



THE OCCULT WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS: THE ROAD TO THE WESTERN LANDS AS  
MAGICAL TEXT AND OCCULT ALLEGORY

by

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*William Seward Hall ... he was a corridor, a hall, leading to many doors. He remembered the long fugitive years after the fall of Waghdas, the knowledge inside him like a sickness. The migrations, the danger, the constant alertness ... the furtive encounters with others who had some piece of the knowledge, the vast picture puzzle slowly falling into place.*

*Time to be up and gone. You are not paid off to be quiet about what you know; you are paid not to find it out. And in his case it was too late. If he lived long enough he couldn't help finding it out, because that was the purpose of his life ... a guardian of knowledge and of those who could use it. And a guardian must be ruthless in defense of what he guards.*

*And he developed new ways of imparting the knowledge to others. The old method of handing it down by word of mouth, from master to initiate, is now much too slow and too precarious (Death reduces the College<sup>1</sup>). So he concealed and revealed the knowledge in fictional form. Only those for whom the knowledge is intended will find it.*

The Place of Dead Roads, page 115

## Introduction

In 1958<sup>2</sup>, William S. Burroughs moved into 9 rue Git-le-Coeur—the “Beat Hotel”—in Paris. Shortly thereafter, he ran into surrealist painter, poet, and occultist Brion Gysin, who moved into the Beat Hotel, and with whom Burroughs quickly struck up a close friendship. The two came to experiment in a variety of ways with techniques for modifying and expanding consciousness. Of the well-known experiments were the cut-up technique (using which they collaborated on The Third Mind in 1978, and which Burroughs subsequently employed in the composition of The Soft Machine, The Ticket That Exploded, and The Nova Express), and the

<sup>1</sup> The “College” (capitalized) is not a term frequently employed by Burroughs. It is likely a reference to the notion of “The Invisible College”—the intangible state or realm of learning in which occultists reside and collude, originally derived from the writings Rosicrucian Order in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>2</sup> While interviews with Gysin seem to place Burroughs’ arrival in Paris in the early 1950s, long-time Burroughs enthusiast, scholar, and acquaintance, Gary Lee-Nova places the date at 1958.

phenomenon of “flicker” which, through collaboration with mathematician and computer programmer Ian Sommerville, led to the creation of the Dreammachine. Less well-known, but still amply documented experiments included what Burroughs referred to as *tape recorder magic*, as described at length in The Electronic Revolution and in interviews; magical curses, and experiments with photographic magical techniques.

In addition to these experiments with Gysin, Burroughs studied a variety of schools of Western Occultism, from the traditional texts, such as the writings of Aleister Crowley to the more avant garde magical writings of the Temple Ov Psychik Youth (whose founder, Genesis P-Orridge was initiated into the occult by Burroughs and Gysin). In addition to these direct studies of occult magical principals, Burroughs has spoken in interviews to a lifelong belief in magic, perhaps offering insight into his study of anthropology, and particular interest in ritual, and beliefs regarding reincarnation and spiritually-based powers among civilizations such as the Maya and Yaqui, and has often referenced books on occult subjects in recorded lectures and classes.

In the final trilogy that Burroughs penned in his lifetime, the Road to the Western Lands, Burroughs explores the full spectrum of occult themes, with particular attention to the system of occultism attributed to the Ancient Egyptians, and generally regarded as the source for the majority of modern Western occultism, from the occult lessons of Paul Foster Case to the rituals of modern Freemasonry to the magical practices of the Golden Dawn. Throughout the three books of the trilogy, The Cities of the Red Night, The Place of Dead Roads, and The Western Lands, Burroughs offers hints to the underlying occult significance of his works, in the manner traditional to the Esoteric tradition, practiced particularly during times of persecution. Woven into the texts alongside these hints are three distinct occult strands.

Firstly, the texts function as magical primers, enumerating magical principles and techniques through the narration and actions and words of the characters. These include instances of traditional ritual magic alongside Burroughs' form of sexual and masturbatory magic—as explored in The Book of Breeething—as well as curses, auric bodies, astral travel, extra sensory perception (ESP), reincarnation, spiritual possession and exorcism, and references to the magical systems laid out in Carlos Castaneda's Don Juan books, and the Ancient Egyptian funerary texts. Secondly, the books *are* magical spells, as Burroughs envisioned, taught and practiced magic; the theme of writing as having magical power is explored repeatedly in the plots of the novels and, when viewed in the context of an overarching belief system, unveil the books to be very definite concentrations of Burroughs' will and intentions. Finally, the books outline the path of occult initiation through the parable of the Road to the Western Lands. Within the occult tradition, this path is seen as a microcosmic preparation for the immortal journey of the soul (as understood from the Egyptian funerary texts), this concept reflected in the trilogy's theme of reclaiming the Western Lands (i.e. the spiritual state that can be reached after death) from the elites who have monopolized it.

In this paper, I will illuminate these profound concepts and principles hidden in the text, identify their proper contexts within Burroughs' study of the occult and frame them therein, and ultimately extrapolate from these hints to withdraw from the text a complete ancillary plot line, interwoven through esoteric symbols in Burroughs' sometimes lurid, often dreamlike prose.

