The Literary Prestige of Censorship: The Case of *Naked Lunch*

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Abstract: By tracing the publication history of William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, this article shows how the gate-keeping mechanism of censorship can facilitate literary prestige. The release of the Grove Press edition of *Naked Lunch* in 1966 – after two obscenity trials – marked the end of complete literary censorship in the U.S. and was a crucial step towards the canonization of underground authors. By making it necessary to argue on behalf of the text's form, the obscenity trials helped in framing Burroughs's arguably "formless" text as both a coherent work and a work of high literary merit. The article offers a detailed account of the enabling role of censorship in the case of *Naked Lunch*, which consisted not only in generating the interest of underground publishers (Olympia Press in Paris and Grove Press in the U.S.) but also in helping Burroughs's formless, fragmented text take shape as a novel.

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The publication of William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* by Grove Press in 1966 exemplifies two coinciding developments within the U.S. literary field in the postwar period. The verdict reached in the obscenity trial against *Naked Lunch* by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court in 1966 was a landmark decision, effectively ending complete literary censorship in the U.S. (de Grazia 1993). At the same time, the release of the Grove Press edition of *Naked Lunch* was a major step in the process of canonization of experimental and underground writers. As Loren Glass explains in *Counterculture Colophon*, Grove Press played a crucial role in advancing both developments, nurturing "a culture of revolutionary reading" in the 1960s (2013, 56). However, a closer look at the convoluted history of the manuscript of *Naked Lunch* reveals a much vaster network of actors, operating on different continents and connected in often contingent ways, involved in turning material that for years was deemed un-publishable – not only and not even primarily because of its pornographic or otherwise "obscene" content, but because of its perceived formlessness or messiness – into a text that has achieved the status of a novel.

As I will show, two cases of censorship revolving around the controversial content paradoxically proved very helpful in this regard. The first case of censorship took place in Chicago in 1958 and the interest it generated convinced Maurice Girodias of Olympia Press to publish *Naked Lunch* in Paris in 1959. The second case concerned the first U.S. edition of *Naked Lunch*

published by Grove Press in 1962, resulting in the obscenity trial that took place in Boston from 1965 to 1966, after which Burroughs's work re-entered the literary market as a work credited with outstanding literary value – a modern classic. *Naked Lunch*, then, serves as a case study for considering the ambiguity of the gate-keeping mechanism of censorship, an ambiguity that rests on the ability of gate-keeping to turn into gate-opening. But in order to fully grasp the enabling aspects of censorship in the case of *Naked Lunch*, it is necessary to pay closer attention to the process of the text's composition. By looking at both publishing history and manuscript history, this article attempts to contribute to a fuller picture of the case.

The Case of *Naked Lunch*

While Burroughs has been assigned a prominent place within literary histories of the Beat Generation, it is worth noting that despite his close association with Beat writers Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac he occupied a marginal position within the literary market throughout the 1950s, even after *Howl* and *On the Road* became highly successful. Burroughs's first novel *Junkie* (later published as *Junky*) – a semi-autobiographical account of his severe drug addiction, set mainly in New York – appeared in 1953, though it went largely unnoticed by literary critics and other serious writers. The novel was published under the pseudonym William Lee. Its publisher, Ace Books, was a New York-based mass-market paperback outlet mainly for detective fiction, true crime stories, and comics – books available in drugstores or train stations. It was mostly due to the efforts of Allen Ginsberg, who was friends with Carl Solomon, then editor at Ace Books, that *Junkie* was published at all. Paired with the memoir of a narcotics agent, *Junkie* sold over 110,000 copies in its first year, but it brought Burroughs no recognition as a serious writer (Miles 2013, 646; Maynard and Miles 1978, 2–4; Shoaf 2007).[1] Another novel by Burroughs, *Queer*, though finished in 1952, had to wait for its publication until 1985.

