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"This Book Spill Off the Page in All Directions": What Is the Text of Naked Lunch?

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

“This Book Spill Off the Page in All Directions”:

What Is the Text of *Naked Lunch*?

Carol Loranger

William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* appears "by wide public agreement" whenever lists of postmodern texts in English are compiled (Connor 129). Its status as a work of art seems clear. But its textual status is less clear: as yet, no effort has been made to establish an edition of *Naked Lunch* which would either provide readers with a reliable critical or scholarly version or, by accounting for its protean materiality as a series of unstable historical-textual events, help make a reality "the fully open, *scriptible*, postmodernist edition of literature" envisioned by textual scholar D. C. Greetham half a decade ago (17). Given the novel's shiftily enduring, if cult, status as a political and artistic touchstone in American letters, the absence of a reliable edition is lamentable. But given the peculiar circumstances of the novel's evolution, establishing such an edition poses serious editorial problems. The textual history of *Naked Lunch* prophesies both Jerome McGann's rejection (on specifically textual-historical grounds) of the ideology of authorial intention, central to modern textual scholarship since Fredson Bowers, and Peter L. Shillingsburg's post-electronic affirmation of the radical non-equivalence of "the work of art" with "the linguistic text of it" (35).

What follows should be taken as a series of first steps toward a postmodern edition of *Naked Lunch*: an edition which, following the novel's explicit and manifold rejections of such social (and editorial) values as "authority," "intention," "stability," and "purity"—"the old cop bullshit" (NL 5)¹—comes closest to capturing the mutability, aimlessness and contamination it offers in their stead—"Let go! Jump!" (NL 222). While it must account for the "work's historical passage" (McGann 24), such an edition would not be a *critical* edition, in that the problem of identifying a copy text from which to identify variants may not be easily settled. The unavailability of the manuscript² and the peculiar events surrounding the compilation of the first, Olympia Press, edition of *Naked Lunch* (see below) militate against deferring to Bowers's theory of final intentions. *Naked Lunch* has undergone at least five significant changes in the three and a half decades since its first publication. The changes in each case have consisted of the addition or deletion of large, often self-contained

portions of text. None of these changes can be considered accidental variants, since changes of this magnitude and these particular kinds were enacted by author or publisher in response to specific pressures. But neither can these changes be satisfactorily marked in each case as deliberate authorial revisions in the sense that, for example, passages in the 1909 “New York” edition of *Daisy Miller* can be clearly marked as the late James’s late-Jamesifying amplifications of the 1878 edition. Some of Burroughs’s additions pre-date *Naked Lunch*, others are mutually contradictory, and yet others were written or transcribed by third parties and were included in some editions but omitted from others, presumably with Burroughs’s blessing. Moreover, Burroughs’s history of abandoning the text to circumstance and necessity and his authorial claim to have “no precise memory of writing the notes which have now been published under the title *Naked Lunch*” (NL xxxvii)—coupled with his subsequent experiments with the unauthored cut-up in the Nova books and his call for guerrilla assault on the idea of authorial ownership in *The Third Mind*—suggest very strongly that authorial intent is antithetical to the very spirit of *Naked Lunch*.

Perhaps most adequate to the special problem of *Naked Lunch* would be the “eclectic text” McGann proposes for another heavily revised text, Byron’s “Giaour”: based on the first edition but incorporating later additions to and revisions from subsequent editions. But the eclectic text McGann imagines generally addresses smaller scale revisions than those occurring in *Naked Lunch*. He warns that the resulting “Giaour” will be “marked throughout by ‘accidental’ distractions—variations in styles of punctuation and capitalization” (59), but he does not suggest that additions and revisions might radically alter the implicitly coherent, stable, recognizable boundaries of the text. The distractions caused...



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