### The Occult Burroughs

Burroughs' belief in, and practice of, and thought about the occult—particularly in its operative form as magic and curses—can be traced back in his letters and interviews at least to the 1950s. In a 1952 letter to Allen Ginsberg, Burroughs writes, “Of course I am attempting black magic. Black magic is always an attempt to force human love, resorted to when there is no other way to score. (Even curse is last attempt at contact with loved one. I do not contemplate any curse, that is absolutely end of wrong line... The curse is last attempt to regain attention.)” (Letters 128). By 1954, while living in Tangier, Burroughs wrote Ginsberg saying, “Paul Bowles is here, but kept in seclusion by an Arab boy who is insanely jealous, and given to the practice of black magic,” (Letters 197). Shortly thereafter, Ginsberg confided in mutual friend Neal Cassady regarding Burroughs' use of magic in personal situations, “in this case not really dangerous since Bill [Burroughs] is ultimately sane somehow & anyway I do not believe in black magic,” (Letters 211). Later that year, Burroughs wrote to Ginsberg of protecting a painter friend from magical attacks: “The young man I protected with counter magic against a vile attempt by a rival” (Letters 245).

It is clear from his open inclusion of his magical beliefs in correspondence with his close friends that Burroughs believed in magic as a matter of fact, not merely an intriguing device to wield in his fiction. The ardent interest spanned the majority of his life. In an interview with the LA Weekly given in 1996—a year before he died—Burroughs said, “Certainly I'm interested in the golden dawn [sic], Aleister Crowley, all the astrological aspects. I'm interested in all that whole level of metaphysics and occultism, magic...” (Conversations 223-4)

In The Book of Lies, Genesis Breyer P-Orridge writes, “My very first question to [Burroughs], a living, breathing, Beatnik legend in the flesh was... ‘Tell me about magick? [sic]’” (105). Burroughs’ response was, “Well... Reality is not really all it’s cracked up to be, you know” (105); he then went on to explain the fundamentals of his magical outlook:

What Bill explained to me then was pivotal to the unfolding of my life and art: *Everything is recorded*. If it is recorded, then it can be *edited*. If it can be edited then the order, sense, meaning and direction are as arbitrary and personal as the agenda and/or person editing. This is magick [sic]. For if we have the ability and/or choice of how things unfold—regardless of the original order and/or intention that they are recorded in—then we have control over the eventual unfolding. If reality consists of a series of parallel recordings that usually go unchallenged, then reality only remains stable and predictable until it is challenged and/or the recordings are altered, or their order changed. These concepts lead us to the release of cut-ups as a magical process (106).

Burroughs was certainly aware that language had broader power than communication. In Electronic Revolution, he writes regarding the power of the word, “Ron Hubbard, founder of Scientology, says that certain words and word combinations can produces [sic] serious illnesses and mental disturbances. I can claim some skill in the scrivener’s trade...,” (38). Regarding this dangerous negative capability inherent in language, Burroughs writes in The Adding Machine, “There is a definite technology for the negative use of words to cause confusion, to create and aggravate conflicts, and to discredit opponents. This is the opposite of what a writer does,” (34).

In search of new means of manifesting the “opposite” of “the negative use of words”, Gysin developed the cut-up technique, which Burroughs took to eagerly and made infamous. Gysin had “spent more than a third of [his] life in Morocco where magic is or was a matter of daily occurrence, ranging from simple poisoning to mystical experience... Magic calls itself the Other Method ... practiced more assiduously than hygiene in Morocco, though [magical practice] is, there, a form of psychic hygiene,” (Vale 39-40). When Burroughs encountered

Gysin and his cut-up technique, he was “only too willing to listen to Gysin’s ideas on the magical-technology approach to writing and to try out the methods discovered by Gysin which, as Burroughs immediately recognized, were specifically intended as ways *out*—out of identity, habit, perhaps out of the human form itself,” (40). Thus, they determined that “Events could be written and the message hidden in any piece of writing divined by the use of scissors”.

To Burroughs, cut-up was a technique for textual divination and magical actualization; events could be caused to occur by writing them—and these linguistic magical triggers could be revealed through the disassembly and rearrangement of language. As P-Orridge put it, “Gysin and Burroughs saw these new writings [cut-ups] as magical spells,” (Lies 94). In The Job, Burroughs writes,

cut-up techniques will lead to more precise verbal experiments closing this gap [between writing’s necessity for abstraction and painting’s ability to mold its medium] and giving a whole new dimension to writing. These techniques can show the writer what words are and put him in tactile communication with his medium. This in turn could lead to a precise science of words and show how certain word combinations produce certain effects on the human nervous system. (27-8)

This ability to rearrange and refashion reality—one of the primary aims of occult training and study—is clearly at the core of Burroughs’ work, developing particular definition and refinement in his later works, and reaching its apex in the Road to the Western Lands trilogy. In his continued experimentation with Gysin, Burroughs came to develop this approach to record and rewrite reality in real time, through the use of tape recorders. By making recordings of a number of facets of an event he wished to make manifest (such as a recording of the location, a recording of an event desired at that location, and a recording of the outcome desired as a result of that event) and playing them back interspersed and cut-up, Burroughs was able to project his

will into reality. A series of these anecdotes are collected in *Feedback from Watergate to the Garden of Eden*, which appears in Electronic Revolution and The Job. An oft-repeated anecdote is Burroughs' curse against a restaurant—the Moka Bar in London—achieved by means of tape-recorder magic.

Here is a sample operation carried out against The Moka Bar at 29 Frith Street London W1 beginning on August 3, 1972 ... Reverse Thursday ... Reason for operation was outrageous and unprovoked discourtesy and poisoned cheese cake...

Now to close in on The Moka Bar. Record. Take pictures. Stand around outside. Let them see me. They are seething around in there...

Playback was carried out a number of times with more pictures. Their business fell off. They kept shorter and shorter hours. October 30, 1972 The Moka Bar closed. The location was taken over by The Queens Snack Bar.

Now to apply the 3 tape recorder analogy to this simple operation. Tape recorder 1 is the Moka Bar itself in its pristine condition. Tape recorder 2 is *my recordings* of the Moka Bar vicinity... Tape recording 3 is *playback*... By playing back my recordings to the Moka Bar when I want and with any changes I wish to make in the recordings, I become God for this local [sic]. (Electronic Revolution 15-16).