Several attempts to publish an early manuscript of *Naked Lunch* proved futile. In the winter of 1957, Ginsberg – acting as Burroughs's literary agent – submitted the manuscript, then titled "Interzone," to Maurice Girodias, the owner of Olympia Press. Olympia Press' business model (which Grove Press largely followed) relied on the publication of avant-garde and experimental literature as well as English-language books that could not be published in the U.S. or Britain due to existing obscenity laws (Glass 2013). Girodias had already published Nabokov's *Lolita* in 1955 and he owned the rights to D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1929) and Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), both published by Olympia Press' forerunner Obelisk Press. Girodias rejected Burroughs's manuscript when it was first submitted to him, calling it "a mess," and then a second time after Terry Southern approached him (Miles 2014, 747). The objection did not concern the content but the form. Girodias only changed his mind when in 1958 a censorship debate ensued over the publication of excerpts of the manuscript in the *Chicago Review*, a student literary magazine.

In its first print run of five thousand copies, *Naked Lunch* rapidly became an underground cult book, smuggled through customs to London and the U.S. (Birmingham 2009, 144). Another five thousand copies followed soon. Under the Comstock Act of 1873 the U.S. Post Office was required by law to keep articles of a "lewd, lascivious and obscene tendency" as well as advertising material for such articles from going through the mail (de Grazia 1993, 4). Thus, the circulation of obscene materials was prevented both by the post office and by customs. It took until 1966 for *Naked Lunch* to be officially available in the U.S. The first U.S. edition was printed in 1962 by Grove Press, whose owner Barney Rosset was Girodias's American counterpart (Glass 2013), but it was quickly

[1] This first double-jacket edition of *Junkie* has become a collector's item.

taken out of circulation due to obscenity charges and went through two court trials. The decision reached in the second trial by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court stated that it was not obscene on account of its redeeming social value, which, in turn, was based on its literary merit. *Naked Lunch* was the last literary text tried for obscenity in the U.S. and the court's decision effectively ended open literary censorship there.

There are a number of established interpretations of the case of *Naked Lunch*. Scholars discuss the case predominantly in terms of a final victory for artistic and literary freedom of expression and the changes it brought to the literary market in general (de Grazia 1993; Whiting 2006; Glass 2013). Others stress the fact that censorship incites interest and discourse, rather than suppressing it (Wilson 2012). I would like to approach the case of *Naked Lunch* from a different angle and argue that the obscenity trial not only helped establish its literary prestige and by extension that of Burroughs's previous work, but affirmed its claim to be a novel. It did so because the argument made in defense of *Naked Lunch* was based on its literary merit. As I want to show, this argument wasn't brought forth simply for the sake of artistic freedom, but as a carefully considered strategy for generating the literary prestige of *Naked Lunch* and its author. Before I discuss the strategy pursued by Barney Rosset and the defense in more detail, I will take a closer look at issues concerning *Naked Lunch*'s form, or the lack thereof, and explain why this was such a pertinent and complicated matter.

The Oddity of *Naked Lunch*

Naked Lunch occupies a central position both within the canon of Beat literature – mainly due to Burroughs's close personal ties with the Beat writers Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac – and within the canon of postmodernist literature. Indeed, the text was crucial in shaping what critics have understood to be literary postmodernism (Fiedler 1965; Hassan 1971; McHale 1987; Jameson 1984) and it has considerably influenced major U.S. writers such as Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace, Kathy Acker, and William Gibson. The fiftieth anniversary of *Naked Lunch*'s publication was celebrated with conferences at various universities. And yet, *Naked Lunch* nevertheless sits somewhat oddly within the canon. As Oliver Harris, one of the most important scholars on Burroughs, stated in 2009: "*Naked Lunch* is a blot on the literary landscape, a stain on the canon of not only mainstream realist fiction but of postmodern fiction, too. *Naked Lunch* just doesn't fit, is neither properly in nor out of the picture, neither comfortably inside the canon nor comfortably absent from it."

