publicised figures of Kerouac and Ginsberg" (166); and in Corso's own novel, *The American Express* (1961), where he appears as the "spectral" Mr. D, who "stands for danger! disaster! death!" (17, 57). Such dramatic promotion in, outside, and on the margins of fiction, inevitably generated a kind of phantom figure. Those images, vivid yet ghostly, seductive but ambivalent, constituted the spectacular substance

of Burroughs ahead of his own work, so that his texts were liable to be read as the products of a simulacral identity not only preceding but cancelling the "real."

The usurping force of Beat mythmaking and fictionalised biography significantly affected how Burroughs has been critically received and popularly imagined. Of course Burroughs has always been tangential to the Beat movement, its elder statesman, godfather, mentor, or tutelary spook, but that has been precisely the point. If the image of Burroughs has remained central to the cultural popularity of the Beats, it is for the paradoxical reason that its presence was always essentially marginal, equivocal, and fantasmatic. He was never completely there and never quite belonged, but always marked a limit, a point of excess, a kind of strange inner extremity. This anomalous status in turn affirmed the very fantasy identity projected in Burroughs's own work, as the irredeemably alien and Other, forever out of place. This position has also in turn been reproduced in Burroughs's location within "Beat Studies," where, in largely unproductive ways, he has remained neither in nor out.[1]

From the point of view of Burroughs criticism, it is tempting to free Burroughs from the Beat Generation altogether, to quite simply disregard the context, and this is what some have tried to do: Two of the best studies, by Robin Lydenberg (1987) and Timothy Murphy (1997), don't even *mention* Kerouac. But there are good reasons not to yield to this temptation, and those who think that Burroughs's early texts can now be read outside the Beat context, taken out like a picture from an old frame, should think again. For contemporary readers, each of his four texts written during the 1950s comes framed in some way by Beat reference, none of which actually dates from that decade, so that, like it or not, Burroughs remains bound by and to the Beats.[2] And what is true for how these texts are received is also true for how they were written: The effects of the association are too material and too enduring to be ignored, so that it is impossible to advance a serious case for Burroughs's development without understanding those effects. Indeed, one reason why the ambiguities of his evolving identity as a writer so troubled Burroughs in the 1950s is that the legendizing of the Beats shaped *simultaneously* the production and reception of his early writing.

If Burroughs's "most important 'work' may be his legend, which exists somewhere between the realms of fact and fiction," as Jennie Skerl claimed (1985, 2), then it was there from the very start. In March of 1950 Burroughs had settled into Mexico City and was just beginning work on what later became *Junkie*. A couple of days after *The Town and the City* arrived in the mail, on March 10 he wrote a letter back which began by praising Kerouac's novel and ended by revealing he'd started his own. And so, at the very moment he was embarking on his own mature writing, literally no more than a few weeks into his first manuscript, Burroughs must have looked into Kerouac's fictionalizing mirror and seen this impersonation of his "own" persona's smile, smiling enigmatically back. For general cultural impact, the image of Burroughs from *The Town and The City* does not compare to the far

more widely read *On the Road*, and Carl Solomon's comments on the portrait of Dennison have never been taken up or developed further. But, paradoxically, the most overlooked representation may well have been the most materially important. To grasp this paradox we must bear in mind not only that the image of Dennison appeared to Burroughs exactly at the point he began to write, but that it remained his sole published image during the period he wrote *Junkie*, *Queer*, "In Search of Yage," and much of *Naked Lunch*. This scene from *The Town and the City* is both a material point of origin and the most potent instance of image-making, and we ought to pay it the closest attention because no representation affected Burroughs *himself* more deeply.

The nature and extent of *The Town and the City*'s impact on Burroughs's own creativity will become clearer from a precise comparison of *Junkie* and *Queer*. For now, we should remember that the name Burroughs used for his persona throughout the writing of *Junkie* was not William Lee—a late substitution—but none other than Will Dennison. This was, in turn, the name Burroughs had used when co-writing "And the Hippos Were Boiled In Their Tanks" with Kerouac five years earlier, which meant that he was using for his own authorial identity the *nom de plume* that Kerouac had just transformed into the name of a fictional character. It is only a mild exaggeration to conclude that Burroughs's career as a fiction writer began not at the moment of Kerouac's inspiring success, but at the moment he recognized himself as a fictional character, and a character of a very particular kind: one whose potency to affect others coincides with a disturbing power of autonomy from its real-life author.