Burroughs' magical theory and practice found its most thorough exposition in an obscure 1975 text entitled The Book of Breeething. The text, to a large extent, functions as a sort of magical notebook for Burroughs: explanations of techniques and principals accompany a chart of hieroglyphic elements that are deployed for magical purposes in textual and illustrated form to comprise the body of the work. Describing the mechanism of magic, he writes, "A curse is activated by hate. Mixture of sexual and hostile elements is the basic death formula," (55). He goes on to lay out the fundamentals of magical control: "To control any situation it is simply necessary to place yourself and keep yourself in Third Terminal Position with respect to other participants in the situation. T.T.P is no-effect position. Hassan i Sabbah took and held Alamout,

a Third Terminal from which he could reach and affect his enemies and where they could not reach or affect him. This is a classic 3T<sup>3</sup> in Alamout.”

### The Road to the Western Lands Trilogy as Occult Primer

Given Burroughs’ deep and abiding relationship with magic and the occult, it is unsurprising that his final fictional written testament to the world (in the form of the Western Lands trilogy) is rife with practical examples of magic, occultism, and a broad range of associated phenomena. A preliminary index of occult themes in the Trilogy yields hundreds of overt references; none of the three texts proceeds for more than twenty-three pages without one of these instances.

Occurring throughout the series is a persistent emphasis on reincarnation, or “transmigration”, beginning roughly mid-way through Cities of the Red Night with the transmigration of John Everson’s soul to a new host’s body (149-50). Shortly thereafter, Burroughs introduces the system of reincarnation that predominates the culture of the cities. “To show the system in operation: Here is an old Transmigrant on his deathbed. He has selected his future Receptacle parents, who are summoned to the death chamber. The parents then copulate, achieving orgasm just as the old Transmigrant dies so that his spirit enters the womb to be reborn,” (154). Just before the character Audrey dons Mercury sandals and a helmet with the

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<sup>3</sup> “3T” no doubt refers to “Third Terminal” in acronym form (a practice which Burroughs seems to have adopted from his time in Scientology); nonetheless, as occultists are trained to recognize multiple equally valid layers of symbolism, it is worth noting that on the seventh Tarot card, the Chariot (which is representative of conquest, willpower, and self-reliance—all principles of utmost important to Burroughs), the rider’s breastplate bears an emblem constructed of three Ts. According to prominent 20<sup>th</sup> century occultist Paul Foster Case, these Ts represent the Hebrew letter ת, which signifies the energetic principle at the center of the three-dimensional universe.

wings of a whooping crane<sup>4</sup>, it is revealed that “Audrey knows [the proprietor of a shop] from Mexico City where Audrey was a private eye in another incarnation” (271), likely referring to the private eye character of Clem Snide who appears along a different plot-line earlier in the novel. As the novel draws to a close, Burroughs writes, “The pilgrimage may take many lifetimes. In many rooms, on many levels, the ancient whispering stage...”

This clue—referring to lifetimes, or incarnations, as “rooms” is a hint towards the manifestation of the reincarnation theme in the second novel of the series, The Place of Dead Roads. In Dead Roads, Burroughs muses, “perhaps the human artifact had a creator. Perhaps a stranded space traveler needed the human vessel to continue his journey, and he made it for a purpose?” (11). According to Egyptologist and occultist John Anthony West, the winged solar disc, representing the soul, graced every doorway in Ancient Egypt in order to serve as a reminder that, as the adept enters a room to serve a specific temporary purpose, so the soul enters an incarnation for only a small fraction of its total existence (Magical Egypt). Throughout Dead Roads, the theme of leaving the physical body for space-travel is emphasized. It is significant that “The themes central to the art and architecture of Egypt are reincarnation, resurrection and the journey of the soul in the underworld,” (West 82), as the motif of Egypt and these themes animate the Western Lands Trilogy. According to West, Egypt is the source of the mysteries—the occult system of initiation that gave rise to the mysteries of Pythagoras and Plato, which in turn evolved into the modern occult schools. Given Burroughs’ occult studies and practice, the symbolism of leaving the physical body for space must have been known to him as the Egyptian conception of the journey of the non-material energetic aspect (the soul) to the celestial realms,

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<sup>4</sup> The whooping crane, or Ibis, is the animal form of the Egyptian god of magic, writing, and wisdom, Thoth, who was known by Greek adepts as Hermes. In the parallel Roman pantheon, Hermes is named Mercury.

often pictured in funerary murals as the winged spirit of the dead ascending to the stars (Magical Egypt).

The Egyptian reincarnation theme is made overt in The Western Lands, wherein Neferti must pass through the Duad, the energetic route, depicted as a river, that souls take to the afterlife. Upon crossing it, Neferti reincarnates: “Neferti is dropping his Ego, his Me, his face to meet the faces that he meets. There is nothing to protect himself from. He can feel the old defenses falling... Khaibit, my shadow, my memory, is shredding away in the wind,” (Western Lands 158). This represents the process of the dissolution of the individual or the “return to the source” that precedes reincarnation.

Beyond reincarnation, Burroughs weaves ample examples of ritual magic throughout the series. In Cities of the Red Night, magical rituals abound, beginning with Clem Snide and his assistant Jim, “The altar is set up for an Egyptian rite timed for sunset...” (76). The Clem Snide storyline continues with the discovery of Jerry Green’s murder as, “the Egyptian sunset rite dedicated to Set. A sacrifice involving sex and death is the most potent projection of magical intention” (85). Afterwards, magical rituals are necessitated in order to exorcise the head of the ritually murdered Jerry Green, and then to exorcise the spirit of Jerry Green from Snide’s assistant Jim (117, 122).