The discomfort that Burroughs's text still causes in many professional and non-professional readers arguably has to do with its indigestible nature, in the double sense of being disgusting and incomprehensible (Lyndenberg and Skerl 1991; Harris 2009). Many of the text's contemporaneous readers pronounced their disgust rather bluntly. The statement that "*Naked Lunch,* in truth, is literary sewage," made by one of the dissenting justices in the 1966 trial (de Grazia 1993, 696), corresponds to the ways in which several critics and literary authors, including Dame Edith Sitwell and David Lodge, expressed their repulsion (Lyndenberg and Skerl 1991). Critics took issue with the scatological imagery, scenarios of all possible forms of human degradation, and the coarse language that appears on every page of *Naked Lunch*. Aspects of the text considered particularly objectionable in the 1950s and 1960s were the depiction of drug use in all its gruesome aspects as well as explicit depictions of homosexual acts (Arthur 2022).[2] Several of the sections of *Naked Lunch* feature what Burroughs called "routines" – outrageous,

[2] In her analysis of the reception and the trial against *Naked Lunch*, Arthur offers a particularly interesting perspective on the conflation of queerness and obscenity.

comical situations related in a clinical manner. The most famous is the "Talking Asshole Routine," where an anus starts speaking and then usurps the whole body and mind of its host. Two sections that have been particularly controversial – and subject to much scrutiny in the trials – were "Hassan's Rumpus Room" and "A. J.'s Annual Party," which involve a scenario that Burroughs called "The OrgasmDeath Gimmick." While *Naked Lunch* has arguably retained its capacity to repel readers, the aesthetic and moral standards applied to the text have certainly been subject to change. The novel's lack of structure has been a more consistent source of discomfort for academic and non-academic readers alike.

None of the structuring elements associated with the "novel" label, be it a character, an identifiable setting, a plot or even an abstract but detectable design, is present in *Naked Lunch* (Ickstadt 1998). It is composed of various sections with shifting narrative instances and abruptly changing settings – some bearing resemblance to actual geographical spaces such as New York, Texas, or the International Zone of Tangier, Morocco, with others being entirely invented, such as the Republic of Freeland. Moreover, the ontological status of characters and events within the narration is highly indeterminate as different levels of the text's innerfictional "reality" cannot be clearly distinguished. One element that gives *Naked Lunch* a sense of coherence is its distinctive voice, marked by a particular diction and a tone often characterized as acerbic or hard-boiled. Remaining relatively constant despite changing narrators, this voice would have to be attributed to Burroughs the author. It is the same "voice" that readers have come to associate with Burroughs's public persona. At the same time, the very process of the text's composition challenges prevalent notions of conscious intent and authorship.

Burroughs, who suffered from a severe addiction to opiates, states in the prefatory text, "Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness," which was added to the Grove Press edition of *Naked Lunch*:[3] "I apparently took detailed notes on sickness and delirium … I have no precise memory of writing the notes which have now been published under the title *Naked Lunch*" (Burroughs 2001, 199). On several occasions he remarked that the order of the different sections of *Naked Lunch* came about randomly when the text went to print in Paris. Though we should be careful not to take Burroughs's statements at face value – knowing that he revised the individual sections several times and that he wrote parts of the text while clean – it is safe to say that most of the sections could be read in a completely different order without the meaning of the text as a whole being considerably altered. If the legends around the composition of *Naked Lunch* – originating not only from Burroughs but also from Kerouac and Ginsberg – should be taken with caution, there is nevertheless a reason why they have accompanied the text from the very beginning, as Harris convincingly points out. In his words, "it's impossible to read *Naked Lunch* without some sort of genetic hypothesis, which is needed to hold together a book that seems constantly to spill off the page in all directions – as it redundantly tells us" (2009). By now, the more mythical accounts of the genesis of *Naked Lunch* have been supplanted by scholarship invested in recovering the history of the manuscript, most notably by the work of Barry Miles and Harris himself.

The Evolution of *Naked Lunch*

The manuscript that was eventually published in 1959 by Olympia Press was the outcome of a long-time collaborative effort on the part of fellow writers and friends of Burroughs's. A key figure in the process was Allen Ginsberg, who had acted as Burroughs's editor and agent since the early

[3] In the most recent edition of *Naked Lunch* – the restored text edited by Barry Miles and James Grauerholz – the "Deposition" has been moved to the back of the book.