We might ask, did Kerouac "read" Burroughs with prophetic knowledge, or did he "write" the Burroughs we know into being? The question raises the fundamental issue of his mythologized image, an identity that we cannot simply wish away. Like Dennison's ghost of a smile, it persists and lingers on for the very reason that it seems a text without an accessible and material author, a signifier without any signified. This is the significance of Burroughs to the Beats: They already conjure him as the name of a peculiar kind of secret, an *empty secret*, in the sense that this shadowy figure, hidden "behind the more publicised figures," serves as a Master precisely because he is never really there at all. The effect depends on a certain distance, one rendered literally through Burroughs's geographic removal from America and figuratively through the resolutely enigmatic quality of Beat representations. In *Doctor Sax*, the closest Kerouac ever came to writing "a book about Will just by himself" (*Vanity of Duluoz* 156)—which is still not very close—it is said that Sax both knows "something that no other man knew" and that he "just does nothing," while his habitat gives evocative architectural form to the enigma: "If one were to approach the shack from the back, from the side, from the front—nothing would be revealed. The shack was as square as a perfect block; it suggested nothing" (*Doctor Sax* 142, 140, 137). Given Kerouac's insistence and precision, I would suggest that in philosophical terms this "nothing" is *something*, a positive negativity, that it denotes a kind

of hole in knowledge, a blind spot in the field of vision, a traumatic blank, a secret that cannot be disclosed. In Kerouac's fiction, Burroughs is represented consistently in very particular ways—obliquely, by negatives and contradictions—fixing a seductive template for what later critics have called a "suppression of presence so ghostly as to become its own powerful identity" (Ward 112), or simply "a formidable *absence*" (Craig Karpel, in Hibbard xi).

Avoided, Yet Hypnotic and Compelling

Since a proper taxonomy of Kerouac's representations of Burroughs would be tedious, I offer an opportunistic reading of Kerouac's scenario in *The Town and the City*. Its aims are to make visible typical features whose effect is cumulative, to demonstrate Kerouac's understanding of the ways in which fascination in the form of a smile can work, and, finally, to establish the material impact of Kerouac's representations on Burroughs's own production. The scene has Peter Martin, Kerouac's chief alter-ego in the novel, arguing against Levinsky's belief in a spreading "atomic disease" or "universal cancer" that he dubs "Virus X" (370, 371). "Everybody's trying to be decent," Peter insists:

> Levinsky was aroused with interest. "Let them *try!*" he brought out with an imitation of a snarl, and a malicious-looking smile—a smile he had learned from Dennison.
>
> "There you go imitating Will Dennison again!" Peter taunted.
>
> "Nonsense, my days of sitting at Dennison's feet are over—the position is almost reversed, in a sense. He listens to my ideas now with great respect, where it used to be just the other way around." (373)

Here, *in absentia*, Dennison is cast in the role of guru and located at the key point in a triangular drama of ideas and influence. The striking and complex ambiguity of this casting should suggest something quite different from what has long remained the portrait of Burroughs from this period: the revered master of the Beats. Kerouac's representations of Burroughs as a teacher figure are fully conscious efforts to dramatise fascination as a profoundly *equivocal* experience. Pedagogy here is all about power, the power of fascination, and this relation is made particularly clear in *On the Road*. "He spent all his time talking and teaching others," Kerouac writes of Old Bull Lee, "Jane sat at his feet: so did I; so did Dean; and so had Carlo Marx" (131). Since Carlo Marx is, like Levinsky in *The Town and the City*, another version of Ginsberg, that "had" establishes the continuity of the scenes across the two novels; he is the one who ceases to sit at His Master's feet. And, since Kerouac is at pains in *On the Road* to parody or undermine Old Bull's ideas—like his plan to build a shelf that will "last a *thousand years*" out of a "piece of rotten wood" (149)[3]—his sketch sustains Carlo's changed position. Kerouac appears

to offer a simple choice—the blind devotion of homage, or detached vision: fascination or freedom.