The trend of ritual magic permeates the other storylines (incarnations) within Cities: Audrey buys “winged-Mercury sandals and a helmet with wings from a whooping crane” from a shop keeper he recalls from a prior incarnation, then “extends his arm and the wand tingles straight for the power plant of Yass-Waddah. ... All the lights in Yass-Waddah go out,” (271). In the final battle of the novel, wherein the iconoclastic rebels lead their “sorcerers revolution,”

Dmitri and General Darg, “evoke every aid they can summon through magical rituals,” (111, 302).

In The Place of Dead Roads, Kim, who “never doubted the possibility of an afterlife or the existence of gods,” and “intends to become a god,” performs a variety of rituals to further his cause (42). He “rears backward, making hooves with his hands and pawing the air. Then he pretends to gallop as the boy fucks him with a riding motion, jogging Kim’s shoulders with his hands,” over a map of the local terrain, magically remote guiding his horse which “streaks ahead of the distant posse,” (78). Kim repeatedly employs an invisibility technique whereby he renders “himself invisible by giving no one any reason to look at him”, described by Burroughs in an essay in The Adding Machine as a trick he learned from a Cleveland mob boss. There are multiple mentions of an incident where Kim and his “Fox Boy made sex magic against old Judge Farris,” drawing upon the principles Burroughs lays out in The Book of Breeething regarding combining sexual and hostile elements (89). Shortly thereafter, Kim meets Chris Cullpepper who “is into magic and has studied with Aleister Crowley and the Golden Dawn”, after which they perform a “preliminary evocation of Humwawa, Lord of Abominations, to assess the strength and disposition of enemy forces...” (91).

The enemy being assessed by the evocation of Humwawa, and reappearing throughout the trilogy, are “Venusians”. The curious selection of Venus as the home planet for the alien invaders is of occult significance. “The Divine Mother is Isis, the Ceres of the Mysteries of Eleusis, the Celestial Venus; she who in the beginning of the world originated the attraction of the sexes and propagated with human generations with eternal fecundity,” (Weor 62).

Burroughs’ worldview maintains that “women are trouble. It is another organism with interests perhaps basically irreconcilable with the male interests—which has installed itself as

indispensable,” (Hibbard 69). As such, it is logical that in his magical text chronicling the battle against the influence of Venus, homosexual sex magic and death/suicide should abound, as embodiments of principles contrary to those attributed to Venus in the occult systems. In The Place of Dead Roads, Burroughs observes, “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 [through sex between males], where dualism need not exist,” (172).

Clearly, the European occult traditions (and the Ancient Egyptian mysteries from which they were adapted) were a significant influence on Burroughs, and his own investigations and explorations formed a large part of his magical outlook, however other sources were clearly known to him. He refers throughout the trilogy to Carlos Castaneda’s Don Juan books in many ways. In Cities of the Red Night, Clem Snide reflects, “Don Juan says anyone who always looks like the same person isn’t a person,” (41). Towards the end of the novel, the lizard youth whom Audrey has encountered uses the “sorcerer’s gait”, a technique which Don Juan teaches Carlos for navigating dark canyon floors (291). The references to the Don Juan books subtly continue in The Place of Dead Roads, Kim tells an old man named Don Linares, “I bring greetings from Don Bernabe Jurado,” (14). While this is not a direct reference to any personages who appear in the Castaneda series, this method of introduction, particularly using the antiquated Spanish title “Don” is reminiscent of the plethora of meetings Castaneda describes with Yaqui sorcerers. In The Western Lands, Burroughs observes (through the character of Neferti), “My universe is less stable than Don Juan’s, sometimes I am an impeccable warrior and at other times I act like a timid suburbanite in a New Yorker cartoon,” (139).

While drawing on external sources as disparate as the Western Mystery Traditions and the Yaqui sorcerers, Burroughs employs his texts as opportunities to display many of the details of

the magical system and techniques that he developed with Gysin. In Cities of the Red Night, private eye Clem Snide proceeds through his investigations by means of a “very special recorder designed by [his] assistant, Jim, and what it won’t pick up isn’t there. It is also specially designed for cut-ins and overlays, and you can switch from Record to Playback without stopping the machine” (43). In essence, Snide is armed with the ideal tool for the tape recorder magic designed and practiced by Burroughs. Even more significant (as it transcends the boundaries of the text and frames the intent of the Trilogy) is the sort of textual magic that Burroughs envisioned being a function of the written word. “Changes, Mr. Snide,” explains the Iguana sister, “can only be effected by alterations in the *original*. The only thing not prerecorded in a prerecorded universe are the prerecordings themselves. The copies can only repeat themselves word for word. A *virus* is a copy. You can pretty it up, cut it up, scramble it—it will reassemble in the same form,” (166). When Snide is captured by CIA agent Pierson, Pierson insists that Snide write a scenario, as he has “written enough already to get the ball rolling,” (203). This reflects Burroughs’ magical view on writing: “the immortality of a writer is to be taken literally. Whenever anyone reads his words the writer is there,” namely that writing something is the first step to its manifestation (Dead Roads 42). At the same time, it represents an example of his view of writing as discovery. In The Western Lands, the District Supervisor tells Kim (who is passing through the afterlife), “Writers don’t write, they read and transcribe something already written. So you read orders, which are then conveyed through your spokesman...” (74). The “orders” mentioned by the Supervisor are equivalent to the prerecordings the Iguana sister explains to Clem Snide in Cities of the Red Night—an original source of knowledge that manifests itself in words and deeds which are removed by orders of magnitude (i.e. the separation between the original text and the spokesman; the separation between the prerecordings and the viral copies).