1950s (Miles 2014). In 1956, Ginsberg announced *Naked Lunch* in his introduction to *Howl and Other Poems*: "*Naked Lunch*, an endless novel that will drive everybody mad" (3). What Ginsberg refers to here is not the text that got published by Olympia Press, but rather the vast material Burroughs had been producing since 1950, hoping that at some point he would find a way to unite the different pieces. A large portion of Burroughs's literary output was contained in letters to Ginsberg, most importantly the "routines" as Burroughs developed them (Harris 2003; Morgan 1988).[4] The "Talking Asshole Routine" was included in a letter dating from February 7, 1955, where Burroughs referred to it as his "latest attempt to write something saleable" and "my saleable product" (Burroughs 1994). One way to read those remarks is to assume that Burroughs was well aware that controversy around issues of obscenity might be the only way to generate interest in his writing.

By the time Burroughs settled in Tangier in 1954, he called the manuscript "Interzone" – referring to the International Zone of Tangier, where most of the text was written (Miles 2014, 594). As he wrote in a letter to Ginsberg in September 1957: "The MS. in present form does not hold together as a novel for the simple reason that it is not a novel. It is a number of connected – by theme – but separate short pieces. My feeling is that it will eventually grow into several novels all interlocking …" (Miles 2014, 669).

The first manuscript presented to Girodias was assembled by Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Alan Ansen when they visited Burroughs in Tangier in the spring of 1957 (Miles 2014, 656).[5] After ten weeks, they put together two hundred pages, selecting from material that encompassed about six hundred pages of more or less finished fragments and from Burroughs's letters to Ginsberg written over the previous nine years, which Ginsberg collected and brought to Tangier (de Gracia 1993, 386; Miles 2014, 656–62). As Ginsberg recalled in a conversation with Edward de Grazia: "So then the problem was how to edit it or how to shape it, how do you shape it into a novel?" (de Gracia 1993, 386). The process involved selecting parts that seemed most finished, so that they could be turned into chapters, re-typing them, since Burroughs's manuscript pages were full of typing errors and hand-written notes, and deciding on the order. As already mentioned, Girodias rejected the manuscript at first. So did Lawrence Ferlinghetti at City Lights and Barney Rosset at Grove Press (Morgan 1988, 287), who shared Girodias's disapproval of the text's disorganized (and reportedly disheveled) state. Meanwhile, Burroughs continued to write and produce many of the sections that ended up in the final version of *Naked Lunch*. Interestingly, the routines "Hassan's Rumpus Room" and "A. J.'s Annual Party," which include the "pornographic" passages of the novel and sparked the most controversy, were added quite late to the manuscript, after Girodias had rejected it (Miles 2014, 669).

The first time an act of censorship inadvertently helped propel the eventual publication of *Naked Lunch* occurred in 1958, after the *Chicago Review*, the student literary magazine at the University of Chicago, had printed several sections of the work in progress. The *Chicago Review* had started publishing Beat literature in 1958 and had a growing readership in New York and San Francisco. The editors, Irving Rosenthal and Paul Carroll, decided to publish extracts from *Naked Lunch* after Ginsberg recommended Burroughs to them (Steinhoff 2020). Rosenthal decided to put the first chapter of *Naked Lunch* in the spring issue of 1958 and planned the second chapter for the autumn issue. He also asked Burroughs to send him ten further chapters to be published in the winter issue. But in October 1958 an article appeared on the front page of the *Chicago Daily*

[4] Harris (2003) stresses the epistolary origins of the routines.

[5] Barry Miles rediscovered this two hundred-page manuscript, long believed to be lost, in 1984 when he was doing research at the archives of Columbia University. According to Oliver Harris, it contains around seventy five percent of the final *Naked Lunch* manuscript (2009).