Kerouac says that Levinsky has "learned" this smile from Dennison; Peter accuses Levinsky of "imitating" him. If learning is imitation, then education is a form of mimesis, or possession. It is less that Levinsky has copied Dennison, than that the student becomes a copy *of* his master. Once this is pointed out to him, Levinsky immediately denies it, in a swift about-face that actually suggests the contrary forces simultaneously at work in fascination: seduction and shame, attraction and repulsion. The point about Levinsky's denial, with its tell-tale qualifiers—"almost reversed, in a sense"—is that it goes too far, suggesting that it is mere wishful thinking. Far from reproducing authority or mastery, by imitating his master Levinsky puts himself in the opposite condition of inauthenticity and service. Peter's charge that Levinsky is imitating Dennison *again* confirms that his idiosyncratic ideas about "Virus X" only recycle what Dennison has told him; in resisting Levinsky's "continual attempt to convert him to his, Levinsky's, point of view" (366),[4] Peter is therefore also resisting Dennison. No coincidence, then, that Dennison's "close friend," Waldo Meister, is described as "an evil magician . . . despised like Philoctetes, avoided, yet hypnotic and compelling . . . " (368), or that Kerouac should observe repeatedly the "glittering eyes" with which Levinsky "fixed Peter" (366, 367), since the scene he evokes here is Coleridge's encounter between Ancient Mariner and Wedding Guest. Since this most famous of cautionary tales of fascination would, a decade later, model the pedagogy of *Naked Lunch*, it's hard to say whether Kerouac intuited the economy of writer–reader relations in Burroughs's future writing, or whether *The Town and the City* gave him the script.

Kerouac's first two novels feature portraits of Burroughs that may or may not fascinate the reader, but which are certainly *about* exercising the power of fascination. While Kerouac dramatises this sinister power in relation to his portraits of Ginsberg, at the same time we can understand this drama as a displacement, a way of working through his *own* enduring fascination with Burroughs. As early as March 1945, Kerouac wrote that "nobody can actually *like* Burroughs": "I think he studied occult yoga magic with which he could throw a cold curse on everybody around him" (*Letters, 1940–1956*, 89). Three years later, Kerouac admitted in another letter that, even if Burroughs had "lost most of his human qualities" and refused to pay him any attention, paradoxically this actually "makes him even more fascinating" (163). These ambivalent biographical relations feed directly into Kerouac's fictional representations, but more importantly they carry over from Kerouac into Burroughs's cultural and critical reception: Does not the fascination of his image lie in the perverse appeal of someone we imagine *fully* capable of throwing a cold curse on us? More generally, we might see a direct line running from the sketch of Dennison in *The Town and the City*, via Ginsberg and Corso's image of the "shadowy unknown genius" and Kerouac's later designation of Burroughs as "a shadow hovering over western literature" in *Vanity of Duluoz* (161), all the way to

David Ulin's 1996 portrait of "a shadowy, wreathlike figure infiltrating our collective consciousness" (George-Warren 206), or Jim Jarmusch's obituary for the "godfather of outlaw artists" who "was always hovering in the shadows" (George-Warren 222). In other words, the sinister figure looming in the fictional texts of other writers has been taken up, and perpetuated in a multitude of contexts, by the repetitions of critics and other artists.

That Inscrutable Thing!

The subtlety of Kerouac's narrative lies in the way it sets up a series of expectations about Dennison as a mysterious figure: Friends sit at his feet, they repeat his strange apocalyptic ideas and mimic his cynical expressions. And so, when Dennison finally appears in person Kerouac presents us with an astonishing paradox: Having witnessed the compelling, enigmatic presence of the man in his absence, now, when Dennison himself appears in full view, the enigma is *not there*. Far from being a seductive source of fascinating ideas, he talks only about the dull practicalities of his drug habit, pays "no attention whatever" to Peter, and when he smiles does so "charmingly" (400–1). The reader is entitled, if not invited to ask, what is going on?

On a banal level, Kerouac seems to have staged a deliberate anti-climax: He builds up to a spectacle that never happens, rather like the baffling contrast between the mysterious reputation and mundane reality of Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel. More profoundly, Kerouac takes the fictional representation of Burroughs and splits this into an original preceded and displaced by a disembodied image. We are then provoked into asking what relation ties one to the other. At this point it is useful to take up Ronna Johnson's analysis of Kerouac as a victim to "the hyperreal effects of his iconic fame" (23). Borrowing from Jean Baudrillard, Johnson's case is that Kerouac belonged to the first generation of writers to become celebrities of the modern mass media and to have suffered the wholesale displacement of the real by the image. What we should add to this analysis is that such a fate, whereby the image stands in for the writer and is contingently related to him, was one that Kerouac himself first produced for Burroughs. In *The Town and the City*, the fictionalisation includes *within itself* the structural confusion of real and model, while the image precedes the real and is more potent than it. The priority of origins is lost together with any chance of an "objective" viewpoint, and Dennison falls short of the image of himself, is less impressive than it because his *impression* is visible as an already circulating and autonomous image. And so what Johnson says of Kerouac's writing—that it "is 'secret' because his immense cultural visibility foregrounds only itself" (24)—is not simply just as true for Burroughs. For what Kerouac's scene establishes is that, while we are used to recognising how Burroughs's writing comes to us mediated by the iconic image, this destiny was already initiated and dramatised for him at the very point he began to write. In Baudrillard's