### The Road to the Western Lands Trilogy as Magical Spell

Given Burroughs' belief in the magical power of writing—in its ability to fashion a concept and pass it through world, from mind to mind, like a virus—it is noteworthy that aspects of the seemingly patchwork texts of the Trilogy stand out as clear examples of magical intention. In Cities of the Red Night, Burroughs describes techniques for “unarmed psychic combat. The techniques mostly run on a signal switch—I love you/I hate you—at rapid intervals,” (224). This technique is employed within the body of the text itself to affect a psychic assault on those with “weak points” who attempt to pry the occult secrets from the Trilogy (recall Burroughs' self-identification as a “guardian of knowledge and of those who could use it,” taken from page 115 of the Place of Dead Roads, taken as the epigraph of this paper).

An example of this I love you/I hate you technique employed not *in* the narrative, but *as* the narrative, can be found in The Place of Dead Roads as Burroughs is describing the smell weapons that Kim finds in the market. His evocation of strong smells throughout the text (i.e. Joe the Dead's smell of “burnt plastic and rotten oranges” on page 128, the “whiff of brimstone and decay” on page 182, “the smell of unwashed flesh, exhaust fumes, and kief” on page 209, etc.) stimulates the reader's imagination to draw strongly upon the smell memory. After this neurological pathway is established and repeatedly accessed “safely”, Burroughs guides the reader to the market. “Many smell weapons work on the “sweet cover” principle, luring one into a good deep breath like rotten blood a heavy sweet odor so you wonder what flower could smell

that sweet and suck in a lungful doubles you over like a kick to the crotch,” (230). In many instances throughout the trilogy, Burroughs finds it sufficient to describe the principles of action that support a phenomenon, yet here, he continues with an assault of the actual smells: “gardenia and carrion ... roses and baby shit... sea air and gangrene,” (230).

In The Western Lands, Burroughs applies a similar principal of magic *as* text. Burroughs first describes some principles of black magic, which

operates most effectively in preconscious, marginal areas. Casual curses are the most effective. If someone has reason to expect a psychic attack, an excellent move is to make oneself as visible as possible to the person or persons from whom the attack is anticipated, since *conscious* attacks on a target that engages one’s attention are rarely effective and frequently backfire. (46)

Here Burroughs reveals a motivation to his lurid style: he is making himself “as visible as possible”, essentially jamming any potential psychic attacks his texts may inspire. He goes on to explain that

Writing prejudicial, off-putting reviews is a precise exercise in applied black magic. The reviewer can draw free-floating, disagreeable associations to a book by implying that the book is completely unimportant without saying exactly why, and carefully avoiding any clear images that could capture the reader’s full attention...

There are other tricks: the use of generalities like “the man in the street” and the editorial “we” to establish a rapport of disapproval with the reader and at the same time to create a mental lacuna under cover of an insubstantial and unspecified “we”. And the technique of the misunderstood word: pack a review with obscure words that send the reader to the dictionary. Soon the reader will feel a vague, slightly queasy revulsion for whatever is under discussion. (47)

After describing the black magic employed by biased literary reviews, Burroughs employs the text to invoke his own curse against a maligned reviewer. Real-life literary critics such as Anatole Broyard delighted in harsh reviews of Burroughs work, thus Burroughs defines the target of his curse as a “book reviewer for a prestigious New York daily, [who] knows all the

tricks. He has chosen for his professional rancor the so-called Beat Movement, and perfected the art of antiwriting. Writers use words to evoke images. He uses words to obscure and destroy images.” Recall Burroughs’ remarks on the negative capability of language in the Adding Machine—the use of “words to obscure and destroy” is anathema to him.

As such, he proceeds to curse the ill-minded reviewer, employing the same logic as his tape recorder magic. First, he describes the standard situation, before the interference of his will and magical intent:

This afternoon he has delivered his latest review to the office and made an appointment with the editor for three o’clock. Reading over a copy of the review, he feels a comfortable cool-blue glow [this indicates a spiritual aura of calm and happiness]. A perfect job of demolition, and he knows it. And the editor will know it too. Two columns and not one image ... word, pure word. The effect is depressing and disquieting, gathering to itself a muttering chorus of negation and antagonism. (47-8)

Having established the pre-curse state of the subject, Burroughs includes a quote from the black magic review—connecting directly to the targeted critic by inviting the critic to manifest within the context of the curse.

The critic thus invoked, Burroughs launches into the next phase of his spell, defining the alterations he wishes to affect on the previously defined “standard situation”. This passage serves the function of the second tape in Burroughs 3-tape recorder system of magic, described in Electronic Revolution.

A sudden silence that can happen in big cities ... traffic sounds cut off, a pause, a hiatus, and at the same moment the feeling that someone is at the door. This should not happen unannounced—that is what he is paying \$3,500 a month for.

He steps to the peephole. The hall is empty down to the elevator. He slides the deadbolt and opens the door. A small black dog slithers in without a sound, its brush against his leg light as wind. He snatches a heavy cane he keeps by the door.

“Get out of here!”

But the dog is nowhere to be seen. (48)

Here Burroughs has given his curse the form of the dog, a symbol of death to the Ancient Egyptians (as the jackal-headed god, Anubis, presided over entrance to the underworld). The dog proceeds to follow the critic, always just behind him, drawing the criticism of doormen and colleagues. At this point, Burroughs has interwoven his intention into the standard situation. To return to the parallel with tape recorder magic, this is tantamount to playing back the “street recordings” at the target.

Finally, he describes the desired outcome of his curse, the “playback” tape, where he leads events to unfold along the desired parameters. The critic arrives at his meeting to find his friend Karl, the abiding editor who has encouraged his black magic reviews, has suffered a nervous breakdown, having imagined he was being followed by a black dog. The editor who has taken his place then takes the critic to task for his review of the text.