Press, in which columnist Jack Mabley complained: "Do you ever wonder what happens to little boys who scratch dirty words on railroad underpasses? They go to college and scrawl obscenities in the college literary magazine. A magazine published by the University of Chicago is distributing one of the foulest collections of printed filth I've seen publicly circulated" (Chicago Review Archive). The university authorities intervened to suppress the planned winter issue and as a consequence Rosenthal and several other members of the editorial board left the *Chicago Review* and started a new magazine called *Big Table*. The first issue of *Big Table*, soon to be known as the "Burroughs issue," published ten chapters of *Naked Lunch* alongside Kerouac, Edward Dahlberg, and Gregory Corso in 1959 (de Grazia 1993, 355–7; Chicago Review 2020). Before it could be distributed, publisher August Derleth reported the issue to the postmaster in Chicago. This led to its confiscation by the U.S. Post Office and inadvertently caused a series of events that proved favorable for Burroughs. The case drew the attention of the American Civil Liberties Union, which resulted in a hearing that took place in Chicago. The hearing was covered by *The Nation*, thus bringing the controversy around Burroughs's material to the attention of a much wider public (de Grazia 1993, 363–4). Shortly after, Girodias decided to publish *Naked Lunch*.[6]

According to Barry Miles, Girodias, hoping to capitalize on the publicity, gave Burroughs only two weeks to prepare the manuscript. This time Burroughs received help from Brion Gysin (with whom he had already started collaborating), Alan Ansen, and Girodias's assistant Sinclair Beiles (Miles 2014, 750–52). The parts chosen for the final manuscript were those that required the least work and were most ready to be printed, among them the ten chapters Burroughs had already prepared for the *Chicago Review/Big Table* publication. The initial five thousand copies of *Naked Lunch* sold out quickly and another five thousand copies were printed soon after (Miles, 752–8). Though Barney Rosset purchased the rights from Girodias already in 1959, he postponed the publication until 1962 because Grove Press was involved in several obscenity cases, most importantly the many trials against *Tropic of Cancer* (Miles 2014, 758). The hardcover edition of *Naked Lunch* was published in March 1962 and was soon banned on grounds of obscenity. By that time Burroughs had been invited to the Edinburgh Writers Conference organized by British publisher John Calder, where he received much attention as well as praise from Norman Mailer and Mary McCarthy.

As Loren Glass outlines in *Counterculture Colophon*, Grove Press carved out for itself a distinct space in the field of cultural production throughout the early 1950s. It "effectively siphoned cultural capital from Paris to New York," reprinting and translating authors it had acquired from various French publishers (Glass 2013, 26). Its main audience was the booming American university and college population, which was the seedbed of the counterculture. Grove Press was the exclusive publisher of Beckett's work in the U.S. at a time when Beckett started to be taught at American universities. It also printed original avant-garde works in quality paperbacks, making them more accessible. Grove both "establish[ed] and expand[ed] the circuits through which experimental and radical literature was distributed" (Glass 2013, 30) and "generated a veritable canon of countercultural reading" (35), not least through its literary magazine, *The Evergreen Review*.

The reputation of Grove Press for publishing quality literature was crucial in its battles over obscenity. By the time *Naked Lunch* was tried Rosset had already won two obscenity battles – one over the unexpurgated edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (in 1959), which then sold two million copies, and one over *Tropic of Cancer* (in 1964). In both cases the strategy was based on former cases and landmark decisions, starting with the 1933 New York trial of *Ulysses*, which

[6] The ban against the first issue of *Big Table* was lifted in 1960.

"functioned as a ritual of consecration" (Glass 2013, 150) that set a precedent whereby modernist texts could be affirmed as classics by experts on literary value rather than by withstanding the test of time. It also set a standard for future trials by establishing a set of guidelines when examining charges of obscenity: 1. the work should be treated as a whole (rather than considering selected excerpts); 2. the effect on an average, rather than an overly sensitive person should be considered; 3. the work should be judged by contemporary community standards.

A further seminal decision for obscenity trials was reached in 1957 in the case of *Roth v. United States* by the U.S. Supreme Court, which extended First Amendment protection to literature. It furthermore defined obscene material more narrowly as "utterly without redeeming social importance" (de Grazia 1993, xii, 263–4). At the same time, the Supreme Court ruled that while "literature" was protected under the First Amendment, "obscenity" was not, thus making it necessary to prove the literary, artistic, or other social merit of a text. Edward de Grazia, a legal historian and the leading attorney in the *Naked Lunch* (and *Tropic of Cancer*) trial, explains that as a consequence of this decision, "courts were required by law … to admit and give weight to the testimony of 'expert' authors and critics concerning a work's values" (de Grazia 1993, 686). It accordingly became the task of critics, authors, journalists, publishers, and college professors to redefine "contemporary community standards" by attesting to the literary merit of a text. In the successful cases of *Lady Chatterley* and *Tropic of Cancer*, Rosset followed the strategy, established by the case of *Ulysses*, of enlisting experts. He also used expert testimonies and the court decisions for marketing purposes (Glass 2013, 148–56).