terms, *The Town and the City* showed Burroughs the image's fate of becoming its own simulation, one that has ceased to reflect, distort, or conceal any reality at all (Baudrillard 6).

Here it is worth noting the consistency in Kerouac's representations of Burroughs of what must otherwise appear as entirely inconsequential details. In *On the Road*, where Old Bull Lee is paradoxically both a "nondescript-looking fellow" and "a Kansas minister with exotic, phenomenal fires and mysteries" (145), he again first appears *before himself*, in the form of a long-distance, telephonic voice: "We heard Bull's whining voice eighteen hundred miles away" (133). In *Visions of Cody* this mediated vocal presence is reproduced by first Jack and then Cody as *imitations* performed in their transcribed taped dialogue, during which Jack dwells precisely on the dynamics of Burroughs's original appearance and reputation: "I had already heard about Hubbard, my impression of Hubbard was of a short, squat . . . *tough* guy . . . I . . . hearin, you know, you hear a guy, you hear about a guy continually—" (184–85). In *Vanity of Duluoz*, Kerouac is even more explicit about the "peculiar intensity" created by advance reports, and how, after such fantasy projections, the actual encounter becomes entirely paradoxical: Hubbard is "inscrutable because ordinary-looking (scrutable)" (156). Here the key word is invested with the philosophical dimension it derives from its given source in Melville's *Moby Dick*: "I seek that inscrutable thing!" (qtd. in *Vanity of Duluoz* 204). The "secret wisdom" of the Burroughsian Doctor Sax, "concealed in that unholy head beneath that black slouch hat," is a secret that must stay concealed (*Doctor Sax* 141). Always appearing before he is present, and always remaining absent even when he seems to be most there, Kerouac's representation of Burroughs figures an essentially unfathomable relation between appearance and essence.

Dennison's failure to live up to his advance billing in *The Town and the City* also suggests something about Levinsky and, insofar as it makes sense to read this scene as a parable for reading Burroughs, Levinsky can stand in for our desires and needs in the way that he appears caught between the desire for mystification and the need for de-mystification. Kerouac prompts this suggestion quite brilliantly through a telling detail about Dennison's apartment: "[I]n the moldy doorway hung a moth-eaten green drape that concealed whatever was behind it" (400). Of course now we are forced to ask, what is the secret behind the green drape?

The short answer is: nothing. To put this another way, the drape is what it appears to be, and it is only our desire to discover something hidden that turns appearance into mystery and a moth-eaten green drape into the veil hiding a secret. The more subtle answer is the paranoid play of secrecy itself, a game Burroughs would make explicit in "The Conspiracy," written in the mid-1950s as part of *Naked Lunch*: "[T]he secret is that there is no secret" (*Interzone* 110). Applied to the seductive power of Burroughs's own image as a mysterious master, the secret of fascination turns out to be nothing but *our fascination for the secret*. There is a political as well as psychological lesson

here, one that Burroughs would spell out in the last words of *Naked Lunch*: "No glot—C'lom Fliday" (235). If you want to know the secret, ask again. . . .

Monstrous Perversity

When Burroughs began writing *Junkie* in March of 1950, with the example of *The Town and the City* before him, he was returning to the New York City of 1945, so that in terms of period, place, and personalities his novel began exactly where Kerouac's ended. However, just as representations of Kerouac and Ginsberg are conspicuous by their absence in *Junkie*, so too is the image of Dennison's smile, whose sinister potency seems a world away from Burroughs's narrating persona William Lee, née Will Dennison. If anything, Lee in *Junkie* resembles Dennison *without* the smile, since he is defined largely by his anonymity, indifference, and detachment from those around him. There is a very particular history to this identity, since it represents a choice between the two potential aesthetic identities that emerged from Burroughs's dramatic collaborations with Kerouac back in 1945.