“Mr. Chandler ... this review of W.S. Hall’s [Burroughs’ initials, with his last name changed from Burroughs to Hall] latest book ... you say categorically that it is a poor novel but you don’t say why.”

“But ...” My God, didn’t this punk know *anything*?

“But?” The young man raised a pencil-thin eyebrow inquiringly.

“Well ... I *understood* ...” Why, his orders had been crystal clear: trash it all the way.

“You understood?”

“I understood that an unfavorable review was indicated.”

“*Indicated*? We are trying to maintain standards of impartial appraisal. After all, this is what criticism is all about. I suggest that you submit a rewrite for *consideration*.” (50)

Burroughs' structure of curse is complete: the outcome has been defined and inserted into the sequence, restoring balance to the imbalance he has built into the energy of the situation.

The final passage of The Book of Breething, written a decade before the Trilogy, refers to precisely this technique: "Possession of the Books puts The Old Man in T.T.P. [the Third Terminal Position described above] He hashis [sic] opponents in his books. They do not have the information access or skill to compile such books on him. The Old Man must have been a very great artist." Precisely because Burroughs can write about the critic in images, while the critic is bound to use words only to "obscure and destroy images", he has put the critic into the Third Terminal Position.

#### The Road to the Western Lands Trilogy as Occult Parable

Understanding Burroughs' familiarity with occult symbolism and principles, and his clear intent to employ this familiarity and seed this symbolism and these principles throughout the Trilogy in active and passive forms; and understanding his assertion from The Place of Dead Roads which functions as the epigraph of this paper; it becomes worthwhile to analyze the predominant themes, ideas, and symbols evoked in the Trilogy in order to discover the "knowledge" that "he concealed and revealed... in fictional form" (115).

This investigation properly begins in the Invocation placed prior to the text of Cities of the Red Night. In it, Burroughs dedicates the book to a pantheon of twenty-seven deities from across world wisdom traditions, culminating the list with "Hassan I Sabbah, Master of the Assassins," ending the section with the quote he and Gysin attributed to Sabbah on his death bed:

“NOTHING IS TRUE. EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED,” (xviii). Of the list, Sabbah is the only human or historical personage and the only one to be referenced twice.

Beyond the Invocation, mention of Hassan i Sabbah appears throughout the Trilogy. In Cities of the Red Night, the text skews into a sudden aside, introduced by Sabbah’s infamous dying quotation, describing the cities as manifestations of permutations of the phrase.

Tamaghis: ... Here everything is as true as you think it is and everything you can get away with is permitted.

Ba’dan: ... Everything is true and everything is permitted.

Yass-Waddah: ... Here everything is true and nothing is permitted except to the permitters.

Waghdas: ... Complete permission derives from complete understanding.

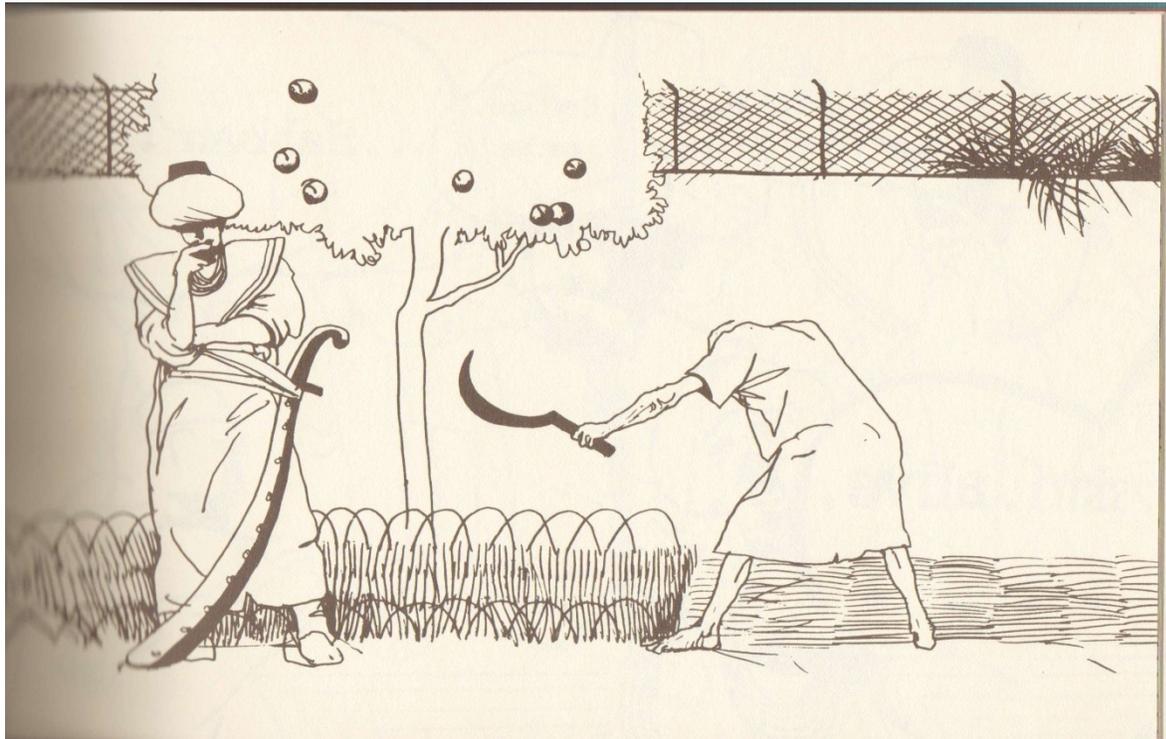
Naufana and Ghadis are the cities of illusion where nothing is true and *therefore* everything is permitted.