Naked Lunch was first tried for obscenity in 1964 in Boston, after a local bookseller was arrested for selling copies of it in 1963. Grove Press became involved as Rosset had agreed with his booksellers that he would offer assistance should they have to defend themselves in court, but also because he was convinced that winning the case was critical for continuing the press' business model (de Grazia 1993, 394). Though it proved more challenging to find experts willing to testify than in the cases of *Lady Chatterley* and *Tropic of Cancer*, Rosset managed to enlist Norman Mailer, Allen Ginsberg, and the poet John Ciardi, as well as the English professor Norman Holland and the Harvard sociologist Paul Hollander, who testified to the validity of the text's representations of underground social milieus. Comparisons to Dante's *Inferno* and St. Augustine's *Confessions* as well as *Ulysses* were made, and Mailer asserted that the "artistry in *Naked Lunch* is very deliberate and profound" (de Grazia 1993, 486).

Despite their testimony, Judge Eugene A. Hudson ruled that the book was obscene and pronounced that *Naked Lunch* was not more than a collection of "the foulest and vilest phrases describing unnatural sexual experiences … tossed … indiscriminately" together (Glass 2013, 171). This very ruling determined the challenge faced by the book's defense for the appeal before the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court in 1965–66. As a contemporary critic remarked in 1967, the defense had to "'prove' to the court that *Naked Lunch* is a book" (McConnell 1967, 668). In his argument on appeal, de Grazia focused on the text's organization and insisted: "*Naked Lunch* has a definite plan or plot line despite what a casual reading might suggest. It has an almost musical structure, and a special psychic logic which – however difficult to autopsy – can nevertheless not be disturbed or bowdlerized without defeating the novel's artistic design" (de Grazia 1993, 494). Ginsberg's responses to questions about the meaning of *Naked Lunch* may have achieved little in clarifying the issue for the judge, but at this point he already was an international literary celebrity, so that "his testimony and his poetry [had] achieved enough cultural legitimacy" (Glass 2013, 173). Mailer's testimony revealed his own difficulties with the text's form, but he eventually asserted that it was "a deep work, a calculated work, a planned work" (Glass 2013, 172). After the court's decision, the hardcover edition immediately sold more than fifty thousand copies.

Instantly putting the case to use, Rosset issued a mass-market edition paperback in 1966, which included both Ginsberg's and Mailer's testimonies. The Black Cat paperback edition became number one on *The New York Post*'s bestseller list.[7]

Paradoxically, then, the obscenity trials, revolving around the question whether *Naked Lunch* deserved to be called a book at all, not only settled that question in the affirmative. Far surpassing its official purpose, the trial generated considerable literary prestige for *Naked Lunch*, placing it among works like *Ulysses* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. As self-reflexive remarks in his texts indicate, Burroughs himself understood that the pornographic sections of his book had an enabling potential that made it possible for a formless, fragmented text to enter the literary market with remarkable tailwind. The obscene material, more than anything, it seems, helped turn a text that defied all formal criteria into a "book," indeed, even into a novel of avant-garde status. Looking back at the turbulent history of *Naked Lunch*, Ginsberg remarked in a conversation with de Grazia: "So it was a mess and it wasn't a mess. It's like talking about Pollock being a mess, until you put a frame around it; then you put a frame around it and it's a picture" (de Grazia 1993, 387). In the case of *Naked Lunch*, the gate-keeping mechanism of censorship achieved far more than just generating interest in the text. By making it necessary to argue on behalf of its form, it facilitated the framing for what was repeatedly perceived to be a mess, allowing it to be regarded as both a coherent work and a work of art. Indeed, it helped establish *Naked Lunch* as one of the most influential texts of postwar American literature.

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[7] Grove Press also published excerpts from the trial in the *Evergreen Review* in 1965.

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