The first identity that Burroughs and Kerouac acted out was captured by Ginsberg's ever-opportune photographic lens: as the caption says, they are playing out a scene from Dashiell Hammett.[5] Hammett was valued—with some license—for the tough, native masculinity and journalistic objectivity of his prose, a stylization well-suited to a work of underworld reportage such as "Hippos," based on the Carr-Kammerer murder case. And of course, the dominant style of *Junkie* is routinely described—with no less license—as that of Dashiell Hammett. But in 1945 Burroughs and Kerouac also staged a second identity of a different national and aesthetic order, when they acted out scenes from André Gide's novel, *The Counterfeiters*. If Hammett stood for an indigenous realist mode, then Gide represented the extreme of narcissistic European modernism. Five years later, Gide's novel is discussed at length in *The Town and the City*, where his name represents "monstrous perversity"—intellectual, sexual, aesthetic—for Kerouac (154). And this unnatural "corrupter" of youth and artist of "falsity" (154, 153) is specifically associated with the image of Burroughs. "Dennison," it is said, "is a first-rate fabricator of Gidean romances" (393). In other words, that malicious-looking smile—seductive, ambiguous, suspect—identified Burroughs negatively in moral, intellectual, and class terms. Together with Waldo Meister (based on Kammerer), Dennison is for Levinsky one of the "evil figures of decayed families" that index the zeitgeist, and for Kenny Wood (based on Lucien Carr) one of the city's sinister "faggot spooks" (367, 414). When Kerouac returned to this scene in *Vanity of Duluoz* he would group Burroughs, Kammerer, and Carr together as giving his "first glimpse of the Real Devil," while making explicit their perverse attraction to him: "The fascination of Hubbard at first was based on the fact that he was a key member of this here 'New Orleans School' " (157).

Once we bear in mind the broader historical context, it becomes even clearer why a careful reading of Kerouac's sketches of Burroughs is so necessary, because in that context the stakes were so high. For by tying Burroughs to the Carr–Kammerer murder case, Kerouac fixes Dennison's name to a scandal of predatory homosexuality that resonates with national, not just local, significance. Dennison signifies Burroughs as "queer" in every negative sense: homosexual; corrupt; counterfeit; criminal; decadent. Not only corrupt but *corrupting*—seeking to "convert" others—the ominous smile fits seamlessly into the Cold War's governing pathological figure of deviance as contagion; an infectious force of viral toxicity threatening the health of the American body politic. Just as Cold War rhetoric worked according to a logic of guilt-by-association, so, too, through references to Gide and resemblances to other characters, Kerouac cast Dennison as dangerously un-American. In historical context, this was even more reckless than the recurrent associations Kerouac later made between Dennison/Hubbard and the Germans—he looks like a "Nazi" in both *Vanity of Duluoz* (156) and *Desolation Angels* (343)—while both characterizations suggest the economy of violent attraction–repulsion at the heart of the fascination that Burroughs exercised over Kerouac.

You'll Be Simply Fascinated

The key point, then, is that a highly suspect identity was firmly established for Burroughs through *The Town and the City*, and that in 1950 he did not take it up. On the contrary, he refused it: As a visible sign of seduction, Dennison's malicious-looking smile simply does not fit the William Lee of *Junkie*. However, in *Queer*, the novel Burroughs began in 1952 as its sequel, Lee does indeed resemble the Gidean figure of Dennison, being not only an unnatural "corrupter" of youth and artist of "falsity," but a first-rate fabricator of the sinister romances Burroughs called "routines." Both wildly funny and frighteningly ugly, the routines of *Queer* stage seduction *visibly*, as a quasi-fascistic force to be resisted, and Burroughs would go on to develop exactly this economy of coercive fascination in *Naked Lunch*. More immediately, Kerouac himself reconfirmed the association in *Doctor Sax*, which he wrote while staying with Burroughs in Mexico City as he worked on *Queer*. In one of many unremarked but very precise readings of Burroughs's work-in-progress, Kerouac endows Sax with "a malignant smile" and "malevolent humour," describes "an evil Gidean" speaking what sounds like the "Slave Trader" routine from *Queer*, and declares "you'll be simply fascinated" by him (142, 140).