The traveler must start in Tamaghis and make his way through the other cities in the order named. This pilgrimage may take many lifetimes. (158-9)

Sabbah persists in the text, referenced in one of Noah Blake’s dreams on page 216, before reappearing in The Place of Dead Roads.

The first reference to the “Old Man of the Mountain,” as Sabbah is called, in The Place of Dead Roads occurs in a parenthetical anecdote: “(An old gardener who has worked in the General’s garden for ten years killed him with a scythe. The General was planning a campaign against the Old Man’s fortress at Alamut.)” (26). It is significant to note that this scene is one of a handful illustrated in the Book of Breathing, Burroughs quintessential magical text, which is

also anchored on the personage of Hassan i Sabbah.



**The Book of Breething, page 47**



**The Book of Breething, page 48**

Following the gardener assassin anecdote, Denton Brady's uncle Kes recognizes Kim Carsons (another of Burroughs' alter-ego characters) as "an assassin", though the phrase seems odd as it does not appear to refer to Kim as an assassin in the sense of a hired killer, and is therefore best understood as a reference to Hassan i Sabbah's followers, the *Hashishin* or "assassins" (53).

It soon becomes obvious that Kim intends to organize his army of Johnsons as Sabbah did his *Hashishin*: Kim first surveys Fort Johnson, his eventual base of operations, declaring, "This could be my Alamut," (87). This is made certain shortly thereafter when the narrator muses, "who would move against him, or even know about the Alamuts he was establishing throughout America and Northern Mexico" (95). Kim later reflects, as a conflict with the elites

his Johnsons are combating becomes inevitable, “I didn’t ask for this fight... or maybe I did. Just like Hassan i Sabbah asked for the expeditions sent out against him just because he wanted to occupy a mountain and train a few adepts,” (117).

Sabbah, who haunts the text almost parenthetically throughout, appears as the primary focus for a set of revelatory passages in the middle of The Place of Dead Roads. “Kim studies the scant sources on... the Old Man of the Mountain. This man is the only spiritual leader who has anything to say to the Johnsons who is not a sold-out P.R. man for the Slave Gods,” (169-70). Burroughs recounts, briefly, the legend of Hassan i Sabbah:

Hassan i Sabbah was a member of the Ishmaelite cult, who were viciously persecuted by the orthodox Moslems...

Hassan incurred the displeasure of a potentate and fled for his life. It was during this flight that he received the vision of the Imam and took over the Ishmaelite sect with all its underground networks. He spent several years in Egypt. Once again he was a fugitive. He escaped by boat and is said to have calmed a storm. He gathered a few followers and, after years of perilous wanderings, established himself and his followers in the fortress of Alamut in what is now northern Iran ... (the fortress is still there<sup>5</sup>). Here he maintained himself for thirty years and trained his assassins, who spread terror through the Moslem world. (170)

Here Burroughs comes to what may be considered the clearly defined key to unlocking the occult nature of the Trilogy:

During his exile in Egypt [Hassan] learned some basic secret by means of which his future power was realized... What Hassan i Sabbah learned in Egypt was that *paradise actually exists and that it can be reached*. The Egyptians called it the Western Lands. This is the Garden that the Old Man *showed* his assassins... *It cannot be faked any more than contact with the Imam can be faked*. This is no vague eternal heaven for the righteous. This is *an actual place* at the end of a very dangerous road. (171)

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<sup>5</sup> The fortress at Alamut was visited by Brion Gysin, who wrote an essay about the trip, ultimately fueling a great deal of speculation by Burroughs in the final portion of The Book of Breething as to what appear to be discrepancies between the “scant sources” and Gysin’s observations.

This passage is obscure and mysterious, particularly when considered along with the claim, two pages later, that “The Old Man showed his assassins freedom from rebirth and death. He created actual beings, designed for space travel,” (173).

The Western Lands returns to Sabbah as an object of contemplation for Joe the Dead, who has killed Kim. “He knew there was only one man who could effect [sic] the basic changes dictated by the human impasse: Hassan i Sabbah: HIS. The Old Man of the Mountain,” (29). Reflections of the Old Man continue to appear: “At the end of the human line, everything is permitted,” a clear corollary to Sabbah’s last words appears as an explanation for a rampant hybridist that could be actualized across species (34). Later in the text, Joe the Dead meets with Sabbah, the Old Man’s first manifestation as an actual character in the Trilogy, and has an opportunity for dialogue.

Questions raised: How did the Egyptian Gods and Demons set up and activate an elaborate bureaucracy governing and controlling immortality and assigning it, on arbitrary grounds, to a chosen few? The fact that few could qualify is evidence that there was something to qualify for.

Limited and precarious immortality actually existed. For this reason no one challenged the system. They wanted to become Gods themselves, under existing conditions....

Immortality is purpose and function. Obviously few can qualify... (70)

Sabbah appears a few times tangentially for the next few chapters, to return in conjunction with this metaphysical quandary, “Is there a technique for confronting death without immediate physical danger? Can one reach the Western Lands without physical death? These are the questions that Hassan i Sabbah asked,” (191). Burroughs discusses the process by which Sabbah trained his initiates to kill their own death, in order to “train individuals for space conditions,” (192).

Hassan i Sabbah makes his final set of appearances as an actual protagonist of the text.

Breaking the fourth wall, Burroughs writes,

The most severe visitation of writer's block has fallen as my narrative comes to Hassan i Sabbah in Egypt, where he presumably learned the secret of secrets that enabled him to attract followers, establish himself at Alamout [sic] and control his assassins from a distance.....

The persistence of this mystery in the Trilogy clearly underscores its import. A last clue is given as the Old Man prepares for his final appearance in the Trilogy:

Consider this scenario: HIS and Neph make the pilgrimage and reach the Western Lands. The knowledge they bring back could destroy the existing order founded by the Venusian Controllers, which manifests itself through all authoritarian governments and organization: the Church, the Communist Party, in fact *all* governments currently operating....

... Alamout [sic] was never intended to be permanent. It was intended to gain time to train a few operatives for the future struggle, which is right here, right now, in front of all of you. The lines are being drawn.

“God's word says that the Occult is the enemy.”

Some reborn son of a bitch is listening to his Master's Voice like a good human dog.

“Magic is the enemy. Creation is the enemy.”

Burroughs' curious linkage of magic and the Occult to Sabbah's operation may seem at first a wishful fictionalization of history, however it is necessary to consider the repeated emphasis Burroughs places on Sabbah's time in Egypt and what he learned there.

The relationship between Burroughs, Gysin, and Hassan i Sabbah is briefly explored in the documentary film, *FLicKeR*. In this segment, it is stated that Brion Gysin envisioned himself as the reincarnation of Hassan i Sabbah, and studied the old man assiduously. Given Gysin's particular Occult leanings, and that all three books of the Road to the Western Lands Trilogy are

dedicated to Gysin, it is worth exploring what Occult connections Gysin may have discovered in his copious research regarding the figure of Sabbah that made his interest so vibrant.

Unquestionably, the connection to Egypt is essential. Burroughs' emphasis on what Sabbah learned there implies that he knew some specific learning was taking place, despite the fact that none of the handful of 10<sup>th</sup> century Persian texts, nor most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century texts discussing the Old Man explicitly state that he did anything in Egypt other than serve in a royal retinue. In The Third Mind, Burroughs and Gysin posit, "Maybe it wasn't just hash Hassan-i-Sabbah [sic] picked up on in Egypt. What about glyphs talking over distances in silence?" (184). This is, however, as obscure as Burroughs' theories about space travel.

The key can be deciphered by means of Arkon Daraul<sup>6</sup>'s A History of Secret Societies, originally published in 1961, a book analyzing an array of secret societies, beginning with Hassan i Sabbah and the *Hashishin*. Daraul writes:

One of the most successful secret societies which the Shiah's founded was centered around the Abode of Learning in Cairo, which was the training-ground for fanatics who were conditioned by the most cunning methods to believe in a special divine mission....

Members were enrolled, on the understanding that they were to receive hidden power and timeless wisdom which would enable them to become as important in life as some of the teachers....

...

Students had to pass through nine degrees of initiation. In the first, the teachers threw their pupils into a state of doubt about all conventional ideas, religious and political.... This 'confusion technique' was carried out until the student reached the stage where he was prepared to swear a vow of blind allegiance to one or other of his teachers.

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<sup>6</sup> Though "Daraul" is known to be a pseudonym and the genuine author has never been identified with absolute certainty, it is thought that noted Sufi mystic and author Indries Shah is the scholar responsible for the text. This is particularly curious, given Gysin's affiliation in Morocco with Sufi mystics.

This oath, together with certain secret signs, was administered in due course, and the candidate was awarded the first degree of initiation.

The second degree took the form of initiation into the fact that the Imams... were the true and only sources of secret knowledge and power... In the third degree, the esoteric names of the Seven Imams were revealed, and the secret words by which they could be conjured and by which the powers inherent in the very repetition of their names could be liberated and used for the individual...

In the fourth degree, the succession of Seven Mystical Law-givers and magical personalities was given to the learner...

The fifth degree named twelve apostles under the seven prophets, whose names and functions and magical powers were described. In this degree the power to influence others by means of personal concentration was supposed to be taught.

To obtain the sixth degree involved instruction in the methods of analytical and destructive argument, in which the postulant had to pass a stiff examination. The seventh degree brought revelation of the Great Secret: that all humanity and all creation were one and every single thing was a part of the whole, which included the creative and destructive power...

To qualify for the eight degree, the aspirant had to believe that all religion, philosophy and the like were fraudulent... The ninth and last degree brought the revelation of the secret that there was no such thing as belief: all that mattered was action.

This is what Hassan i Sabbah learned in Egypt. He was initiated into an Occult secret society with demonstrable links to ancient and modern occultism (according to scholar of secret societies and the Occult, William Cooper, these are the nine degrees of initiation maintained in modern York Rite Freemasonry) (Cooper).

Reviewing these nine degrees of initiation, and comparing them to Burroughs' descriptions of the permutations of "Nothing is true; everything is permitted," that define the aspects of the Cities that comprise the journey described by the Trilogy, the link between Sabbah's discovery in Egypt and the Western Lands becomes clear: the road to the Western Lands functions as a metaphor describing the successive states of mind and personal

development that result from Occult initiation and progression through the degrees of an esoteric school or doctrine.

In this light, even Burroughs' remarks regarding Hassan i Sabbah preparing his followers for space travel, the notion that the journey to the Western Lands could take many life times, and the concept of achieving immortality by reaching the Western Lands appear logical. As John Anthony West explains in *Magical Egypt, the Osirian Mysteries of Ancient Egypt* (which gave birth to all subsequent occult traditions) emphasized Occult initiation in the physical incarnation in order to prepare the soul or eternal energetic essence for its journey towards immortality in the heavens following bodily death.

### Conclusion

Given William S. Burroughs definite familiarity with Occult principles, techniques, and philosophies; his affiliation and collaboration with Occultist Brion Gysin; his interest in the Occult initiate and master, Hassan i Sabbah; and his inclusion of all these themes and concepts, alongside suggestions of a hidden message, in his *Road to the Western Lands Trilogy*, it can be surmised that these three books represent Burroughs' passing on of his accreted Occult understandings "in fictional form" as his death loomed closer and his priorities shifted to the eternal principles he had discovered in his lifetime of experimentation and exploration.

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