If it is important to establish how fully Burroughs's own productivity was shaped by the material impact of Kerouac's, then we must not lose sight of the specific thematic discontinuity that separates *Junkie* from *Queer*, since what this suggests is how precisely Burroughs first rejected and then two

years later embraced the suspect identity and seductive image already given him in 1950. Because the entire narrative of *Queer* consists of Lee's ugly and desperate attempts to disarm, seduce, control and ultimately possess his victim, it is clear that *Queer* is about exercising, and exorcising, the power of fascination in a way that *Junkie* simply is not. And it is equally clear that this basic distinction is precisely related to Kerouac's representations of Burroughs in *The Town and the City* and *Doctor Sax*. Then again, was Kerouac *reading* Burroughs in 1952 or once again *writing* him?

Since even the most conventional literary reputations are what John Rodden calls "radically contingent"—made by "a constant interaction of images and information" (x, xi)—it is not surprising that Burroughs's active participation in the making of his own image has always remained in doubt. In the Beat context, he occupies an indeterminate space somewhere between Ginsberg and Kerouac; which is to say that he neither embraced the self-marketing strategy of Ginsberg, whose genius for Ron Sukenick was to "seize the means of promotion" (14), nor suffered Kerouac's illusory faith that a published writer could escape the reach of the reifying commodity image. However, Burroughs's inclusion within the Beat field itself remains problematic. Referring to his own fictional use of a Burroughs persona, Clellon Holmes once observed that "we all took delight in dropping these enigmatic intersecting references into our books" (*Go*, xi), but this is not the case. For while the Beats all engaged in forms of self-mythologizing, when it comes to the *mythologizing of others*, which is surely one of the hallmarks of Beat writing, this was never a part of Burroughs's project.[6] Just one among the many signal features that separates Burroughs's work from the Beat label, this is an important distinction, because it suggests more than a temperamental, artistic, or even ideological difference; it suggests his early experience of the power of the image, and that he grasped at once the danger of its autonomy. Burroughs's position may well therefore suggest a calculated reaction *against* the practice of the other Beat writers, especially Kerouac. For what Holmes equally overlooks is the disturbing potency of these enigmatic references, which, like forces conjured up by the Magician's Apprentice, quickly ran out of control and began to take on a life of their own.

Elsewhere, I have explored the issue of Kerouac's *moral* responsibility for his mythologization of his real-life fellow Beats.[7] Here, I can only conclude that Kerouac's rendition of Burroughs as the Virus-X of the Beat Generation, the mythic object of a radically ambivalent fascination, had material effects on Burroughs's writing and popular image, and that it did so because it reflected back a fantasy identity in which both Burroughs and Kerouac had a deep investment. In 1956 Burroughs wrote in his journal: "I'll maintain this International Sophistico-criminal Mahatma con no longer. It was more or less shoved on me anyway" (*Interzone* 130). The ambiguity in the second sentence perhaps explains why Burroughs could never make good the resolve in the first, and so was fated to exercise a power of fascination that he could never quite stop—and that we can never quite resist.

Notes

* A version of this essay appears in my book, *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2003).

1. See my essay, "Beating the Academy," *College Literature*, 27.1 (2000): 213–31.
2. The re-edited *Junky* (New York: Penguin, 1977) is prefaced by Ginsberg's long introduction; the belated publication of *Queer* sports back-flap comments by Ginsberg or Kerouac; *The Yage Letters* combines "In Search of Yage" with Ginsberg's "replies" from 1960; and all editions of *Naked Lunch* after 1962 begin with Burroughs's introduction that credits the book's title to Kerouac.
3. The element of parody in this passage is crucial, but rarely acknowledged. Significantly, Corso would repeat this material in his own novel (133), continuing the *parodic* thrust of Beat visions of Burroughs.
4. It is important to recognize that what is at issue here is not Levinsky's fidelity to the historical Ginsberg, but rather the dynamics of Kerouac's scene, which invite us to read Levinsky's denials as further proof that Dennison remains his master.
5. See Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (New York: Straight Arrow, 1973): photograph between pages 64 and 65.
6. As Dave Moore has pointed out to me, Kerouac does, in fact, "appear" in one scene in *Junky*, as Peter (15), his name no doubt borrowed from "Peter Martin" in *The Town and the City*. However, what makes this minimal appearance of Kerouac in *Junky* so revealing is that Moore can recognize Kerouac and make the identification only because he is aware of a much more detailed description of this same scene in Kerouac's novel, *Visions of Cody* (192–99).
7. See my essay, "Queer Shoulders, Queer Wheel: Homosexuality and Beat Textual Politics," in *Beat Culture: The 1950s and Beyond*, edited by Cornelis van Minnen et al. (Amsterdam: VU Press, 1999): 221–40.